



LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES

The Chilling Effects of Online Harassment
on Young Human Rights Defenders
in the Philippines



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GLOSSARY

TERMS AND ACRONYMS	DESCRIPTION
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ATC	Anti-Terrorism Council
ANTI-TERRORISM ACT (ATA)	Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (Republic Act No. 11479)
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEGP	College Editors Guild of the Philippines
CHILLING EFFECT	Self-censorship and other negative changes to individuals' exercise of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly due to repressive state actions and legal provisions as well as wider repressive actions encouraged or legitimized by state actors. This research conceptualizes the chilling effect to identify changes of behavior among young human rights defenders who have witnessed and experienced online harassment.
CPP	Communist Party of the Philippines
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DND	Department of National Defense
HRD	Human Rights Defender
HRIA	Human Rights Impact Assessment
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
INTERSECTIONALITY	A way of examining how different forms of discrimination can overlap and interact with each other to create a unique and compounding experience of oppression for an individual. In this research, we apply it to the heightened risk of online harassment faced by young human rights defenders based on factors such as age, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGIE), institutional affiliations, political beliefs, ethnolinguistic identity, geographic location, occupation, religion, and education.
LGBTI	A broad category of people, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex
NPA	New People's Army
NUJP	National Union of Journalists of the Philippines
NTF-ELCAC	National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict
ONLINE HARASSMENT	The use of digital platforms and technologies to cause harm to another person or group.
PFV	Press Freedom Violation

TERMS AND ACRONYMS	DESCRIPTION
PNP	Philippine National Police
PUP	Polytechnic University of the Philippines
QUEER	An umbrella term used by people who challenge socially constructed norms and expectations around sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression, and sex characteristics that have been assigned to them. This research uses “queer” in cases where LGBTI people and human rights defender directly identified themselves with this term.
RED-TAGGING	The public vilification of human rights defenders, student activists, teachers, media workers, and others as members of and clandestine recruiters for the New People’s Army (NPA), a communist armed group that has been active in the Philippines since 1969.
ROTC	Reserve Officers' Training Corps
RPC	Revised Penal Code
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics
TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (TfGBV)	Any act of gender-based violence, or threat thereof, perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated, and/or amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media. It disproportionately affects women and girls but can also affect other people based on their real and/or perceived sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and/or expression, or sex characteristics, causing physical, psychological, economic, social, and sexual harm ¹ . Gender-based violence, including TfGBV, exists on a continuum between physical and digital spaces.
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UP	University of the Philippines
YHRD	Young Human Rights Defender

¹ Amnesty International, “Everybody here is having two lives or phones”: The devastating impact of criminalization on digital spaces for LGBTQ people in Uganda, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr59/8571/2024/en/>

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of the collective work of young Filipino human rights defenders.

In 2024, Amnesty International launched RightUp, its first child and youth-led research project, to center youth expertise otherwise sidelined by conventional hierarchies in human rights work and research. Piloted in the Philippines, nine Filipino young human rights defenders (YHRDs) investigated and documented a human rights issue that puts them at risk on a daily basis: online harassment. Amnesty International provided resources, guidance, and technical support to the young researchers for the report's publication. It focuses particularly on an often-overlooked consequence of online harassment: the chilling effect. People may not only be threatened after exercising their human rights; the chilling effect can stop individuals from daring to exercise them at all.

We ask: How does any chilling effect of online harassment manifest among YHRDs? How is it shaped by YHRDs' intersecting identities? How do YHRDs cope and adapt their advocacy? We find that the chilling effect of online harassment severely impairs YHRDs' human rights work and enjoyment. Through interviews, an online questionnaire, and desk research, we engaged with and listened to fellow YHRDs aged 18-24 who were direct targets of online harassment. We witnessed how they took the lead in framing their experiences, building networks of solidarity, and reclaiming their spaces in advocacy.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS UNDER ATTACK IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines has a vocal civil society and long tradition of activism. Yet it remains one of the most dangerous countries for human rights defenders in Asia. The Duterte administration institutionalized repressive measures such as the Anti-Terrorism Act and the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). While these measures supposedly enable the State to address threats to national security, they have been used to silence opposition and intimidate activists in the Philippines, especially the youth, both physically and digitally.

YOUNG HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT PARTICULAR RISK

Youth activists often operate within volunteer-based initiatives, putting them at risk of harassment from the state and unknown perpetrators, both offline and online. YHRDs experience specific and intersectional risks of online harassment, based on their age; sexual orientation, gender identity and expression; student status and institutional affiliation; and other factors.

The education system in particular has become a battleground for state policies affecting youth activism. National Service Training Program classes, originally designed to instill civic responsibility among students, have reportedly been used as a breeding ground for red-tagging, where students and organizations critical of the government are labeled communist sympathizers.

ONLINE HARASSMENT AND MANIFESTATIONS OF ITS CHILLING EFFECT

While there are laws and ordinances that are expected to protect Filipinos online, online harassment has emerged as a key digital rights concern. Online harassment is broadly understood as the use of certain online or digital platforms and technologies to cause harm to another person or group, which could manifest in the form of trolling, doxing, verbal violence, and red-tagging, among others. This research builds on findings of previous Amnesty International investigations, including how the two successive governments of President Duterte and President Marcos Jr. have weaponized digital tools, misinformation and a flawed anti-terrorism law to create a climate of fear and intimidation among young human rights defenders in the Philippines. Through the practice of “red-tagging,” state actors including leading political figures have vilified young human rights defenders, student activists, teachers, journalists and others as “Communist rebels” and “terrorists,” inciting hatred and violence. “Red-tagging” has been used to harass, intimidate, and repress young human rights defenders in the Philippines. Aligned with this, research by Plan International has shown that 7 out of 10 girls and young women in the country have been harassed on social media. Online harassment often leads to a chilling effect among YHRDs which can discourage them from exercising their rights due to fear of reprisal.

The narratives of YHRDs show that the chilling effect of online harassment has nuanced manifestations. Direct or indirect experience of online harassment has induced psychological distress among YHRDs that manifests as heightened feelings of insecurity, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. In this way, online harassment leads to consequences beyond the digital realm. YHRD’s awareness of this risk further amplifies their distress, threatening their right to health, particularly mental health.

This further leads to cases of self-censorship and YHRDs’ reported experiences made clear that self-censorship cannot merely be understood as the withholding of information. Fundamentally, self-censorship involves YHRDs questioning their place in the realization of their rights or their very status as rights holders. Hence, the chilling effect threatens YHRDs’ freedom of expression and their capacity to defend their human rights.

This inhibition also manifests as inactivity from their organizations, movements, or general human rights advocacy and as isolation from families and social circles. In fact, several YHRDs reported temporarily or permanently deprioritizing their human rights advocacy for their safety. While some manage to adapt their strategies, others face long periods of stagnation, which can weaken their movements and advocacy efforts.

YHRDs are also disincentivized from seeking accountability because they downplay their experiences of abuse. This is due to a perception that online harassment is an “occupational risk” and an “inherent” reality of human rights work. Hesitance to seek redress is also compounded by distrust of state justice institutions and the inaccessibility or ineffectiveness of these mechanisms.

INTERSECTIONAL RISK FACTORS AND YOUTH-LED COLLECTIVE CARE

YHRDs’ particular experiences of the chilling effect are conditioned by their intersecting identities. SOGIESC, age, and other identities, magnify the risks and impact of online harassment of YHRDs. These must be recognized to develop more contextualized, and therefore effective, responses.

Despite their struggles, YHRDs have shown strength and courage in finding alternative means to continue their human rights advocacy. Through interviews, they shared a range of coping mechanisms that they employ for self and collective care, both online and offline.

These include establishing internal well-being committees, enforcing safety protocols, and accessing mental health services and legal support when needed.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing the multifaceted manifestations of online harassment can empower YHRDs to vigilantly identify how the exercise of their rights – such as freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, the right to health, the right to remedy, the rights to be free from discrimination and to defend human rights – is impaired by the chilling effect.

The Philippines, despite its formal commitment to international human rights instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), has consistently failed to fulfill its obligations to protect the rights of human rights defenders in the country, meaning both perpetrators and YHRDs are left to their own devices. Perpetrators of online harassment are not effectively held accountable, while YHRDs must cope with the consequences of this abuse on their own. YHRDs often have to fend for themselves in a repressive political context where dissent is heavily restricted.

While this is the harsh reality of YHRDs in the Philippines, the imperative for human rights advocacy grows stronger with every attack. YHRDs, acknowledging the negative impacts of online harassment on their lives, nonetheless strive to overcome the chilling effect and sustain their activism.

To ensure that YHRDs can continue the work that they do safely, and with their rights respected and protected, we make the following recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PHILIPPINE EXECUTIVE

- End any practice of state-sponsored red-tagging, ceasing all forms of intimidation, harassment, threats, or attacks by government officials, state authorities, and security forces against human rights defenders, especially the youth.
- Abolish the NTF-ELCAC by revoking Executive Order No. 70. Following this, establish a prompt, independent, impartial, and transparent investigation into NTF-ELCAC's practices and activities throughout its operational period. The goal of this investigation should be to address and mitigate impunity within the body.
- Repeal the Anti-Terrorism Act or Republic Act 11479, which has been widely criticized as a threat to human rights for infringing on basic freedoms. Amend the Cybercrime Prevention Act or Republic Act 10175 to remove provisions such as libel clauses which have been used to suppress freedom of expression.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PHILIPPINE CONGRESS

- Pass the Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill to provide formal recognition and protection for human rights defenders in the Philippines, with special attention to the risks and challenges faced by YHRDs and women defenders and those working on women's rights and gender issues. Harmonize the bill with existing laws, such as the International Service for Human Rights' Model National Law on the Recognition and Protection of Human Rights Defenders. Define and criminalize red-tagging explicitly, to ensure that provisions are not weaponized against human rights defenders.
- Enact the Campus Press Freedom Bill to institutionalize protections for student journalists, ensuring their ability to report on critical issues without fear of harassment or legal persecution.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

- Revise institutional policies to safeguard the rights of students to engage in political discourse and activism. Remove restrictive policies that impede students' human rights advocacy.
- Create a registry to document red-tagging and online harassment incidents within educational institutions. Conduct annual analyses to inform policy decisions, ensuring accountability and proactive institutional lines of response.
- Set up comprehensive support systems for students, faculty, and staff who experience red-tagging and online harassment. Ensure access to counseling, legal assistance, and peer support, designating a confidential point of contact within each institution for victims to seek help.
- Implement protocols to protect the independence of student councils, campus publications, and youth organizations, supporting their role in fostering free expression and civic engagement without interference from administrative authorities.
- Uphold educational institutions as 'Safe Havens' explicitly prohibiting any military presence on campuses to maintain a neutral, safe environment for students. Ensure that any investigations concerning students or faculty are conducted with full transparency and involve coordination with the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and relevant rights groups to safeguard the rights and welfare of all parties involved.
- End any affiliations with the NTF-ELCAC. Given NTF-ELCAC's record of red-tagging organizations and individuals, institutions must assess the potential impact of such affiliations on the student body and prioritize protecting students from undue intimidation and stigmatization.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO FUNDERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS IN THE PHILIPPINES

- Ensure sustainable funding for YHRDs and youth social movements, including adequate funding to ensure the health, safety and well-being of YHRDs in their communities.

2. METHODOLOGY

Children and young people are experts on their lived experience of human rights issues. It is therefore important to involve them in knowledge production and decision-making processes that affect their lives and futures. Firm in this belief, Amnesty International convened RightUp,² the movement's first child and youth-led research project. This aligns with Amnesty International's Global Children and Youth Strategy (2022-2025)³ and its broader global Protect the Protest campaign.⁴

RightUp was piloted in the Philippines in 2024, with nine young Filipino researchers from diverse background, aged 18 to 24. The pilot sought to: document and analyze the chilling effect of online harassment on fellow young human rights defenders (YHRDs); analyze how YHRDs' identities intersect and affect their experiences; and document the alternative strategies YHRDs have developed in response to online harassment.

RightUp is anchored in a youth-led participatory action research⁵ framework, positioning the YHRDs who participated in the research interviews as active collaborators and leaders in the research process, rather than passive subjects. YHRDs were referred to as co-researchers, reflecting their central role in the formulation of the research design, collection and analysis of data, articulation of the findings, and advocacy. Amnesty International provided resources, guidance, and technical support to the young researchers for the report's publication.

This approach reflects the study's commitment to challenging traditional hierarchies in human rights work, centering the perspectives of those most affected by the issues under study, and ensuring that the recommendations are grounded in and respond to their lived realities. This participatory framework brings into fruition Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which recognizes the right of children to express their views on issues relevant to their lives.

Intersectionality is also an essential framework of the research, especially in analyzing how YHRDs' overlapping identities – such as age, gender, ethnolinguistic background, and advocacy focus – shaped their experiences of online harassment.⁶ This guided the research in recognizing how systemic inequalities amplify the chilling effect, creating compounded barriers for marginalized communities such as women, LGBTI individuals, and Indigenous Peoples.

² Amnesty International. "RightUp: Amnesty International's Child and Youth-led Research Methodology Guide" (Index: ACT 10/6507/2023), 2023. RightUp is Amnesty International's first child and youth-led research project.

³ Amnesty International, "Youth, Power, Action!" *Global Children and Youth Strategy 2022-2025* (Index: ACT 10/5057/2021) 19 April 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act10/5057/2021/en/#:~:text=The%20Youth%2C%20Power%2C%20Action!,themselves%20in%20the%20driving%20seat>.

⁴ Amnesty International, "Protect the Protest," 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/petition/protect-the-protest/>

⁵ Allyson Rivera, Yuki Okubo, Romona Harden, Hannahlise Wang, and Michele Schlehofer. 2022. "Conducting Virtual Youth-Led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* 3 (3). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.37029>.

⁶ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. New York: The New Press, 2022.

2.1 DATA COLLECTION

2.1.1 ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Amnesty International distributed an online questionnaire to capture a broader understanding of YHRDs' experiences. The questionnaire focused on five key themes: advocacy history, direct and indirect experiences of online harassment, perceived impacts of harassment on advocacy and personal well-being, and strategies for coping and adaptation. The online questionnaire was distributed through network sampling, targeting YHRDs aged 18–24 who directly or indirectly experienced online harassment. Participants from Visayas (central Philippines) and Mindanao (southern Philippines) were also included to reflect geographic diversity. In total, 94 responses were collected. Respondents were distributed fairly evenly across ages:

RESPONDENTS' AGE	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	12	6	15	16	16	10	19

Most of the YHRDs who responded were students, and a number reported living in urban areas in the Philippines.

RESPONDENTS' LOCATION	SOUTH LUZON	NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION	MINDANAO	VISAYAS	CEBU	CENTRAL LUZON	NORTH LUZON
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	24	20	20	11	9	8	2

2.1.2 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Research for this report primarily relies on interviews with 29 Filipino YHRDs aged 18-24 who directly experienced online harassment.⁷ This age range mirrored the RightUp project's definition and selection criteria for young researchers.⁸ It allowed for inclusion of young people at various life stages including those in and out of education and work.

These YHRDs were engaged through purposive network sampling, including 20 interviewees who were identified through their responses to the online questionnaire. All were interviewed remotely through a secure platform from June to July 2024. Conducted in Filipino and/or English, the in-depth interviews explored the nuanced impacts of online harassment as conditioned by the YHRDs' intersecting identities and human rights advocacy. The YHRDs were also invited to share screenshots or links of the harassment they

⁷ The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders defines young human rights defenders as those "under 32 years of age and child human rights defenders as those under 18 years of age, who are acting peacefully to promote, protect and defend the human rights of others". Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor "We are not just the future": challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders 2024 A/HRC/55/50, para 9.

⁸ Amnesty International, "Youth, Power, Action!" *Global Children and Youth Strategy 2022-2025* (Index: ACT 10/5057/2021) 19 April 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act10/5057/2021/en/#:~:text=The%20Youth%2C%20Power%2C%20Action!,themselves%20in%20the%20driving%20seat.>

experienced. Ethical guidelines were rigorously observed throughout the interviews, prioritizing informed consent and the safety of all YHRDs who are referred to by pseudonyms.

Most of those interviewed were current or recent students and most lived in urban areas in the Philippines such as Manila, Baguio, Los Baños, and Cebu. These areas have relatively greater concentrations of universities and human rights groups. YHRDs from outside these areas, particularly from Mindanao and other parts of the Southern Tagalog region, were also sought out and included in the interview pool. This was because some of these areas are considered as insurgency hot spots, are militarized, and often experience unique and under-reported intimidation challenges. Many of the YHRDs were also actively engaged in human rights advocacy as leaders of their respective organizations before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, however, YHRDs had to shift to online means in response to the difficulties brought about by travel restrictions, compounded with the Duterte administration's militaristic pandemic response.⁹ Further, the recent 2022 Philippine national elections were deemed the most polarizing election to date.¹⁰ Reports have shown how, during the 2022 elections, civil public deliberation often degenerated into adversarial online feuds among rival political groups.¹¹

2.1.3 DESK RESEARCH

The research also included a scoping review of academic literature, media content, social media platform guidelines, and relevant legal and policy frameworks at the local and international levels. These provided context on online harassment, YHRDs, and the broader human rights landscape in the Philippines. This research builds on findings of previous Amnesty International investigations, including into the practice of “red-tagging” to harass, intimidate, and repress YHRDs in the Philippines.¹² Desk research insights informed the design of the questionnaire and interview tools, ensuring that they captured the specific challenges faced by YHRDs.

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis used qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of YHRDs' experiences.

Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using a two-stage thematic coding process. The first stage involved sorting texts into predefined codes in line with the objectives of the research: cases of online harassment; manifestations of the chilling effect; intersectional identities, and adaptive strategies. The second stage involved the identification of recurring themes and patterns. The YHRDs were also consulted during the data analysis process for further validation, ensuring that their accounts were accurately reflected and interpreted. The analysis was conducted in the original language to avoid loss of nuance in translation.

Also, questionnaire data were cleaned to remove identifying details and analyzed descriptively to identify patterns and connections. For example, patterns between demographic variables (such as age, advocacy focus, and living arrangements) and experiences of online harassment were examined.

⁹ Hapal, Karl. 2021. “The Philippines' COVID-19 Response: Securitising the Pandemic and Disciplining the Pasaway.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40(2): 224-244. doi: 10.1177/1868103421994261.

¹⁰ Jon Benedik Bunquin, Fatima Gaw, Julienne Thesa Baldo-Cubelo, Fernando Paragas, and Ma. Rosel San Pascual. “Digital Public Pulse: 2022 Philippine Elections.” 2022, Philippine Media Monitoring Laboratory, University of the Philippines Diliman. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WHv_I0ph04Se9o2vlybwun6JQBraMs7L/view

¹¹ Fatima Gaw, Jon Benedik Bunquin, Samuel Cabbuag, Jose Mari Lanuza, Noreen Sapalo, and Al-Habbyel Yusoph. “Political Economy of Covert Influence Operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections,” 2023, Internews. https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/InternewsPH_July2023_Political-Economy-of-Covert-Influence-Operations-in-the-2022-Philippine-Elections-2.pdf

¹² Amnesty International “I turned my fear into courage”: Red-tagging and state violence against young human rights defenders in the Philippines 14 October 2024 (Index ASA 35/8574/2024) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/8574/2024/en/>

2.3 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the geographic focus on major metropolitan areas reflects the concentration of youth and human rights organizations in these regions but may not fully capture the experiences of YHRDs in rural or Indigenous areas. Although participants from Visayas and Mindanao were included, further research is needed to explore regional and cultural dynamics in greater depth.

Second, language constraints were another limitation, as the use of Filipino and/or English in the general research tools, especially the questionnaire, may have excluded individuals more comfortable in regional languages such as Bisaya and Ilocano. Nonetheless, the young researchers leveraged their diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds to ensure that the interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the YHRDs.

Third, participant engagement in the online interviews and questionnaires may have been reduced by varying levels of internet access and digital literacy, as well as self-selection effects. This study has found that the chilling effect of online harassment has led to YHRDs often doubting the relevance of their own human rights work. YHRDs reported feeling that they did not deserve the label “human rights defender” or “activist” due to their relative privilege or reduction in engagement. This, along with the perceived risks associated with human rights work in the Philippines, may have dissuaded some from participating.

Finally, the study’s temporal scope (2020–2024) coincided with significant sociopolitical events. These notably include the implementation of the Anti-Terrorism Act amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 national elections which ushered the transition from the Duterte to the Marcos Jr. administration. While these events provided important context, they may have shaped participants’ experiences in ways that require further exploration.

Despite these limitations, the participatory and intersectional approach ensured that the study captured a diverse range of experiences. By centering youth voices, this study offers critical insights into the impact of online harassment and pathways for meaningful advocacy that are more grounded in and responsive to the lived realities of YHRDs.

3. BACKGROUND: HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS UNDER ATTACK IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines remains a dangerous place for human rights defenders (HRDs) and journalists.¹³ The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression has reported that in the past 30 years, 117 journalists were killed in the country.¹⁴ A dramatic rise in human rights violations and impunity under former President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022)¹⁵ and the continuation of attacks against activists and human rights defenders under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (since 2022) has further intensified the threats to those working on human rights. In 2023, the group Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment recorded 21 killings and 11 abductions of environmental defenders.¹⁶ Within this context, YHRDs are similarly vulnerable, facing daily threats and risks as they speak out for justice.

3.1 WEAPONIZING MEASURES AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Over the past 15 years, successive governments have introduced and enforced measures that have had significant implications for human rights defenders. These include the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, and Executive Order No. 70 (2018) that created the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). Civil society groups have raised concerns regarding the application of these measures and their potential to restrict fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. The implementation of these laws has been cited by legal

¹³ Global Witness, Press release: Rush for critical minerals in Philippines threatens Indigenous communities and biodiversity, 3 December 2024, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/rush-critical-minerals-philippines-threatens-indigenous-communities-and-biodiversity/#:~:text=Since%202012%2C%20the%20Philippines%20has,killings%20documented%20by%20Global%20Witness>

¹⁴ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Philippines: UN expert calls for more sustained reforms to prevent threats and killings of journalists and activists" 2 February 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/philippines-un-expert-calls-more-sustained-reforms-prevent-threats-and#:~:text=The%20Special%20Rapporteur%20stressed%20that,which%2081%20cases%20remain%20unsolved.>

¹⁵ The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported in 2020 that OHCHR had "verified the killings of 208 human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists, including 30 women, between January 2015 and December 2019." United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Report: Situation of human rights in the Philippines, 29 June 2020, UN Doc. A/HRC/44/22, para. 50.

¹⁶ Iya Gozum, "For 11th year, Philippines still deadliest place in Asia for environmental defenders," 10 September 2024, Rappler.com, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/deadliest-place-asia-environmental-defenders-2023/>

experts, human rights organizations, and international bodies as having contributed to an increased risk of legal prosecution, surveillance, and physical threats against HRDs.¹⁷ Their provisions, particularly concerning counterterrorism, online expression, and national security, have led to scrutiny regarding their alignment with constitutional guarantees and international human rights commitments.

3.1.1 ANTI-TERRORISM ACT

The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (ATA), enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, expanded the Philippine government's authority in addressing terrorism. However, several groups have challenged the constitutionality of the law, arguing that its broad definitions and procedural mechanisms could lead to potential violations of human rights.¹⁸ Various human rights organizations, including Amnesty International have raised concerns regarding its implications for due process, freedom of expression, and the right to association.¹⁹ Amnesty International called on the Philippine government to reject the ATA when it was first proposed.²⁰

One of its key provisions, Section 25, empowers the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) to designate individuals and organizations as terrorists based on intelligence assessments, without judicial oversight. Those identified as terrorists would be subjected to financial restrictions, surveillance, and legal action.²¹

In July 2023, the ATC designated four leaders of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance, an Indigenous Peoples' rights organization, as terrorists, citing alleged affiliations with proscribed groups. This designation led to the freezing of their financial assets and the initiation of state investigations into their activities.²²

Another problematic provision of the law authorizes warrantless arrests and extended periods of detention. Under Section 29, authorities can detain suspects for up to 24 days without charge, exceeding the limitations set under the Philippine Constitution and international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The United Nations Human Rights Office (OHCHR) has previously expressed concern that this provision may facilitate arbitrary detention. In its 2020 report on the human rights situation in the Philippines, OHCHR highlighted that the ATA's broad definition of terrorism and warned its extended pre-charge detention period could lead to human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention without sufficient legal safeguards. The OHCHR also warned that the law might be misused to stifle dissent and restrict civil liberties, disproportionately affecting activists, journalists, and civil society organizations engaged in human rights and social justice advocacy.²³ Five years since the law's implementation, Amnesty International, alongside other domestic and international

¹⁷ Amnesty International Philippines, Anti-Terror Act remains dangerous and fundamentally flawed 9 December 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/2021/12/anti-terror-act-remains-dangerous-and-fundamentally-flawed/> and Maria Corazon Reyes, "Rethinking the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012: Strengthening Philippine Sovereignty in the Digital Age". 4 September 2024 <https://cids.up.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/PB-The-Cybercrime-Prevention-Act-of-2012-04-Sept-2024-for-uploading.pdf>

¹⁸ ABS-CBN News. SC sets oral arguments for petitions vs Anti-Terror Law. 11 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/08/11/20/sc-sets-oral-arguments-for-petitions-vs-anti-terror-law>

¹⁹ Julie McCarthy, Why rights groups worry about the Philippines' new anti-terrorism law. NPR, 21 July 2020. Available at: <http://npr.org/2020/07/21/893019057/why-rights-groups-worry-about-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law> and Amnesty International Philippines, End use of anti-terror laws to target development and human rights workers, (Index: ASA 35/9005/2025) 5 February 2025 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/9005/2025/en/>

²⁰ Amnesty International, Philippines: Reject dangerous anti-terror law, (Index: ASA 35/2476/2020), 3 June 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/2476/2020/en/>

²¹ University of the Philippines Law Center. At a Glance: Anti-Terrorism Bill Briefer. University of the Philippines College of Law. 2020. <https://law.upd.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/At-a-Glance-Anti-Terrorism-Bill-Briefer.pdf>.

²² Amnesty International (2023). *Philippines 2023 Report*. Amnesty International. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/philippines/report-philippines/>

²³ OHCHR (2022). Implementation of Human Rights Council resolution 45/33 and progress and results achieved in technical cooperation and capacity-building for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Philippines. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/10/implementation-human-rights-council-resolution-4533-and-progress-and-results>

groups, raised concerns about the increasing misuse of counter-terrorism laws, including the ATA, by the Philippine government to crack down on development, humanitarian and human rights organizations.²⁴

One impact in the digital realm has been The National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) which, citing the Anti-Terrorism Act, has blocked the websites of at least 20 media outlets, including Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly, labeling them as “terrorist-friendly.”²⁵ These platforms, often operated by young journalists and activists, have consistently reported on human rights violations and issues critical of the government.

3.1.2 CYBERCRIME PREVENTION ACT OF 2012

The Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10175), particularly Section 4(c)(4) on libel committed through a computer system or any other similar means commonly termed “cyber libel,” has been instrumental in legal actions against journalists and human rights advocates.²⁶ Unlike traditional libel under the Revised Penal Code (RPC), which prescribes a penalty ranging from six months to four years, the Act imposes a harsher penalty of six to 12 years’ imprisonment for cyber libel.²⁷ This legal precedent intensifies the risks for individuals accused of online defamation and raises concerns over potential misuse to suppress press freedom.



A study commissioned by the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), titled State of Legal Safety of Filipino Journalists, examined the prevalence of cyber libel and libel cases from June 2016 to March 2023.²⁸ The study reported that at least 50 journalists were facing cyber libel charges, with 61% of these cases filed by local politicians.²⁹ Figure 1 shows how the Act has emboldened the authorities to pursue young journalists.



Figure 1. A screenshot of the official Facebook account of the Philippine National Police (PNP) of Rizal, Kalinga, red-tagging SINAG, a University of the Philippines Diliman (UPD) college publication.

Source: Sinag Red-tagging Report Page 7

The police post reads:

You cannot fool anyone anymore!

If we're talking vileness, no one can beat you because you have been using the Aetas for your own interest. You are becoming desperate now that they know the truth and are driving you and your deceiving propaganda away from their territory.

²⁴ Amnesty International, Philippines: End use of anti-terror laws to target development and human rights workers (Index: ASA 35/9005/2025), 5 February 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/9005/2025/en/>

²⁵ Adox, “What is red-tagging and why it is dangerous in the Philippines?” 27 April 2023, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2023/04/27/what-is-red-tagging-and-why-it-is-dangerous-in-the-philippines/>

²⁶ Republic of the Philippines. (2012, September 12). Republic Act No. 10175 – Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012. Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines. Retrieved from <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2012/09/12/republic-act-no-10175/> “Section 4(c)(4) Libel. — The unlawful or prohibited acts of libel as defined in Article 355 of the Revised Penal Code, as amended, committed through a computer system or any other similar means which may be devised in the future.”

²⁷ Republic of the Philippines. (2012, September 12). Republic Act No. 10175 – Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012. Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines. Retrieved from <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2012/09/12/republic-act-no-10175/> Section 8.

²⁸ National Union of Journalists of the Philippines. (2023). State of legal safety of Filipino journalists. Retrieved from https://nujp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/LAWFARE-STUDY_State-of-Legal-Safety-of-Filipino-Journalists.pdf

²⁹ National Union of Journalists of the Philippines. (2023). State of legal safety of Filipino journalists. Retrieved from https://nujp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/LAWFARE-STUDY_State-of-Legal-Safety-of-Filipino-Journalists.pdf (p.20), The breakdown of complainants included 11 mayors, seven governors, three congressional representatives, two barangay chairpeople, and one provincial board member. Other entities initiating cyber libel cases included government offices (12.8%), private individuals (15.4%), police officers (7.7%), and religious organizations (2.6%).

You have been busted!

3.1.3 EXECUTIVE ORDER 70

Executive Order No. 70 (EO 70), issued in December 2018, institutionalized a whole-of-nation approach to addressing armed conflict in the Philippines. The order established the NTF-ELCAC, a multi-agency body tasked with coordinating the government's efforts to address the root causes of the armed conflict. While government authorities present EO 70 as a national security measure, human rights organizations and legal experts argue that the task force has abused its influential position, overstepping its mandate by amplifying the vilification of human rights defenders, leading to systemic human rights violations and suppression of civil liberties.

The most documented consequence of EO 70 is the practice of red-tagging.

RED-TAGGING

Red-tagging is when individuals and organizations critical of the government are publicly accused of affiliations with communist groups. According to the International Commission of Jurists, red-tagging has resulted in harassment, surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and even unlawful killings.³⁰

Amnesty International has documented how the two successive governments of President Duterte and President Marcos Jr. have weaponized digital tools, misinformation and a flawed anti-terrorism law to create a climate of fear and intimidation among young human rights defenders in the Philippines. Through the practice of "red-tagging," state actors including leading political figures and security actors have vilified young human rights defenders, student activists, teachers, journalists and others as "Communist rebels" and "terrorists," inciting hatred and violence.³¹ Amnesty International has also raised concerns about the use of red-tagging to crack down on development, humanitarian and human rights organizations.³²

Even the most benign activities could fall prey to red-tagging. During the COVID-19 pandemic, community pantries emerged across the Philippines as grassroots initiatives to provide free food and essential items to those in need.³³ These efforts were widely lauded as embodiments of the Filipino spirit of "bayanihan" (communal unity). However, the NTF-ELCAC expanded its red-tagging activities to include religious and humanitarian endeavors.³⁴

Former NTF-ELCAC spokesperson Lt. Gen. Antonio Parlade Jr. publicly accused community pantry organizers of using these initiatives as fronts for communist recruitment. He likened the rapid proliferation of community pantries to the biblical story of Satan's temptation of Eve, suggesting that while the pantries appeared benevolent, they concealed a more sinister agenda.³⁵ As a result of these accusations, several community pantry organizers reported increased surveillance and intimidation by police and military

³⁰ International Commission of Jurists. Philippines: Cease Dangerous Practice of Red-Tagging Human Rights Defenders. 31 January 2022, <https://www.icj.org/philippines-cease-dangerous-practice-of-red-tagging-human-rights-defenders/>.

³¹ Amnesty International, "I turned my fear into courage," 2024, (previously cited)

³² Amnesty International, "Philippines: End use of anti-terror laws to target development and human rights workers," (Index: ASA 35/9005/2025), 5 February 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/9005/2025/en/>

³³ Nikka G. Valenzuela. "Community pantry: 'Not charity, but mutual aid'." 18 April 2021.

<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1420463/community-pantry-not-charity-but-mutual-aid>

³⁴ Mark Saludes, "Mission in peril: 'Red-tagging' the religious sector in the Philippines, 5 June 2021, <https://www.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/multimedia/slideshow/06/05/21/church-red-tagging>

³⁵ Rappler. (2021, May 5). NTF-ELCAC's Parlade says Ana Patricia Non is 'same' as Satan. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/ntf-elcac-parlade-says-ana-patricia-non-same-satan/>

personnel. In the Pandacan Community Pantry, police required pantry organizers to fill out a form detailing personal information and organizations they are affiliated with.³⁶

NTF-ELCAC's activities and programs still enjoy state support and funding as incumbent President Marcos Jr. continues the legacy of his predecessor in this regard. In recent statements, Marcos denied public allegations against NTF-ELCAC's activities and dismissed calls from civil society organizations to abolish the agency.³⁷ In fact, he took the opportunity to laud the agency's success in adopting a whole-of-government approach to curbing "internal security threats" and helping local communities to develop.

Under the guise of promoting national security, state forces can freely weaponize the law and curtail dissent. As such, red-tagging and other forms of online harassment of human rights defenders and civil society organizations have become normalized in the Philippine digital ecosystem.

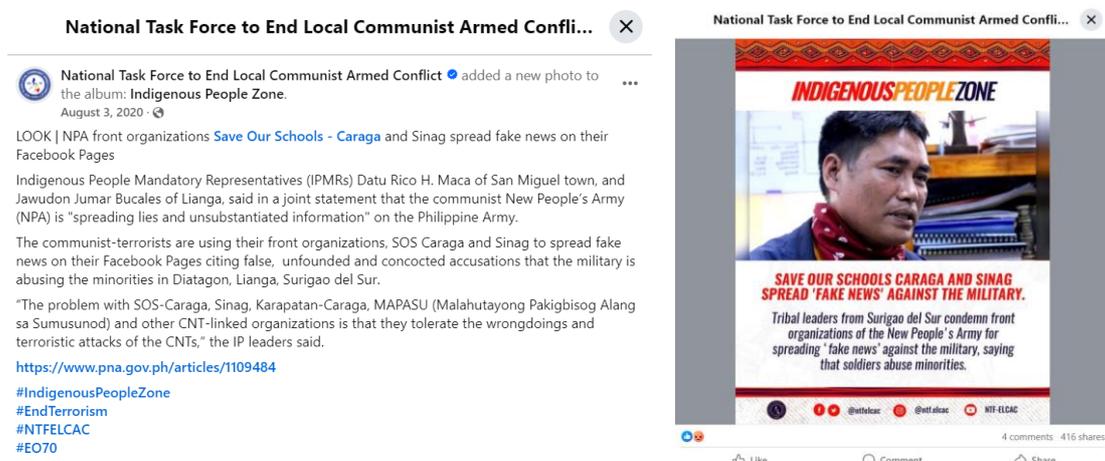


Figure 2. Screenshot from NTF-ELCAC's Facebook page, red-tagging *Save Our Schools - Caraga and Sinag*
Source: [NTF-ELCAC's Facebook Page post on 3 August 2020](#)

WHAT IS ONLINE HARASSMENT?

Online harassment may include:

- offensive name-calling;
- cyberstalking;
- doxing (the publication of personal data, such as a person's address, without their consent);
- trolling;
- impersonation;
- swatting (deceiving an emergency service into sending a police or emergency service response team to another person's address);
- physical threat; and
- sexual harassment, among others.³⁸

³⁶ Rappler. 2021. [Philippine Government's Red-Tagging of Community Pantry Sparks Uproar Online](https://www.rappler.com/moveph/philippine-government-red-tagging-community-pantry-sparks-uproar-online/). 20 April 2021.

³⁷ Philippine News Agency, "Marcos: No plans to abolish NTF-ELCAC" 14 May 2024 <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1224930>; ABS CBN News, "Marcos sees no need to abolish NTF-ELCAC" May 16, 2024 <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/2024/5/16/marcos-sees-no-need-to-abolish-ntf-elcac-1720>

³⁸ The following forms of harassment were derived from the answers of YHRDs in the online questionnaire (T30A: What type/s of online harassment have you experienced in relation to your human rights advocacy?)

Previous investigations suggest that online violence is perpetuated by either state forces or private actors with state-aligned political values forcing activists and HRDs to lessen their online activities and compromise their long-term engagement with digital media.³⁹

It is essential to recognize that all these actions contribute to a culture of violence, including gender-based and technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Each incident, regardless of perceived severity, perpetuates harm and reinforces fear and control in both online and offline spaces.

States must both ensure the rights of YHRDs, especially women and LGBTI people, to be protected from violence and discrimination, and refrain from promoting content that incites violence or reproduces or reinforces discrimination.⁴⁰ Such content may include forms of disinformation, smear campaigns, harassment, doxing and other forms of online violence – which are often used as forms of intimidation or reprisals against YHRDs. States should also engage in internet governance that respects and promotes the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and to privacy.

3.2 EFFORTS TO INSTITUTIONALIZE PROTECTIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Laws protecting the digital rights and welfare of human rights defenders in the country are severely lacking. There are currently no national laws specifically safeguarding the rights of HRDs. Thus, HRDs who experience online harassment and wish to pursue legal remedies are limited to the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 (Republic Act. 10175). While this law may address isolated incidents of online harassment, it cannot deter or respond to organized online attacks targeting HRDs. Nevertheless, there are ongoing efforts by certain government sectors to establish legal mechanisms and policies that would offer more comprehensive protection for human rights defenders.

One option is to seek a writ of amparo, an emergency proceeding in the courts to secure a protective order against state security forces. In a landmark decision issued in 2024, that was related to such a case, the Supreme Court of the Philippines took a definitive stance on red-tagging, ruling that it constitutes a violation of constitutional rights, particularly due process, freedom of expression, and the right to security.⁴¹ The ruling emphasized that public accusations of communist insurgency affiliations infringe on human rights and contribute to a climate of fear and repression.⁴² The court acknowledged that “[b]eing associated with communists or terrorists makes the red-tagged person a target of vigilantes, paramilitary groups, or even State agents”.⁴³

In Congress, on February 28, 2023, the House Committee on Human Rights approved a bill “Defining the Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Human Rights Defenders, Declaring State Responsibilities, and

³⁹ Human Rights Foundation, “Red-Tagging in the Philippines: A License to Kill” 10 April 2023 <https://hrf.org/latest/red-tagging-in-the-philippines-a-license-to-kill/>

⁴⁰ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression, 7 August 2023, UN Doc. A/78/288, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a78288-gendered-disinformation-and-its-implications-right-freedom>

⁴¹ Supreme Court of the Philippines Siegfred D. Deduro Vs. Maj. Gen. Eric C. Vinoya, in his capacity as Commanding Officer of the 3rd Infantry Division, Philippine Army G.R. No. 254753, 4 July 2023. Retrieved from <https://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/254753-siegfred-d-deduro-vs-maj-gen-eric-c-vinoya-in-his-capacity-as-commanding-officer-of-the-3rd-infantry-division-philippine-army/>

⁴² Supreme Court of the Philippines. 2024. SC: Red-Tagging Threatens Right to Life, Liberty, and Security <https://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/sc-red-tagging-threatens-right-to-life-liberty-and-security/>.

⁴³ Supreme Court of the Philippines Siegfred D. Deduro Vs. Maj. Gen. Eric C. Vinoya, in his capacity as Commanding Officer of the 3rd Infantry Division, Philippine Army G.R. No. 254753, July 4, 2023. Retrieved from <https://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/254753-siegfred-d-deduro-vs-maj-gen-eric-c-vinoya-in-his-capacity-as-commanding-officer-of-the-3rd-infantry-division-philippine-army/>

Instituting Effective Mechanisms for the Protection and Promotion of these Rights and Freedoms” (House Bill No. 77).⁴⁴ The bill sought to establish protection mechanisms for Human Rights Defenders but was not signed into law due to time constraints.⁴⁵

At the local government level, several municipalities have enacted ordinances designed to provide immediate protections for HRDs. In 2024, the Baguio City Council passed the Baguio City Human Rights Defenders’ Protection Ordinance, explicitly prohibiting red-tagging by government officials and law enforcement personnel. This ordinance criminalizes any public labeling of individuals or groups as members of communist or terrorist organizations without clear and verifiable evidence.⁴⁶ Additionally, Mayor Benjamin Magalong has taken a strong stance against red-tagging within his jurisdiction. In 2022, he ordered the removal of posters and tarpaulins around the city that accused activists of being linked to communist groups.⁴⁷

Beyond Baguio, other local government units have also taken measures to protect HRDs. Isabela City, located in Basilan Province, pioneered the passage of the Human Rights Defenders’ Protection Ordinance in April 2023, making it the first local legislation in the Philippines dedicated to safeguarding HRDs. The Commission on Human Rights Chairperson Richard Palpal-latoc has lauded the legislation as “a concrete move to protect human rights defenders at the local level, which is crucial in creating a conducive environment for human rights at the grassroots level”.⁴⁸

Building on this precedent, Basilan Province enacted the Basilan Province Human Rights Defenders’ Protection Ordinance on August 8, 2024, making it the first provincial-level legislation of its kind in the Philippines. This ordinance defines HRDs, establishes the obligations of duty-bearers in protecting fundamental freedoms, and enshrines the rights of HRDs. This includes, but is not limited to, the right to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, the right to form groups, and the right to receive and use resources.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ The House Committee on Human Rights approved Rep. Edcel Lagman’s HB 77 as substitute bill for similar proposals, including Makabayan bloc’s HB 256 and 2484 which have identical subjects. The proposed Human Rights Defenders Protection (HRDP) Act is closely patterned from the ‘Model Law for the Recognition and Protection of Human Rights Defenders’ developed by the International Service for Human Rights and endorsed by 28 high-level experts. Amnesty International Philippines, Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill Salient Points, April 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/2024/04/hrdp-bill-salient-points/>.

⁴⁵ Amnesty International Philippines, Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill Salient Points, April 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/2024/04/hrdp-bill-salient-points/>.

⁴⁶ Northern Dispatch. *Groups Laud Passage of Baguio Rights Defender Ordinance*, 10 December 2024, <https://nordis.net/2024/12/10/article/news/groups-laud-passage-of-baguio-rights-defender-ordinance>

⁴⁷ Inquirer.net, *Baguio Mayor Bans Red-Tagging Posters, Tarps*, 23 November 2022, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1567759/baguio-mayor-bans-red-tagging-posters-tarps>

⁴⁸ Manila Bulletin. *CHR Lauds Isabela City in Basilan for Enacting 1st Human Rights Protection Ordinance in PH*. 20 April 2023. <https://mb.com.ph/2023/4/20/chr-lauds-isabela-city-in-basilan-for-enacting-1st-human-rights-protection-ordinance-in-ph>

⁴⁹ Commission on Human Rights, Statement of the Commission on Human Rights Lauding the Local Government of Basilan for the Passage of Its First Ordinance Protecting Human Rights Defenders in the Province 2024. Accessed 6 February 2025. <https://chr.gov.ph/statement-of-the-commission-on-human-rights-lauding-the-local-government-of-basilan-for-the-passage-of-its-first-ordinance-protecting-human-rights-defenders-in-the-province>

4. YOUNG HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT PARTICULAR RISK

In this report, YHRDs are activists aged 18-25 who have engaged with grassroots advocacy, including student journalism, community organization, in-person activities, and online campaigning, among others.⁵⁰ They may be students, young professionals, or members of youth organizations advocating for human rights, education reform, environmental protection, and democratic freedoms. Despite their contributions, youth activists often operate within volunteer-based initiatives, putting them at risk of harassment from the state and unknown perpetrators, both offline and online.⁵¹ YHRDs experience specific and intersectional risks of online harassment, based on their age; sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (see chapter 7); student status and institutional affiliation; and other factors that will be discussed below and later in this report.

4.1 AGE

While it is a common theme internationally for young people's voices to be diminished if not dismissed,⁵² it is particularly evident in the context of young people advocating for human rights in the Philippines. The cultural norm of "utang na loob" (deep sense of moral indebtedness and reciprocity) and the strong tradition of filial piety in Philippine context reinforce the importance of familial and communal ties, however, they can also present challenges for young people to assert their opinions and individual expression.⁵³ These deeply rooted values tends to frame the youth and youth participation in community and governmental affairs as passive recipients of care rather than active contributors to change.

4.2 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

YHRDs face specific challenges in the Philippines as political participation is commonly expressed through membership in groups and movements that are often at odds with the state. In fact, the Philippines has

⁵⁰ Amnesty International, "Youth, Power, Action!" *Global Children and Youth Strategy 2022-2025* (Index: ACT 10/5057/2021) 19 April 2024, (previously cited).

⁵¹ Amnesty International, "I turned my fear into courage," 2024, (previously cited)

⁵² Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor "We are not just the future": challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders 2024 A/HRC/55/50

⁵³ Aleksí Seger, "Precarious lives of children and youth in the Philippines: Critical perspectives on rights-based approaches to development and empowerment" May 2021, <https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2784742/no.ntnu:inspera:80893378:50628817.pdf?sequence=1> p.48; Steph Araldo, "'Utang na loob?' Filipino family values gone wrong, and how they affect mental health," 31 January 2023, Rappler.com, <https://www.rappler.com/life-and-style/relationships/filipino-family-values-gone-wrong/>

been dubbed the “non-governmental organization (NGO) capital of the world,”⁵⁴ boasting dense civil society networks and a long tradition of activism.⁵⁵ However, left-leaning movements, human rights organizations, and opposition movements are viewed with suspicion due to state propaganda and red-tagging. This was especially the case during the Duterte administration⁵⁶, and was spurred by the divisive rhetoric of national leaders who often paint human rights groups as threats to national stability.⁵⁷

DISAPPEARANCE OF YOUNG ECO-ACTIVISTS

On 2 September 2023, YHRDs Jhed Tamano, 22, and Jonila Castro, 21, disappeared for 17 days after being picked up by state-affiliated forces.⁵⁸ Both Tamano and Castro were actively involved in environmental activism in Manila Bay which, according to their colleagues, may have made them targets. After their enforced disappearance, the two were later presented by state authorities on 19 September. These authorities alleged that Tamano and Castro had voluntarily surrendered due to affiliations with communist groups. However, during the same press conference, Tamano and Castro refuted these claims, asserting that they had been abducted and coerced into speaking.⁵⁹ The incident sparked significant retaliation from the authorities, and the military subsequently filed perjury charges against them,⁶⁰ underscoring the increasing risks faced by YHRDs involved in grassroots advocacy.

YHRDs aligned with left-leaning movements in the Philippines, may be disproportionately targeted with red-tagging by the state and private actors.⁶¹ More broadly, in the Philippine digital landscape, YHRDs who publicly criticize government policies and officials are at risk of harassment from government-aligned actors, both offline and online.⁶² As discussed above, through the Anti-Terror Act (ATA), YHRDs can be at risk of being tagged as “terrorists” by the government on baseless claims.



⁵⁴ Aries Arugay and Justin Keith Baquisal. “Bowed, Bent, & Broken: Duterte’s Assaults on Civil Society in the Philippines,” 2023, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/18681034231209504>. (October 30, 2023)

⁵⁵ Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso. “State and Society in the Philippines” (2nd ed.), 2017, Ateneo de Manila University Press.

⁵⁶ Aries Arugay and Justin Keith Baquisal, “*Bowed, Bent, & Broken: Duterte’s Assaults on Civil Society in the Philippines*,” 2023, (previously cited)

⁵⁷ Joshua Uyheng and Cristina Jayme Montiel. “Populist polarization in postcolonial Philippines: Sociolinguistic rifts in online drug war discourse,” 2021, *European Journal of Social Psychology*. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2021-09405-001>.

⁵⁸ Gaea K. Cabico, Green activists say they were abducted by military, deny surrender, 19 September 2023, Philstar.com, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/09/19/2297469/green-activists-say-they-were-abducted-military-deny-surrender>

⁵⁹ Amnesty International, “Annual Report 2023/2024: Philippines,” 23 April 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/amnesty-report-2023-24-philippines>

⁶⁰ Amnesty International, “Annual Report 2023/2024: Philippines,” 2024 (previously cited).

⁶¹ Ruby Rosselle Tugade, “Persistent Red-Tagging in the Philippines as Violation of the Principle of Distinction Under International Humanitarian Law,” 2023, *Philippine Law Journal* 95, pp. 560-581, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369365561_Persistent_Red-Tagging_in_the_Philippines_as_Violation_of_the_Principle_of_Distinction_Under_International_Humanitarian_Law

⁶² Amnesty International, “*I turned my fear into courage*,” 2024, (previously cited)

FALSELY ACCUSED – THE TACLOBAN 5

The Tacloban 5 are five activists who are active members of organizations involved in independent journalism, human rights, and environmental issues. The activists are: Marielle Domequil, aged 22 at the time of her arrest and affiliated with the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines: community journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio, aged 21 at the time of her arrest; Alexander Abinguna, a human rights defender from KARAPATAN; Marissa Cabaljao from People Surge⁶³; and Mira Legion from Bagong Alyansang Makabayan - Eastern Visayas.⁶⁴

The Tacloban 5 were arrested in Tacloban City in February 2020 and charged with illegal possession of firearms and explosives under Republic Act No. 10591, also known as the Comprehensive Firearms and Ammunition Regulation Act. Activists allege that the state has used this law against HRDs, planting evidence, including guns and explosives.

Simultaneous raids on activists' residences and offices, often conducted in the early hours and with the use of "shotgun search warrants," or that identified members of mass organizations are arrested for supposed illegal possession of firearms and explosives,⁶⁵ have been reported as a common tactic in these cases.⁶⁶ While Marissa and Mira were granted bail after being charged with illegal possession of firearms, Frenchie Mae, Alexander and Marielle remain detained, as the charge of illegal possession of explosives is non-bailable.⁶⁷

On 27 January 2024, Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, conducted a visit to the Tacloban prison to personally assess the situation of the three that continue to be detained. In her preliminary report following the visit, she called for either the dismissal of the charges or an acceleration of the judicial process in their cases.⁶⁸

⁶³ People Surge is an alliance of victims of Super Typhoon Yolanda.

⁶⁴ Jazmin Bonifacio, "Continued detention of Tacloban 5 causing mental pain on their families," 23 January 2023, Rappler.com, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/visayas/detention-tacloban-5-causing-mental-pain-their-families/>

⁶⁵ Associació Catalana per la Pau and International Action for Peace, "Duterte's Kill Them All Politics: A Diagnosis on the State of Human Rights in the Philippines." Human Rights Philippines, July 14, 2022. <https://humanrightphilippines.org/>

⁶⁶ National Union of Peoples' Lawyers, "Weaponization of the Law against Human Rights Defenders, Attacks on Lawyers and the Ineffectiveness of Domestic Remedies" Submission for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on the Philippines 2022, <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=9876&file=EnglishTranslation>

⁶⁷ Philstar, "Firearms and Explosives Raps an 'Easy Way' to Lock Activists Up, NUPL Says," Philstar, 11 December 2020, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/12/11/2063075/firearms-and-explosives-raps-easy-way-lock-activists-up-nupl-says>.

⁶⁸ OHCHR, Preliminary observations by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, Ms. Irene Khan, at the end of her visit to the Philippines, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/expression/statements/20240202-eom-philippines-sr-freedex.pdf>

5. ONLINE HARASSMENT

Online harassment has become an increasingly alarming human rights concern in the Philippines. It is broadly understood as the use of certain online or digital platforms and technologies to cause harm to another person or group, which could manifest in the form of hateful and abusive speech, targeted smear campaigns, doxing, and threats of violence.⁶⁹ In the Philippines, this form of digital violence notoriously takes place on Facebook, Meta's leading social media network in the country, with 95% of social media users logging into Facebook each month.⁷⁰

A Plan International report (2020) has shown that 7 out of 10 girls and young women in the country have been harassed on social media.⁷¹ Three out five young activists are reported to have experienced online harassment for posting human rights content according to the result of an online questionnaire by Amnesty International in 2024.⁷² These findings are consistent with the results of the questionnaire completed by 94 YHRDs in the Philippines who participated in this research:

- 88 reported that they used Facebook to advocate for human rights;
- 57 directly experienced online harassment;
- 29 witnessed online harassment; and
- 8 neither experienced nor witnessed online harassment.

Of the 86 YHRDs who either experienced or witnessed harassment:

- 67 (or more than three quarters) reported that the harassment they experienced was directly related to their human rights advocacy;
- 14 stated that it was both related and unrelated to human rights advocacy; and
- 5 reported that it was not related to human rights advocacy.

Most of the YHRDs who took part in this study encountered online harassment to some extent, echoing earlier reports that YHRDs are likely to experience or witness online harassment.⁷³

The majority of the online questionnaire respondents and interview participants shared that they began advocating for human rights at an early age, particularly as teenagers. Their activism was inspired by their exposure to various civil society organizations as students in secondary and tertiary education, as well as their engagement in political events and issues such as national elections, the continuing “war on drugs,” and the COVID-19 pandemic. A very limited cohort reported being socialized into human rights work by their own families, with long traditions of activism traceable to the democratization movements of the 1980s up to the turn of the millennium. However, this is the exception and not the norm.

⁶⁹ Amnesty International, “I turned my fear into courage,” 2024, (previously cited); Durham University, “What is online harassment?,” <https://reportandsupport.durham.ac.uk/support/what-is-online-harassment>

⁷⁰ Amnesty International, “I turned my fear into courage,” 2024, (previously cited)

⁷¹ Plan International, “7 in 10 girls and young women in PH experience online harassment – Plan International study,” 16 October 2020, <https://plan-international.org/philippines/news/2020/10/16/7-in-10-girls-and-young-women-in-ph-experience-online-harassment-planinternational-study/>

⁷² Amnesty International, “Three out five young activists face online harassment globally for posting human rights content” 1 July 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/three-out-five-young-activists-face-online-harassment-globally-for-posting-human-rights-content/>

⁷³ Amnesty International, “Three out five young activists face online harassment globally for posting human rights content,” 2024, (previously cited)

In the online questionnaire, the majority of respondents identified the 2022 presidential election as a prominent trigger for online harassment. Meanwhile, all of the YHRDs we interviewed expressed that they were harassed online when posting supportive messages for opposition presidential candidates and critical comments about other contenders.

We found that the YHRDs tend to carry out different types of advocacies. Of the YHRDs who reported being targets of online harassment related to human rights, the advocacy they were engaged in that triggered online harassment were focused on:

- civil and political rights (50);
- gender equality, and women’s and LGBTI rights (46);
- good governance against corruption (48); and
- freedom of expression (43).

Others reported advocating for labor rights, young people’s participation, criminal justice, sovereignty concerns, environmental justice, (mental) health, digital rights, inclusivity, and corporate social responsibility. Some of the most prominent kinds of harassment that occur on digital platforms are red-tagging, doxing, and verbal violence (including threats of violence) which, as discussed above, sometimes translate to offline settings.

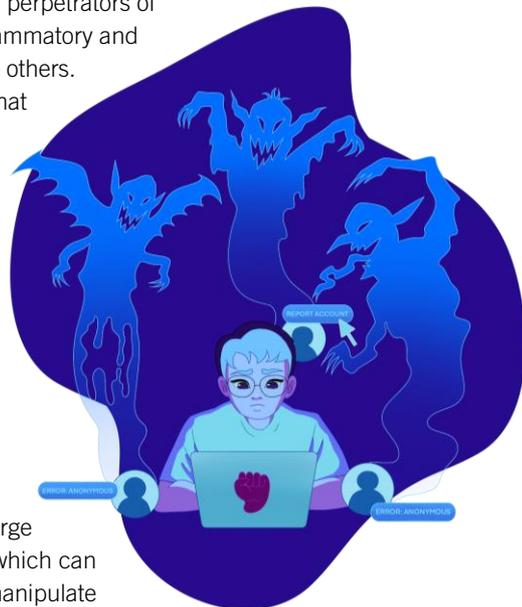
As for this report, a large number of our fellow YHRDs who participated in the questionnaire and interview reported trolling, abusive direct messages, smear campaigns, and cyberstalking.

5.1 TROLLING

Fellow YHRDs who contributed to this report said that the perpetrators of harassment are often trolls – that is, people who post inflammatory and offensive remarks on online platforms to upset or provoke others.

17 YHRDs replied to the online questionnaire, reporting that they experienced trolling, where several accounts left several comments on their posts that were upsetting or disrespectful.⁷⁴ YHRDs who were supporters of opposition candidates reported being trolled and threatened by supporters of the government-aligned tandem of Bongbong Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte. However, infighting also led to trolling within the opposition.⁷⁵

Online harassment is linked with disinformation networks that use strategies and principles of brand marketing to influence public sentiment. When operating together in large numbers, organized trolls are referred to as “troll farms” which can be used as a political weapon to spread disinformation, manipulate



⁷⁴ The online questionnaire asked whether YHRDs had experienced “trolling, where several accounts left several comments on their posts that were upsetting or disrespectful”.

⁷⁵ Interview with Hiyas, 27 June 2024; Interview with Isla, 8 July 2024; Interview with Kidlat, 14 July 2024; Interview with Liwasan, 15 July 2024; Interview with Bituin, 16 July 2024.

discourse, and influence public opinion.⁷⁶ Their structures are multi-layered, ranging from advertising and public relations strategists to handlers of fake social media accounts.⁷⁷ Their disinformation campaigns can give the appearance that these are real opinions held by actual people. Authentic users encountering this content on fake social media accounts can adopt and spread these opinions, helping them reach a large number of people.

Given their potency in shaping public opinion, the services of networked disinformation architectures are sometimes contracted by political actors. They can help political figures control political discourse online by promoting narratives that are beneficial to them and harmful to their rivals. To this end, the disinformation architecture, including trolls, has been linked to a rise in historical revisionism and fake news in recent years.⁷⁸

This disinformation machinery has also been turned into a tool to delegitimize YHRDs and other activists who express dissent, publicly document human rights violations, or expose corruption against political actors. For example, the numerous fake social media accounts can be repurposed to directly harass YHRDs online. In 2020, an investigation by Meta, Facebook's parent company, revealed the existence of a network of Philippines-based accounts that engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behavior,"⁷⁹ spreading red-tagging and online harassment.

5.2 DOXING



Doxing is the publication of personal, private, or sensitive information about a person such as their address, workplace, or school.⁸⁰

Six of the YHRDs who responded to the online questionnaire reported doxing, where other people had posted their personal data, such as their address, without consent. Among our interviewees, doxing often occurs in tandem with red-tagging. Some of the advocates we spoke with shared that they had been doxed and related the publication of their information to offline intimidation or harassment. Posts aligning YHRDs with communist or terrorist movements often also detail their real organizational affiliations or other sensitive, identifying information. A striking case is that of Kawayan. A supporter of democratic socialist candidate Leody de Guzman, Kawayan was doxed by supporters of the dominant (liberal) opposition candidate. Now 24 and working in the corporate sector, Kawayan was a student leader when he was doxed and intimidated on various online platforms. This was after he wrote an article for an alternative media outlet. The article was critical of a particular group of supporters during the 2022 presidential elections.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Derrick A Paulo, "Trolls for hire in Philippines: The concealed political weapon used in a social media war," Channel News Asia, 4 September 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/paid-troll-army-hire-philippines-social-media-elections-influencers-2917556>

⁷⁷ Jonathan Ong and Jason Vincent Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines," 2018, Newton Tech for Dev. <https://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf> (8 February 2018)

⁷⁸ Jonathan Ong and Jason Vincent Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation," 2018, (previously cited).

⁷⁹ Meta reported on its investigation of "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" originating in or targeting the Philippines in September 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-china-philippines/>

⁸⁰ Office of Ethics, Risk and Compliance Services, University of California-Berkeley, "Protect yourself from 'Doxing,'" <https://oercs.berkeley.edu/privacy/privacy-resources/protect-yourself-doxing#:~:text=What%20is%20Doxing%3F,shame%20or%20embarrass%20the%20user.>

⁸¹ Interview with Kawayan, 12 July 2024.

5.3 VERBAL VIOLENCE

Amnesty International has previously identified several reasons for the spread of content advocating hatred and violence on Facebook, including its use of engagement-based algorithmic recommendations, prioritizing engagement over “integrity measures,” and poor content moderation.⁸² These conditions effectively shrink the spaces where YHRDs can freely and safely organize and express themselves online. Aside from Facebook, platforms like X (formerly Twitter) have failed to meet their corporate responsibility to respect human rights in the context of violence and abuse against women on the platform in other national contexts.⁸³



Interviewees reported the following types of abuse: name-calling and derogatory remarks, severe threats of rape, and physical violence, among others. In our conversations, the YHRDs identified a wide range of perpetrators, from state forces carrying out red-tagging, to individuals in the community, including relatives and peers.⁸⁴

5.4 STUDENT STATUS AND INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

The education system has become a battleground for state policies affecting youth activism. National Service Training Program (NSTP)⁸⁵ classes, originally designed to instill civic responsibility among students, have reportedly been used as a breeding ground for red-tagging, where students and organizations critical of the government are labeled communist sympathizers.⁸⁶ In 2024, under the Marcos Jr. administration, there were renewed proposals to make Reserve Officers' Training Corps mandatory for college students. This is a program that trains college students for military service. It sparked widespread opposition, with youth groups arguing that the program will only normalize a culture of militarization and suppress free expression within academic institutions.⁸⁷ Furthermore, reports reveal that the AFP and NTF-ELCAC have entered high schools and universities under the pretext of conducting a “civic education program,” only to use these events as platforms for red-tagging student leaders and organizations.⁸⁸



⁸² Amnesty International, “Philippines: Authorities increasingly using Facebook to stifle young activists’ right to freedom of expression and protest,” 14 October 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/philippines-authorities-using-facebook-to-red-tag-young-activists/>; Amnesty International, “Myanmar: Facebook’s systems promoted violence against Rohingya; Meta owes reparations – new report,” 29 September 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/myanmar-facebooks-systems-promoted-violence-against-rohingya-meta-owes-reparations-new-report/>

⁸³ Amnesty International, “Toxic Twitter – A Toxic Place for Women,” 21 March 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1-1/>

⁸⁴ Interview with Bulan, 11 July 2024; Interview with Sarita, 20 July 2024; Interview with Panday, 20 July 2024

⁸⁵ Republic of the Philippines, Republic Act No. 9163 - AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE NATIONAL SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAM (NSTP) FOR TERTIARY LEVEL STUDENTS, AMENDING FOR THE PURPOSE REPUBLIC ACT NO. 7077 AND PRESIDENTIAL DECREE NO. 1706, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES, 23 July 2001, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2002/01/23/republic-act-no-9163/>

⁸⁶ Rappler. 2024. University of the Philippines Baguio Officials, Groups Denounce Red-Tagging of NSTP Class. April 25. Accessed February 6, 2025. <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/luzon/university-philippines-baguio-officials-groups-denounce-red-tagging-nstp-class/>

⁸⁷ SunStar. 2024. Filipino Youths Denounce Revival of ROTC. <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/tacloban/filipino-youths-denounce-revival-of-rotc>.

⁸⁸ Inquirer.net. 2024. ACT Slams Distribution of Red-Tagging Leaflets. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1945507/act-slams-distribution-of-red-tagging-leaflets>.

The abrogation of long-standing protective agreements between universities and the government has intensified concerns regarding the safety and freedom of YHRDs and student activists in the Philippines. In 2021, the Department of National Defense (DND) unilaterally terminated its accord with the University of the Philippines (UP), which has been in place since 1989.⁸⁹ In 2022, the DND unilaterally terminated its accord with the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP), which was signed in 1990.⁹⁰ These accords restricted the military and police forces from entering these campuses, and were designed to protect academic freedom and provide a safe space for peaceful assembly, free expression, and student activism.⁹¹

The terminations of the said accords removed the protections that previously controlled state surveillance and intervention within university spaces. This shift has put YHRDs and student activists at risk of increased monitoring and potential state interference, raising concerns over the curtailment of academic freedom and civic engagement within institutions traditionally known for their role in activism.

The absence of these protections is seen as a constraint on students' ability to organize and advocate for human rights without fear of reprisal, thereby altering the landscape for activism within educational institutions.

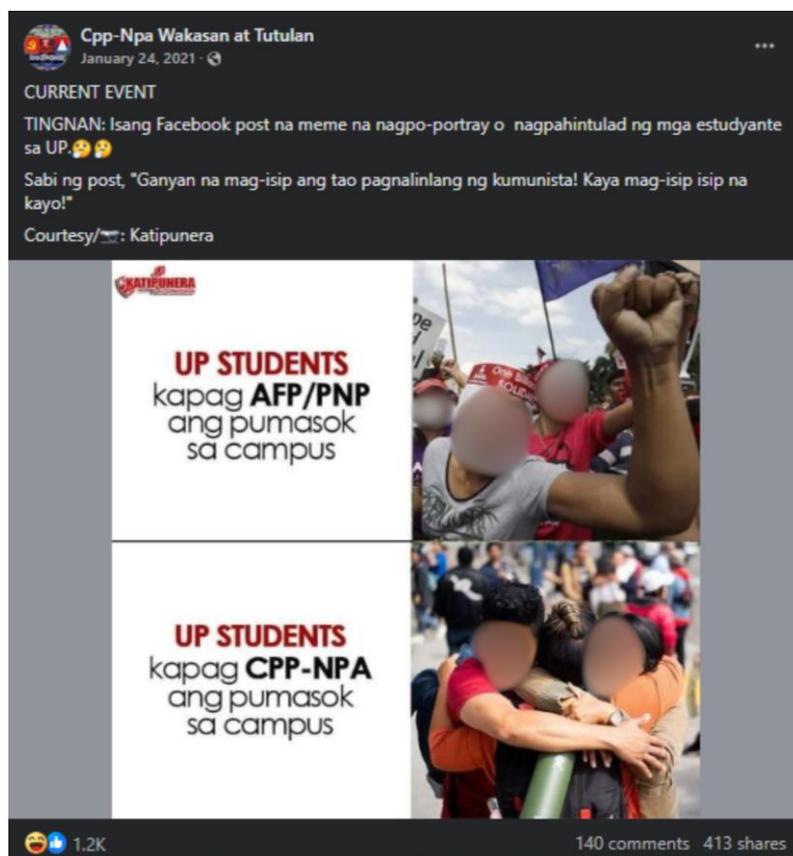


Figure 3. Screenshot of a Facebook post by a page called CPP-NPA Wakasan at Tutulan (End and Oppose the CPP-NPA)

TRANSLATION: A Facebook post, in the form of a meme, portraying or likening students from UP. The post says, "That's how people think when they are deceived by communists! So, think carefully!"

⁸⁹ Commission on Human Rights. "Statement of the Commission on Human Rights on the Unilateral Termination of the Department of National Defense (DND) of Its Accord with the University of the Philippines (UP)." Commission on Human Rights, January 20, 2021. <https://chr.gov.ph/statement-of-the-commission-on-human-rights-on-the-unilateral-termination-of-the-department-of-national-defense-dnd-of-its-accord-with-the-university-of-the-philippines-up/>.

⁹⁰ Philstar. "Students Alarmed at DND Termination of Accord on Operations in Pup Campuses." Philstar, April 19, 2023. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/04/19/2260088/students-alarmed-dnd-termination-accord-operations-pup-campuses>.

⁹¹ Jeannette I. Andrade and Meg Adonis, PUP accord with DND also faces termination, 21 January 2021, Inquirer.net, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1386348/pup-accord-with-dnd-also-faces-termination>

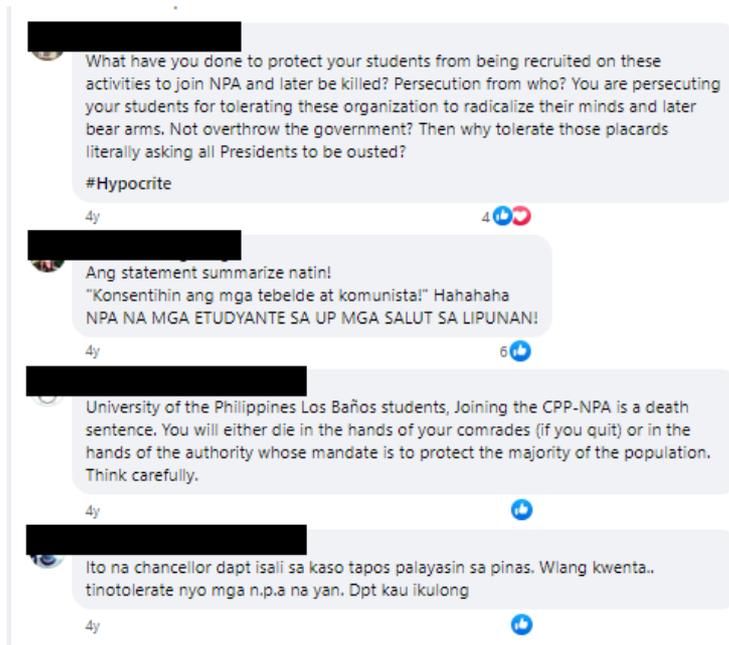


Figure 4. A screenshot of the comments section from an official post by the University of the Philippines Los Baños

The image contains a series of comments in response to a statement posted by the University of the Philippines Los Baños on the use of protest clips of NTF-ELCAC in their post. One commentator criticizes educational institutions for allowing students to be influenced by such organizations, labeling them hypocritical. Another summarizes the post, implying that students are being radicalized. A third commentator warns that joining the CPP-NPA can have dire consequences. The final commentator suggests that university officials should face charges for allegedly tolerating such activities, calling for stricter legal actions.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the negative stereotypes associated with certain academic institutions like UP as well as the similarly negative responses from the general public towards these institutions. Because of its rich culture and history of student activism, UP is accused by these pages and their supporters as a breeding ground for communist groups and is easily misidentified as a “recruiter” for the Community Party of the Philippines. As such, merely being affiliated with the university is enough ammunition to harass or malign a person.

More broadly, the figures demonstrate that institutional affiliation is a significant source of risk for YHRDs. There have been multiple cases of harassment or red-tagging reported by individuals associated with UP and other academic institutions. State agencies, including the NTF-ELCAC, have periodically targeted UP campuses, alleging that they are centers for recruitment by the New People’s Army (NPA) and locations for anti-government activities, such as the “Oust Duterte” movement in 2018.⁹² This situation was worsened by the termination of the UP-DND Accord in 2021 (mentioned above), a decision justified by the Defense Secretary with unverified claims of ongoing recruitment efforts by communist groups on UP campuses.⁹³

The implications of this environment extend to various members of the university community. Former and current members of student councils across the UP system have reported encounters with military personnel, with some being identified as associated with “underground” organizations and placed under surveillance by senior military officials.⁹⁴ Luzon, one of the YHRDs interviewed for this report who is a former chairperson of the UP Diliman University Student Council (USC), described experiences of harassment during their tenure, noting that the council’s role in addressing national and local issues often attracted attention from state actors, leading to intensive state surveillance and intimidation.⁹⁵

⁹² The New York Times, “Duterte’s Forces Have a New Target: University Students” 14 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/14/world/asia/philippines-university-protests.html>

⁹³ Philippine News Agency, “DND revocation of accord within UP ‘ambit of its mandate’” 21 January 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1128100#:~:text=%22The%20UP%2DDND%20Accord%20of,Nacnac%20said%20in%20a%20statement.>

⁹⁴ Tinig ng Plaridel, “Campus militarization, red-tagging intensifies amid returns to f2f — UP student councils” 19 August 2023, <https://www.tinigngplaridel.net/2023/gasc55-unit-reports/>

⁹⁵ Interview with Luzon, 15 July 2024

Kidlat expressed a similar sentiment, recounting how state authorities, including high-ranking officials, actively perpetuated red-tagging and intimidation, creating an environment hostile to dissent and accountability.⁹⁶

In addition, campus journalists at UP have faced targeted harassment. Urduja saw this happen to her college's student publication. She is active in campus journalism and is president of her state university's political science organization. "I've also witnessed online harassment in our local publication," Urduja shared. "Our student publication members were constantly red-tagged and vilified by state forces."⁹⁷

Another YHRD who was interviewed, Mayari, a campus journalist from UP Baguio, reported that their publication has been subjected to attacks by troll accounts due to their articles and coverage of protests. "Throughout the years, there have been protests being covered [by campus journalists], and there are comments that label the people from UP as communists," they stated. Furthermore, Mayari told researchers that a member of their editorial board experienced direct military engagement under a method known as "Dumanon Makitongtong," resembling the war on drugs "Tokhang" approach⁹⁸, in which military personnel visit activists or journalists at their residences, ostensibly to protect them from alleged threats posed by groups such as the CPP-NPA-NDF.⁹⁹

In 2023, the risks associated with military surveillance were underscored when third-year students from the Development Studies program at UP Manila were withdrawn from a community work placement in Barangay Silongin, San Francisco, Quezon.¹⁰⁰ This decision followed incidents of military surveillance and intimidation, despite the students having official documentation and recognition from the local government supporting their activities.¹⁰¹



Figure 5. An image depicting a slide that classifies youth organizations as "terrorists"

This image depicts a forum presentation by the AFP and NTF-ELCAC at Central Luzon State University, in which several youth organizations – including Kabataan Partylist, the League of Filipino Students (LFS), Anakbayan, the College Editors Guild of the Philippines (CEGP), the National Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP), and others – are classified as "front organizations" for the CPP-NDF-NPA.¹⁰²



Youth organizations such as Kabataan Partylist, Anakbayan,

⁹⁶ Interview with Kidlat, 14 July 2024

⁹⁷ Interview with Urduja, 17 July 2024

⁹⁸ Altermidya, "Media groups reveal renewed Baguio PNP red-tagging of journalists," 21 January 2022, <https://www.altermidya.net/media-groups-reveal-renewed-baguio-ntp-red-tagging-of-journalists/>

⁹⁹ Interview with Mayari, 14 July 2024

¹⁰⁰ The Manila Collegian, "DS students pull out from community practicum amid surveillance, intimidation by AFP's 85th Infantry Battalion" 13 July 2023, <https://mkule.medium.com/ds-students-pull-out-from-community-practicum-amid-surveillance-intimidation-by-afps-85th-4dc2597c4eac>

¹⁰¹ The Manila Collegian, "DS students pull out from community practicum amid surveillance, intimidation by AFP's 85th Infantry Battalion" 13 July, 2023, <https://mkule.medium.com/ds-students-pull-out-from-community-practicum-amid-surveillance-intimidation-by-afps-85th-4dc2597c4eac> (previously cited)

¹⁰² Tindig CLSU, Red-Tagging Forum, "Muli Namang Inilunsad ng AFP at NTF-ELCAC sa CLSU", 17 February 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/share/tX9Lx3BmyWWYLDQ9/>

College Editors Guild of the Philippines (CEGP), and others have been targets of red-tagging through various state-sanctioned methods. During leadership forums held in schools, the NTF-ELCAC has used presentations and visual aids that explicitly instruct students not to join these organizations. Visuals presented during these forums include phrases like “Do not join Kabataan Partylist, SCMP, Anakbayan, LFS...” alongside depictions of these groups as subversive entities (see Figure 5).

Such materials are intended to intimidate and dissuade students from associating with legitimate political organizations, thus directly infringing on their rights to freedom of association and political expression, as protected by the ICCPR. These efforts not only deter young people from exercising their rights but also foster an environment of fear within schools, where students feel pressured to disengage from political activism or risk becoming targets of state harassment.

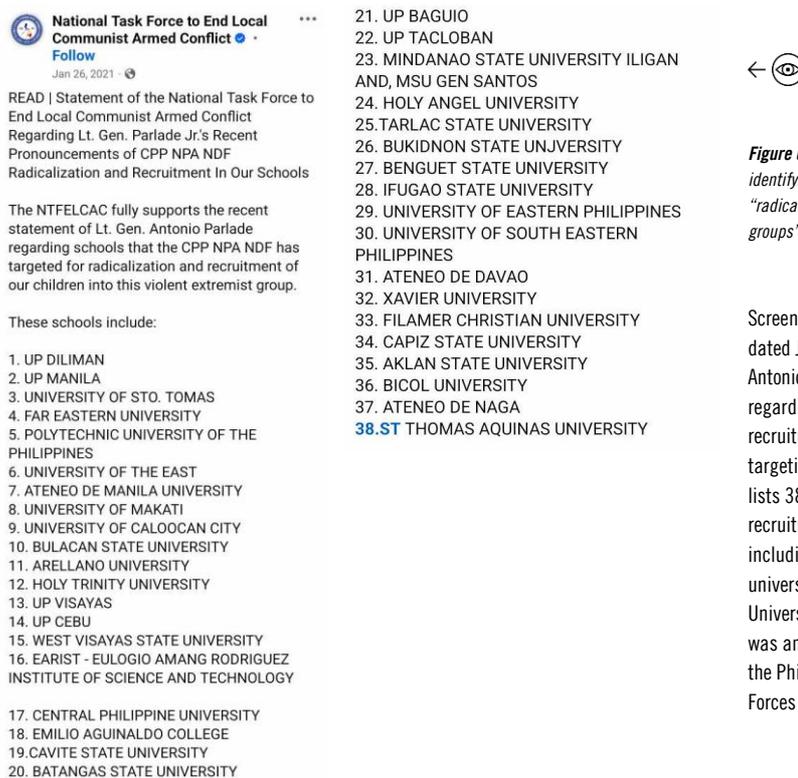


Figure 6. A screenshot of a post by NTF-ELCAC identifying several academic institutions as sites of “radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist groups”

Screenshot: Statement from the (NTF-ELCAC, dated January 26, 2021, endorsing Lt. Gen. Antonio Parlade Jr.'s recent comments regarding the CPP-NPA-NDP's alleged recruitment and radicalization activities targeting students in various schools. The post lists 38 universities and colleges where recruitment efforts are said to take place, including the country's three leading universities – UP Diliman, Ateneo de Manila University, and University of Santo Tomas. It was amplified by pages from state forces like the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

This practice of red-tagging and harassment extends beyond the University of the Philippines system to other academic institutions nationwide. In 2021, state universities such as the Polytechnic University of the Philippines and Mindanao State University, as well as private institutions like Ateneo de Manila University and De La Salle University, were among the institutions put on a list by NTF-ELCAC as locations where “recruitment and radicalization activities” by insurgent groups allegedly take place (see Figure 6).

Institutions have heavily denied such allegations, affirming their commitment to academic freedom, freedoms of expression, opinion and assembly and rejecting any connections to subversive activities.¹⁰³ However, some universities have reportedly implemented restrictive student policies against socio political activism, with threats of disciplinary action toward students involved in progressive movements.¹⁰⁴ One of the

¹⁰³ De La Salle University, “Joint Statement on the News Report of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict,” 25 January 2021, <https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/joint-statement-on-the-news-report-of-the-national-task-force-to-end-local-communist-armed-conflict/>

¹⁰⁴ Amnesty International, “I turned my fear into courage,” 2024, (previously cited)

interviewees claimed that her alma mater, one of the most prominent private sectarian universities in the Philippines, maintains an environment unsupportive of activism by scrutinizing students' political expressions, including their activities on personal social media accounts.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, a broader pattern of campus press freedom violations exacerbate the risk for YHRDs. According to a report by the CEGP, 206 such cases were documented from 2023 to 2024 alone.¹⁰⁶ These include censorship, administrative intervention, and state surveillance, which have led to an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among student journalists. The report also reveals that many student publications are pressured by school administrations to limit critical reporting, impeding their ability to exercise independent journalism.

State agencies like NTF-ELCAC perpetuate and legitimize negative and wrongful stereotypes towards certain academic institutions and youth organizations.¹⁰⁷ This renders students at even more risk of harassment, by virtue of their affiliation with institutions that the state wrongfully assigned as “front organizations” and recruitment grounds for insurgents. Due to the sweeping generalizations made by agencies like NTF-ELCAC, this can mean that people that may not necessarily engage in human rights advocacy may also become victims of harassment simply because they are associated with certain schools or groups.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Bulan, 11 July 2024

¹⁰⁶ Far Eastern University - Advocate, “CEGP submits campus press freedom violations report to CHR,” 18 July 2024, <https://feuadvocate.net/cegp-submits-campus-press-freedom-violations-report-to-chr/>

¹⁰⁷ Amnesty International, “*I turned my fear into courage*”, 2024. (previously cited)

6. MANIFESTATIONS OF THE CHILLING EFFECT AMONG YHRDs

“It made me feel so weak, so inferior compared to these politicians with all the powers that they have.”

Sarita, YHRD interviewed 20 July 2024

This chapter explores the many ways that the chilling effect of online harassment manifests among YHRDs in the Philippines. The chilling effect is the environment of fear enabled by the state to discourage individuals from exercising their rights, particularly freedom of expression.¹⁰⁸

The personal narratives of YHRDs and supplementary data from the online questionnaire responses indicate that the chilling effect among YHRDs in the Philippines manifests specifically as *psychological distress, self-censorship, inactivity, isolation, downplaying the impact of online harassment, and barriers to redress and remedies*. These demonstrate how online harassment threatens YHRDs’ rights such as the rights to: freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, health, remedy, non-discrimination, defend human rights.

6.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

One of the most immediate effects of online harassment on YHRDs is psychological distress, whether they are direct targets, indirect targets by virtue of their membership in an organization, or witnesses. The experience disrupts their sense of safety, leaving them emotionally shaken. Psychological distress may manifest as stress, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness, among others. Experiences of online harassment have previously been linked with “psychological distress, depression, and increased risk of suicide, especially among youth and young adults”.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Laurent Pech, The concept of chilling effect: Its untapped potential to better protect democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights in the EU, Open Society European Policy Institute, March 2021, page 4.

¹⁰⁹ Seunghyun Kim, Afsaneh Razi and others, “Assessing the Impact of Online Harassment on Youth Mental Health in Private Networked Spaces”, 2024, <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/31355>, p. 826.

Of the 57 questionnaire respondents who experienced online harassment as direct targets:

- 40 reported experiencing stress and anxiety;
- 15 reported panic attacks; and
- 19 described feeling powerless.

Other reported effects included feeling nervous or afraid and less able to focus on everyday tasks. Meanwhile, the 29 YHRDs who witnessed harassment aimed at their peers or organizations also reported significant distress. According to their questionnaire responses, six of those who witnessed online harassment experienced stress and anxiety, while seven felt powerless. These figures demonstrate the emotional toll that online harassment can exert not only on its direct targets but also on those who witness it.

During the pandemic, Sarita, a young advocate for peace and security in Southern Philippines, shared a post on social media criticizing a group of government officials (including a national senator and local officials) for breaching social distancing guidelines in her province. Her post gained traction, drawing attention from the officials involved. The officials even commented on her post. One of them, a political councilor, contacted her directly by sending her a private message. The councilor threatened her by revealing that they had knowledge of her parents, school, and whereabouts. Sarita described her emotional state:

"It made me feel so weak, so inferior compared to these politicians with all the powers that they have. They could just stop me and have me dumped somewhere... After receiving that message, I was crying. That was the lowest point of my life... I really felt weak and powerless."¹¹⁰

The psychological impact of online harassment often spills over into other areas of YHRDs' lives. Among the questionnaire respondents who experienced harassment, 36 reported feeling afraid to use social media platforms, while 15 said their ability to perform daily tasks was impaired. For witnesses of harassment, 12 reported fear of social media use, and two noted difficulty managing their daily routines.

Habagat, a student activist who was publicly red-tagged by the NTF-ELCAC's Facebook page through a video post,¹¹¹ told researchers he had received numerous death threats, including messages suggesting he should be caught by the NTF-ELCAC. "I couldn't sleep properly for three weeks after it happened," he recalled. "I was constantly afraid for my safety."¹¹² Liwasan, a popular content creator and human rights advocate who is vocal online especially when it comes to sexual harassment and women's rights, echoed these sentiments, explaining she found comments relating to sexual violence "make me feel unsafe and really trigger me" and describing her such experiences as "disheartening, draining, and traumatizing."¹¹³



¹¹⁰ Interview with Sarita, 20 July 2024

¹¹¹ This video post, mentioned during an interview with Habagat dated 17 July 2024 and reviewed by the young researchers, was publicly acknowledged and condemned by his university as a form of red-tagging propaganda.

¹¹² Interview with Habagat, 17 July 2024

¹¹³ Interview with Liwasan, 15 July 2024

While the online harassment triggers distress, it is often the perceived risk of future attacks that sustains it. Many YHRDs recognize that harassment could escalate, potentially leading to physical harm. Feelings of being physically unsafe following their experiences of online harassment were reported by 23 questionnaire respondents who were direct targets of harassment.

Although a human rights impact assessment by Article One found that red-tagging on Facebook may not necessarily lead to physical or offline threats, it acknowledged “the killings of several individuals that had been red-tagged both online and offline indicates that red-tagging remains an urgent and severe threat to HRDs and one that can infringe on the right to life and security of person.”¹¹⁴ Along with the Constitutional Court’s similar recognition (discussed above) this shows that the perceptions of possible escalation and physical harm are not unfounded.

For instance, Ningning, the chairperson of a political youth organization, shared that she was doxed, red-tagged, and personally threatened around the same time a journalist in her city was killed. She reflected: “I couldn’t help but think about how close this was to me. If they could do that to a journalist, what’s stopping them from doing the same to me?”¹¹⁵ In Sarita’s case, the government official who threatened her online also threatened her personally, visiting her former school in an attempt to have her expelled.¹¹⁶

These incidents illustrate how online harassment can lead to consequences beyond the digital realm, YHRD’s awareness of this risk further amplifies their distress, threatening YHRDs’ right to health, particularly mental health.

Several YHRDs reported wanting to seek professional help, but only some were able to access psychosocial services. YHRDs who were clinically diagnosed with mental health conditions prior to their experience of online harassment also reported intensified symptoms. Their exercise of the right to health is further undermined by the inadequacy of mental health services in the Philippines and the cultural stigma associated with these issues.¹¹⁷

6.2 SELF-CENSORSHIP

Self-censorship is characterized by the withholding of information such as political opinions and reluctance, or refusal, to participate in discussions. Varying levels of self-censorship have emerged as a common experience among YHRDs who have faced online harassment. Based on both interviews and the questionnaire responses, examples of self-censorship range from decreased social media engagement and self-moderation to altering their personas and content, or even outright disengagement from social media platforms to avoid repeated harassment.

Of the 81 YHRDs who responded to the online questionnaire and had either witnessed or been the direct target of online harassment:

- 32 reported they had minimized their engagement in human rights advocacy online;
- 16 said they had increased their engagement; and

¹¹⁴ Article One, “Assessing the human rights impact of Meta’s Platform in the Philippines,” Executive summary published by Meta, 2020/2021, https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Meta-Philippines_HRIA_Executive-Summary_Dec-2021.pdf

¹¹⁵ Interview with Ningning, 17 July 2024

¹¹⁶ Interview with Sarita, 20 July 2024

¹¹⁷ Noah Ramos, Richard McNally, “What variables predict stigmatizing attitudes toward people with mental disorders and their treatment in Filipinos and Americans?,” *Transcult Psychiatry*, no. 6(2024): 811–822, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634615241245872>

- 33 reported their engagement levels did not change.



In interviews, YHRDs reported similarly mixed experiences. Bulan has been a YHRD since high school and used to write for a student publication. She recounted receiving personally targeted online messages directly from personal accounts of military personnel, and received death threats and other traumatizing messages. Labelling her experience as “traumatizing,” Bulan shared how she has considerably reduced her social media usage.¹¹⁸ Bulan is now a researcher at a private Catholic university and an activist for Indigenous Peoples’ rights. While she continues to use social media to stay updated on news and connect with people, she has deliberately avoided engaging with social issues online.

Similarly, Mayari, a student journalist and civil and political rights advocate, revealed that online harassment has made her more cautious in choosing her words and engaging only with “safer” topics to avoid further abuse.¹¹⁹ This is particularly significant as Mayari is the former Editor-in-Chief of her university’s publication, and a dedicated advocate for press freedom, civil and political rights, and gender equality. Since entering university, she has covered numerous.

Environmental defender Marisol, who continues to use social media for advocacy, admitted to self-censoring by avoiding triggering topics and “playing it safe” to minimize backlash.

However, this approach has left Marisol feeling conflicted: “It’s like you’re not taking a stand on what needs to be done.”¹²⁰

For some YHRDs, self-censorship is compounded by their identities. Mutya, a 23-year-old transwoman, student leader, and gender and disability advocate, described her experience:

“When it comes to online safety, I think a lot of it feels like holding back. When you're online, you kind of have to pull back on certain things. There are things you can't talk about without being harassed or being targeted en masse, especially as a transwoman; when things are said on social media, it is very difficult to take them back.”¹²¹

This persistent need to “hold back” creates a tension between advocating for critical issues and protecting oneself from harm.

Alarmingly, self-censorship also has an internalized effect, leading some YHRDs to question the value of their contributions to online discourse. Alunsina, a university law student activist and paralegal, reflected: “Do I really need to post this? Is it necessary for me to make this post, to share this statement?”¹²² Mayari echoed similar doubts: “Is it worth adding to the discussion since many have already talked about it? Or is it

¹¹⁸ Interview with Bulan, 11 July 2024
¹¹⁹ Interview with Mayari, 14 July 2024
¹²⁰ Interview with Marisol, 16 July 2024
¹²¹ Interview with Mutya, 14 July 2024
¹²² Interview with Alunsina, 15 July 2024

fine to leave it as is?"¹²³ Mutya added another dimension, pointing to the perceived need for an unattainable level of expertise to counter harassment effectively (which intersects with the discussion on age as a risk factor, explored in 7.2):

"The reason the answer is often no [not to post] is [because] even if we're well-read, even if we've read all of the papers on a subject, you kind of feel like you have to be an expert of [the] experts to even begin to push back on harassment to that level."¹²⁴

These testimonies reveal a pervasive hesitation among some YHRDs to participate in public discussions. Among the YHRDs who shared their experience for this research, this hesitation stemmed not only from fear of backlash but also from a deeper questioning of their own expertise in an already crowded and divisive online space. Their doubts as to the necessity and quality of their inputs point to a profound uncertainty about the value of their voices as young people, a dynamic we explore further in section 7.2. These cases show how self-censorship must not merely be understood as the withholding of information. At a deeper level, self-censorship involves YHRDs questioning their place in the realization of their rights or their very status as rights holders. Hence, the chilling effect threatens YHRDs' freedom of expression and their capacity to defend their human rights.

6.3 INACTIVITY

As a reaction to distress and as a behavioral manifestation of self-censorship, Filipino YHRDs reported they often end up reducing their activism activities and/or disengaging from their organizations or movements. Several YHRDs shared that they chose to "lie low" in their activism to avoid further harassment. Inactivity manifests in prolonged or haphazard periods of disengagement from organizations or general advocacy work, with some YHRDs even reporting the urge to cease their political engagements entirely.



Hiyas, aged 25, is an LGBTI and peasant rights advocate from Central Luzon. He said:

"Because you can't act, you wind up taking a break and lying low, and eventually becoming demoralized. You don't know how to return [to your advocacy work], you don't know what's happened to your co-advocates, or what's become of the plans you've made before. You don't know how to get back into the groove of things because your safety was threatened."¹²⁵

This inactivity is not limited to individuals.

Youth organizations in the Philippines engage in human rights advocacy online by posting statements on key issues and participating in mobilizations. YHRDs reported that their organizations began to minimize these engagements upon receiving online threats. In some cases, entire youth organizations have felt compelled to adopt a low-profile approach to protect their members from the risks associated with red-

¹²³ Interview with Mayari, 14 July 2024

¹²⁴ Interview with Mutya, 14 July 2024

¹²⁵ Interview with Hiyas, 28 June 2024

tagging and other forms of online harassment. Tupas, aged 22, an LGBTI rights advocate and graduate from a state university, described how his college-based socio-civic and academic organization shifted into “defensive mode” after it was red-tagged during an event:

"The organization went into a bit of a defensive mode, limiting posts and [enhancing] privacy because maybe some information about people will be released, which of course will make things worse... Then, the organization also lied a little low when it came to posting."¹²⁶

Duyog, aged 23, is a university student in Manila and a dedicated human rights defender who champions social justice issues and amplifies marginalized voices. She has been a spokesperson for a political organization which had been repeatedly red-tagged. “Our organization’s [web] page was constantly attacked... they would spread lies to discourage people from joining us,” she shared. “Some of my friends left the organization because of the constant online threats... it’s hard to keep people when they fear for their lives.”¹²⁷

Habagat, now aged 23 and a YHRD artist, is a university graduate and a member of an organization that advocates for science and technology. He was publicly red-tagged by the NTF-ELCAC’s Facebook page through a video post when he was a student activist. He explained that in the aftermath, he initially decided to limit his on-ground engagement and focus on supporting his organization online through advocacy-related tasks such as creating publicity materials. However, the ongoing fear and distress eventually led him to completely disengage:

"So, I said goodbye to my organization [and told them] that I will stop for several months... I will try to help online, like [by creating] publicity materials to post. Eventually, I stopped completely. My ‘stagnation’ or inactivity from the movement lasted for three years. This year [2024], I will try again to integrate my advocacies."¹²⁸

Despite stepping back, Habagat did not entirely stop engaging in activism. Instead, he used an anonymous account to continue expressing dissent while safeguarding his identity and has gained a large following. Now, he is gradually attempting to return to human rights activism.

Other YHRDs reported feeling compelled to not only temporarily disengage from their organizations but also to deprioritize human rights advocacy. For some, championing human rights takes a back seat to their education or employment. For example, Bulan, once an advocate for Indigenous Peoples and labor rights, left her organization in pursuit of a more discreet – and in many ways, safer – line of work. Now, Bulan works as a health and social science researcher as a means to strike a balance between advocacy and safety.

In contrast, Sarita, who faced threats after criticizing government officials for violating pandemic guidelines, chose to “lie low” online but remained active offline: “I lie low first, low-key for everything. But offline, I was still doing some events.”¹²⁹ Sarita’s experience aligns with the findings of the questionnaire responses, with many YHRDs reporting a change in the level of their activism following their experience of online harassment.

¹²⁶ Interview with Tupas, 16 July 2024

¹²⁷ Interview with Duyog, 19 July 2024

¹²⁸ Interview with Habagat, 17 July 2024

¹²⁹ Interview with Sarita, 20 July 2024

Some YHRDs reported that their on-ground engagement continued while their online activity declined significantly.

Based on the experiences of YHRDs who shared their experiences in interviews, some YHRDs transferred their activism to offline spaces or adopted anonymous accounts to continue their advocacy more safely.

These cases highlight the profound impact of online harassment on YHRDs' activism. Several YHRDs reported temporarily or permanently deprioritizing their human rights advocacy for their safety. While some manage to adapt their strategies, others face long periods of stagnation, which can weaken their movements and advocacy efforts. In this way, the chilling effect, further threatens YHRDs' rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and undermines their right to defend human rights.

6.4 ISOLATION

Related to inactivity, another recurring effect of online harassment among YHRDs is isolation from some social circles, especially their families, an important institution in the Philippine context. For many YHRDs, isolation stems mainly from a desire to insulate others from negative impacts. They may also isolate themselves to avoid further harassment from others, especially parents or relatives, who are opposed to their advocacy.

Tupas shared how his family's negative preconceived notions about his school and advocacy shaped his experience of isolation. When his organization was red-tagged during an event, Tupas chose to keep the ordeal to himself:



"Most likely, with my family, if I know that it's contentious, problematic or anxiety-inducing for them, I don't share it anymore... I don't share much with them. That's all on me. As a result, I isolate myself. With my friends, however, I don't filter much of what I say."¹³⁰

However, not all YHRDs are fortunate to have supportive peers. Former campus journalist Isidro's criticisms of the government and involvement in alternative journalism led to red-tagging and ridicule. The attacks forced him to conceal his activism to avoid being ostracized by those friends and acquaintances who disagreed with his beliefs: "I fear that the people around me might change the way they treat me once they learn that I am an activist."¹³¹

Isolation can not only be a protective move for the self but for others, too. YHRDs like Tupas intentionally limit communication about their activism to shield their families and friends from potential risks, such as surveillance or state-led violence.

¹³⁰ Interview with Tupas, 16 July 2024

¹³¹ Interview with Isidro, 08 July 2024

Science and technology activist Habagat echoed this sentiment, sharing how his desire to protect his family led him to remain silent about the threats he faced. After being publicly named and red-tagged on state-led Facebook pages, Habagat received numerous death threats, including messages suggesting he should be caught by the NTF-ELCAC, but he kept his struggles private:

"Actually, [my family and friends] are still not aware of these happenings since I don't want them to worry or have a 'I told you so' moment regarding this [activism] and how I should have stopped it back then. This is why I never told them, and I tried to resolve it on my own."¹³²

For Habagat, the fear of judgment and concern for his family's peace of mind outweighed his need to seek support. For some YHRDs, their own families posed a risk to their safety. Many said that their families were unsupportive of, if not openly hostile to, their activism. As a result, YHRDs had to either make compromises or move out to continue their advocacy work.

In more extreme cases, YHRDs are forced to sever ties with their families to continue their activism. Bituin, aged 24, began their activism in high school, but faced online harassment, particularly red-tagging, from their own father and relatives after posting about joining a protest. Their family's comments and messages attempted to dissuade Bituin from activism. As familial opposition escalated, Bituin ultimately decided to leave home:

"With my family, that's a whole other story. I'd say that the 2022 national election was such a bad experience for me that I had to cut ties with my dad and almost all of my relatives from my dad's side. Even up to now, I don't talk too much with my dad. I also don't join family gatherings. Ever since I moved out, I have avoided going back to my province because it's not a safe place for me given all of the things that happened in 2022."¹³³

As a family-centered society, Filipinos tend to have close ties with their immediate and extended family.¹³⁴ Findings from the survey also show that more than half (56 of the 94) of the participating YHRDs reside with their immediate family, and a further 11 with extended family. Fourteen reported living with their friends, 10 lived alone and two with their partners.

These testimonies reveal how the chilling effect permeates not only the digital realm but also threatens the safety of the YHRDs' domestic spaces. YHRDs' decisions to move out, sever ties, or find alternative sources of subsistence further show some negative impacts of online harassment.

For some, their decision to tone down their activism was heavily influenced by their financial dependence on their family who often leveraged this dependency. Bituin reported that their parents threatened to disown them should they continue with their human rights advocacy.¹³⁵

¹³² Interview with Habagat, 17 July 2024

¹³³ Interview with Bituin, 16 July 2024

¹³⁴ Hannah M. Morillo, Joseph J. Capuno, and Amado M. Mendoza, "Views and Values on Family among Filipinos: An Empirical Exploration," 2013, *Asian Journal of Social Science* 41 (1): 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-12341278>.

¹³⁵ Interview with Bituin, 16 July 2024

Indeed, of the 94 YHRDs who responded to the online questionnaire more than half were financially supported by their family members, 56 by parents, and 12 by their relatives and guardians. A minority of respondents, 19 of the 94, shared that they supported themselves through personal income and seven relied on NGOs and other organizations.

These experiences demonstrate how isolation is a manifestation of the chilling effect of online harassment on YHRDs. Whether by choice or necessity, many of the activists interviewed for this report faced their struggles alone, navigating threats and hostility without the support of their families. Their stories reveal the emotional and practical challenges of pursuing activism in the face of online harassment, particularly when family opposition exacerbates the already significant risks they face.

Despite isolating themselves from family, Bituin remained steadfast in their online advocacy:

"I'm not going to stop being an advocate, [or] stop being an activist."¹³⁶

Bituin created a separate Facebook account that excludes hostile family members and is only accessible to a heavily-curated list of peers. Similarly, senior high school student, environmentalist and SOGIE advocate Isla told researchers she concealed her activism from her family due to their red-tagging, misogynistic comments, and rigid social expectations on her as the eldest child. Isla recounted how her family restricted her access to social and political information from a young age, insisting she remain silent on such issues:

"My awareness was diminished, and when I started to speak up for the first time during the pandemic, I found it difficult because of my age and living arrangements."¹³⁷

Isla's first public posts about Rodrigo Duterte and the 2022 presidential elections triggered attacks from her family, both personally and online. She described the backlash she received after sharing a post criticizing Duterte for his inaction following a typhoon:

"My family saw that post and they questioned if I really knew the issue. That made speaking up so difficult – especially since that was the first time I spoke up and it was during the pandemic. Because of that shared post, I received backlash responses. I was belittled by my own family because 'I don't know anything... I'm still young.'¹³⁸

Feeling unsupported and unsafe, Isla deactivated her family-linked Facebook account and created a separate one where she could be "very vocal online" without fear of interference.¹³⁹

Bituin and Isla's move to secure private accounts not only illustrates how YHRDs tend to isolate themselves physically and socially, but also how they compartmentalize their social identities as YHRDs. Of the 94 YHRDs who responded to the online questionnaire, seven similarly said that they use accounts with aliases specifically for posting about their advocacy. These accounts provide a safe space for people to freely speak about their advocacy or their personal content. To reconcile their desire to continue with advocacy and to

¹³⁶ Interview with Bituin, 16 July 2024

¹³⁷ Interview with Isla, 08 July 2024

¹³⁸ Interview with Isla, 08 July 2024

¹³⁹ Interview with Isla, 08 July 2024

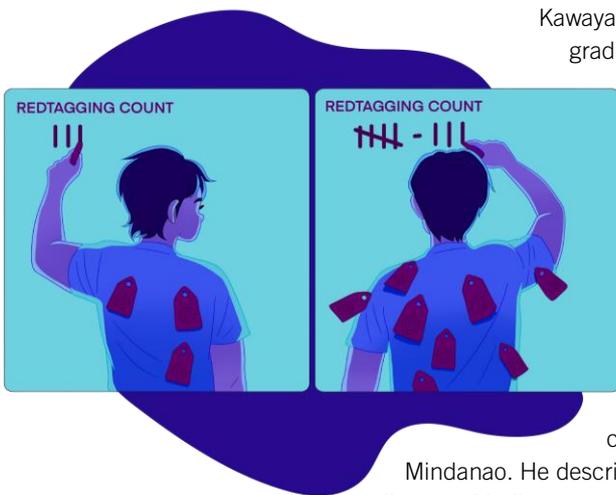
avoid social stigma, some YHRDs resort to selectively concealing their identities, affiliations, and advocacy to certain groups of people, leveraging the tools available on social media platforms. This isolation and compartmentalization nonetheless threaten YHRDs' freedom of expression and may further contribute to social fragmentation and polarization, albeit unintentionally.

6.5 DOWNPLAYING ONLINE HARASSMENT

Another key manifestation of the chilling effect that emerged in this research is that YHRDs downplay their own experience of online harassment. This includes minimizing the negative effects, and a consequent desensitization to online harassment as an "occupational risk."

Several YHRDs shared that they tend to diminish the impact and severity of their experience despite drastic changes in their psychological states and behavior. This is often due to comparisons with cases of online harassment that are perceived to be more severe, including those that translated to threats in real life or those that involve more high-profile perpetrators such as officials of the state, such as those discussed above.

Bong, a former student journalist from a state university and now a corporate professional, acknowledged the importance of addressing each online attack but admitted that, at times, he minimized the significance of these incidents. "Other people have it so much worse," Bong observed. "I don't want to say that they weren't a big deal because each and every attack on press freedom, each and every case of red-tagging, is a big deal and shouldn't be swept under the rug." However, Bong also noted: "Because of the volume of these kinds of attacks, at some point, pragmatism takes over, and you begin to prioritize."¹⁴⁰



Kawayan (who experienced doxing in 2022) shared that he gradually came to view online harassment as an inherent risk of human rights work online: **"I've personally come to the acceptance that it probably is and always will be a part of the experience and the work when it comes to defending human rights and advocating particular causes online... And so, it happened so much that I eventually thought of it as a feature, not a bug, of working in these online spaces."**¹⁴¹

Isko, aged 24, is a development worker from Marawi, capital of the province of Lanao del Sur on the island of Mindanao. He describes how repeated encounters with online abuse, both direct and indirect, over three years of work, have shaped his outlook. Isko supports internally displaced communities after the Marawi siege of 2017, when an armed conflict broke out between Philippine government forces and armed militants with reported links to Islamic State, resulting in the displacement of 360,000 people.¹⁴² Isko said he frequently contend with derogatory remarks online, many of which target his gender and political beliefs. "I don't know if it's just a matter of getting used to it," he reflected. "You just get used to stomaching it. It's more of just words." By framing these interactions as "just words," Isko downplays his experience.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Bong, 12 July 2024

¹⁴¹ Interview with Kawayan, 12 July 2024

¹⁴² Amnesty International *The 'Battle of Marawi': Death and destruction in the Philippines* ASA 35/7427/2017

¹⁴³ Interview with Isko, 14 July 2024

These dynamics are also seen in Kidlat’s experiences. A student leader, his desensitization has been driven by the rapid cycle of online issues. He noted: “I’m already kind of jaded by what’s happening online, and I feel like when there’s an issue online, I know that the next day or like after two days, it will be gone.”¹⁴⁴

These experiences illustrate how online harassment is sometimes downplayed, both as part of a transient cycle of social media discourse and as an inherent risk of human rights work. This raises the concern that YHRD’s experiences are not given the proper weight that they deserve, even by YHRDs themselves, leading to a reluctance to seek redress.

6.6 BARRIERS TO REDRESS AND REMEDIES

Many YHRDs reported feeling compelled to normalize the effects of online harassment due to perceived inefficiency and other barriers to available redress mechanisms, both from social media platforms and state institutions.

Liwasan, aged 24, is a content creator and an online activist. She explained that she was scared to report online harassment to state institutions, citing her fear of the tables turning and being locked up instead of the perpetrator. “I don’t think I’ve attempted anything other than just block[ing] and report[ing] them... I personally don’t believe that it’s worth my time and energy to report them further,” she reflected.¹⁴⁵

One of the significant barriers to justice for YHRDs who have experienced or witnessed online harassment carried out by the state lies in the paradoxical dilemma of seeking redress from the very institutions or entities responsible for their harassment.

From the narratives shared by YHRDs, there are three primary reasons why they choose not to report their experience of OH: (1) lack of trust in justice institutions; (2) the red tape involved in the processes for seeking remedies, and (3) the challenges of identifying anonymous perpetrators. These themes reflect findings from broader research on barriers to reporting hate crimes, highlighting the systemic nature of these issues and their persistent lack of resolution.¹⁴⁶



1. LACK OF TRUST

A pervasive mistrust in reporting mechanisms discourages YHRDs from seeking redress. Many feel that these systems are either complicit or incapable of providing meaningful support.

For instance, Bunso, a women’s rights advocate, feared that reporting incidents to local authorities, such as the police, would place her in greater danger due to her activism. She emphasized the precarity of her situation, explaining that authorities might view her activism as justification for harassment rather than

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Kidlat, 14 July 2024

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Liwasan, 15 July 2024

¹⁴⁶ Carolina Navarro, “Hate crime reporting barriers: why are victims reluctant to report?,” <https://tacklinghate.org/trainingmodule/hate-crime-reporting-barriers-why-victims-of-hate-related-incidents-are-reluctant-to-report2/>

addressing her grievances.¹⁴⁷ This mistrust is further exacerbated in cases where the harassment originates directly from state-affiliated actors. This was true for Sarita, who did not seek redress since the perpetrators of the harassment were officials themselves.¹⁴⁸

In Habagat's case, online red-tagging and smear campaigns against him intensified when the government-affiliated NTF-ELCAC framed him as a member of the communist party in a public video. He chose not to report these incidents, stating:

"Reporting would mean appealing to the same entities responsible for my harassment."¹⁴⁹

Kidlat expressed a similar sentiment, recounting how state authorities, including high-ranking officials, actively perpetuated red-tagging and intimidation, creating an environment hostile to dissent and accountability.¹⁵⁰

Other YHRDs stated that they had attempted to report and seek redress after being victimized. On a positive note, some civil service organizations and citizen-led initiatives are available to make the process of attaining justice a little easier. Bulan shared that the College Editors Guild of the Philippines and UP Solidaridad were eager to help them go through the process of reporting.¹⁵¹

2. BUREAUCRATIC RED TAPE

Some YHRDs highlighted weak or fragmented mechanisms of universities to support student organizations targeted by online harassment as a barrier to redress. Overly bureaucratic and often ineffective processes in seeking justice are another deterrent to reporting online harassment. YHRDs described these processes as burdensome and time-consuming, requiring substantial paperwork, mental energy, and resilience. For example, Urduja, a leader of various youth organizations at University of the Philippines, criticizes the failure of the UP to develop lines of response and effective support for students, despite the university being a known bastion of left-leaning groups and student activism.¹⁵²

Bituin noted that these processes are not only mentally taxing but also yield limited results, with cases often deprioritized or ignored entirely.¹⁵³ Mayari, aged 22, shared with us a similar experience about a time when she attempted to seek help from the Crisis Management Unit of her university after her student publication was red-tagged and subsequently attacked online by trolls. However, she described the outcome as: "Highly bureaucratic, quite challenging, and long."¹⁵⁴ Ultimately, nothing much happened in the case since progress was slow.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Bunso, 15 July 2024

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Sarita, 20 July 2024

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Habagat, 17 July 2024

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Kidlat, 14 July 2024

¹⁵¹ Interview with Bulan, 11 July 2024

¹⁵² Interview with Urduja, 17 July 2024

¹⁵³ Interview with Bituin, 16 July 2024

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Mayari, 14 July 2024

For many YHRDs, the time and effort required to navigate these processes detract from their ability to continue their advocacy work or maintain their mental well-being. As a result, some opt to move on from their complaints rather than engage with mechanisms that offer little hope for resolution.

The Commission on Human Rights – a Toothless Tiger

Amnesty International’s previous research has reported YHRDs’ frustration with the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) bureaucratic process and limited capacity to resolve cases.^[1] It is the central independent constitutional body with investigatory powers in relation to grievance reports by human rights defenders. The CHR publishes regular reports on the situation of human rights defenders in the country and has repeatedly spoken out about the threat posed by red-tagging.^[2] However, CHR investigations are bureaucratic processes and the CHR’s leadership acknowledged that it was at times seen as a “toothless tiger,” and has been hampered by the lack of cooperation of state officials and government departments with its investigations into serious human rights violations, especially in the context of the “war on drugs”.^[3]

In this context, the CHR has called for a charter to clarify and extend its mandate and to ensure its political and financial independence. HRDs have also called for binding legal protections for human rights defenders at risk. As discussed above, different draft versions of the Human Rights Defenders Protection bill, which would provide for such a mechanism, have been in discussion for years.^[4]

^[1] Amnesty International, “I turned my fear into courage”: Red-tagging and state violence against young human rights defenders in the Philippines 14 October 2024 (Index ASA 35/8574/2024) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/8574/2024/en/>

^[2] Commission on Human Rights, “Statement of the Commission on Human Rights on the attempt to trivialize and justify the dangers of red-tagging,” 11 April 2022, <https://chr.gov.ph/statement-of-the-commission-on-human-rights-on-the-attempt-to-trivialize-and-justify-the-dangers-of-red-tagging/>; Commission on Human Rights “Report on the situation of human rights defenders,” 2020, <https://chr2bucket.storage.googleapis.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/08165055/CHRP-2020-Report-on-the-Situation-of-Human-Rights-Defenders.pdf>

^[3] Rappler, “More power, independence: Can a charter give CHR more teeth?,” 26 September 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/things-to-know-commission-human-rights-own-charter-more-power-independence-teeth/>

^[4] Amnesty International, “Human Rights Defenders Protection (HRDP) Bill Salient Points,” 12 April 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/2024/04/hrdp-bill-salient-points/.ph/2024/04/hrdp-bill-salient-points/>

3. ANONYMOUS AGGRESSORS

The anonymity afforded by digital platforms poses another significant challenge. While anonymity provided some YHRDs with a safer way to continue their activism online it also allows many perpetrators of online harassment to operate behind pseudonymous accounts or as part of organized troll networks, making them difficult or impossible for the targeted YHRDs to identify. Bituin likened the experience to “fighting a ghost,” underscoring the frustration of confronting faceless attackers with no discernible identities.¹⁵⁵ It is also difficult to ascertain whether the perpetrators of online harassment are accounts of real individuals or are connected to the wider disinformation machinery in the country.¹⁵⁶

The narratives of YHRDs show that the chilling effect of online harassment has nuanced manifestations. Direct or indirect experience of online harassment has induced *psychological distress* among some YHRDs that manifests as heightened feelings of insecurity, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. This further leads to cases of *self-censorship* and *inactivity* from their organizations, movements, or general human rights advocacy. It also causes *isolation* from families and social circles. Hesitance in seeking redress is compounded by distrust of state institutions and discontent considering the perceived inaccessibility or ineffectiveness of mechanisms.

As young researchers, we are concerned YHRDs are also disincentivized from seeking accountability because they themselves *downplay* their own experiences, born out of the perception that online harassment is an occupational risk and an inherent reality of human rights work.

YHRDs’ particular experiences of the chilling effect are also conditioned by their intersecting identities. Marginalized identities are disproportionately affected by the chilling effect of online harassment, as we will explore in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Bituin, 16 July 2024

¹⁵⁶ Jonathan Ong and Jason Vincent Cabañes, “Architects of Networked Disinformation,” 2018, (previously cited); Meta reported on its investigation of “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” originating in or targeting the Philippines in September 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-china-philippines/>

7. INTERSECTIONAL RISK FACTORS

YHRDs' experiences of online harassment and the resulting chilling effect are affected by their intersecting identities. This chapter discusses how sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) and age, among other identities, magnify the risks faced by YHRDs in the digital realm. These must be recognized to allow civil society to develop more contextualized, and therefore effective, responses.

7.1 SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION, AND SEX CHARACTERISTICS



Interview and questionnaire responses demonstrated how YHRDs' sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) increased their risk of various forms of online harassment. LGBTI YHRDs are often subjected to targeted gender-based violence. This type of online harassment typically takes the form of sexually explicit threats, personal attacks, and the dismissal of YHRDs' credibility, thus creating a hostile environment that transcends the digital space and threatens their safety and well-being.

During the Duterte administration, various officials, possibly empowered by Duterte's own misogynistic remarks, used sexist comments to intimidate critics, including former Vice President Leni Robredo, Senator Leila De Lima, and head of media outlet, Rappler, Maria Ressa.¹⁵⁷ This culture of gender-based violence perpetuated by the Duterte administration ironically came to the fore alongside his approval of the Safe Spaces Law in 2019, which penalizes gender-based violence in the offline and online spaces.¹⁵⁸ Young advocate Liwasan, aged 24, revealed how her identity as an openly bisexual woman has been weaponized against her, with online critics using superficial aspects of her appearance as grounds for harassment. "Usually, what people focus on, besides the fact that I'm a woman, is that I'm openly bisexual and I have colored hair," she said. "As shallow as these things might seem, they critique how I dress, how I talk, and how I communicate."¹⁵⁹

This tendency to latch onto trivial details, such as her hair color, exemplifies the absurd lengths to which online attackers go to invalidate women's presence in advocacy spaces. Similarly, Alunsina, a student

¹⁵⁷ Rappler, "TIMELINE: How Duterte normalized sexism in the Philippine presidency," 21 June, 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/timeline-how-duterte-normalized-sexism-misogyny-philippine-presidency/>.

¹⁵⁸ Rappler, "TIMELINE: How Duterte normalized sexism in the Philippine presidency," 21 June, 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/timeline-how-duterte-normalized-sexism-misogyny-philippine-presidency/>. (previously cited)

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Liwasan, 15 July 2024

activist, shared how her comments on political issues are often met with hateful remarks that shift from political disagreements to personal and gender-based attacks, some escalating to sexually lewd comments and even rape threats.¹⁶⁰ Such experiences expose the structural violence embedded in online platforms, where women's bodies and identities are aggressively targeted, reinforcing patriarchal and heteronormative hierarchies.

The experiences of Bunso, a lesbian activist, reflect an even harsher reality faced by women with marginalized sexual identities. During the 2022 election campaign period, she received a flood of sexually violent messages and rape threats, simply for being vocal in her advocacy. "Even if it's online and those people aren't directly affecting you, you still feel scared because if they're this wild in a virtual space, how will they act when they see you in person?" she remarked.¹⁶¹ As discussed above, the psychological toll of these threats is compounded by the constant fear of physical harm, creating a hostile environment beyond the digital space.

For defenders like Luzon, harassment frequently centers on their identity. They reported that critics tend to mock their gender identity instead of addressing their arguments:

"When you're [trans] and you talk about LGBT rights, anti-terror laws, or cases like POGO¹⁶² or Alice Guo,¹⁶³ there's a tendency for people to attack your SOGIESC. They don't really listen to what you're saying; they just want to mock who you are because that's how queers and women are viewed in our society."

Luzon went on to highlight how their gender identity becomes a tool for detractors to silence them, a tactic that reflects a broader societal pattern of dehumanizing and discrediting queer voices.¹⁶⁴ This form of harassment is not unique to Luzon, as other queer defenders reported similar experiences of ridicule and attacks that undermine their credibility and marginalize their advocacy.

The testimonies of Mayari, a former campus journalist, and Alunsina, a political activist, further illustrate how harassment often targets visible and vocal women advocates, extending beyond them to affect their families and communities. Mayari expressed her concern about state surveillance and harassment, often exacerbated by her gender.¹⁶⁵ The Philippines remains lacking in legal protection and recognition for its LGBTI community members as the SOGIE Equality Bill has yet to make progress, despite receiving initial approval from the House of Representatives Committee on Women and Gender Equality in May 2023.¹⁶⁶ The SOGIE Equality Bill recognizes the fundamental rights of every person regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. At its core, it aims to provide fair and equal opportunities for everyone in accessing basic social services, opportunities, healthcare, protection, and justice while acknowledging and breaking down the barriers that exist for people with diverse SOGIESC.¹⁶⁷ The bill aims to provide legal penalties for individuals who are proven guilty of discriminatory acts on the grounds of SOGIE.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Alunsina, 15 July 2024

¹⁶¹ Interview with Bunso, 15 July 2024

¹⁶² Philippine offshore gaming operations (POGO) are Philippine-based gaming operations that cater mostly to the Chinese market. They have recently been banned by the Marcos Jr. administration.

¹⁶³ Guo Hua Ping, better known as Alice Guo, is the former mayor of Bamban, Tarlac charged with 62 counts of money laundering by the Department of Justice.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Luzon, 15 July 2024.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Mayari, 14 July 2024

¹⁶⁶ Inquirer, "House panel approves SOGIE equality bill," 23 May 2023. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1773344/fwd-house-panel-approves-sogie-equality-bill>

¹⁶⁷ Amnesty International Philippines SOGIE Campaign <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/campaigns/sogiesc/>

Alunsina, on the other hand, shared how attacks on her personal posts led to threats directed not only at her but also at her friends and family members.¹⁶⁸ This example highlights the absence of the Human Rights Defenders Protection (HRDP) bill (discussed above) which aims to protect HRDs and their work, and remains pending at the Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights.¹⁶⁹

These testimonies highlight the compounded risks faced by young defenders due to the intersection of their identities. Women and LGBTI advocates bear the brunt of gendered and identity-based violence, which not only delegitimizes their work but also places them at greater risk of physical harm. Addressing these issues requires recognizing the specific risk of these defenders and implementing targeted measures to protect their rights, ensuring their voices are safeguarded rather than silenced by threats and harassment.

7.2 AGE

Many of the YHRDs we spoke with reported that age hinders their advocacy and distorts the way people perceive their work. Several expressed that their age was often used against them.

Isla, a student and environmental advocate, shared how age is a double-edged sword. While it affords YHRDs energy and an innovative outlook in their human rights advocacy, age also becomes a significant obstacle to securing support from families and institutions. Isla recognizes the advantages of social media such as Facebook to develop public consciousness of human rights. However, after publishing a post critical of a political figure, her age became the prime target of derogatory statements and negative responses from her family. Isla recalled her family aggressively demanding if she “knew anything” because it was out of line for a young person like her to comment on political affairs.¹⁷⁰ Panday, a student journalist from the Southern Tagalog region, recalled being told that he was “brainwashed” because of his affiliation with progressive groups in the region.¹⁷¹



The recurring argument among detractors of YHRDs hinges on the supposed impressionability of young people (discussed above). Several YHRDs mentioned the case of the Hands Off Our Children movement a self-described representation of parents “whose children were victimized through deceptive recruitment from the front organizations of CPP-NPA-NDF”.¹⁷²

Aside from invalidation, being young also makes one an easier target for harassment. Habagat, a civil and political rights advocate, shared that he faced online harassment in the form of a smear campaign and red-tagging. In retrospect, Habagat believes that he was targeted in particular because of his age at the time.¹⁷³ For Mayari, young people make easier targets for harassment because they do not have the same financial resources, physical capacity, or even necessary connections as more seasoned advocates to protect

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Alunsina, 15 July 2024

¹⁶⁹ Amnesty International Philippines. “PH Senate should act swiftly, Pass HRDP Bill to protect Human Rights,” 18 January 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/2022/01/ph-senate-should-act-swiftly-pass-hrdp-bill-to-protect-human-rights/>

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Isla, 08 July 2024

¹⁷¹ Interview with Panday, 20 July 2024

¹⁷² Amnesty International, “I turned my fear into courage,” 2024. (previously cited)

¹⁷³ Interview with Habagat, 17 July 2024

themselves.¹⁷⁴ Thus, young people pursuing human rights advocacy may also be at greater risk if they do not have access to resources to properly protect themselves.

These findings resonate with those of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor who has found agism to be an obstacle faced by child and youth human rights defenders. She has warned that agism manifests as challenges for YHRDs, noting that a “[l]ack of recognition and credibility due to their age may affect all aspects of their human rights advocacy, including impeding access to resources and opportunities... Many have faced demeaning and belittling remarks, questioning their experience, expertise and motivation... [as well as] political narratives that use the age of child and youth human rights defenders to imply that they are being manipulated, recruited or brainwashed”.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Mayari, 14 July 2024

¹⁷⁵ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor “We are not just the future”: challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders 2024 A/HRC/55/50, paras 45-47.

8. COLLECTIVE CARE: YOUTH-LED PROCESSING AND COPING MECHANISMS

The cases above highlight the struggles that come with YHRDs' advocating for justice and fairness. Nevertheless, YHRDs find alternative means to continue their human rights advocacy as they contend with online harassment and its chilling effects.

During our interviews, YHRDs shared a range of coping mechanisms and alternative strategies that they employ for self and collective care, both online and offline.

8.1 SELF-CARE

For many YHRDs engaged in human rights advocacy through civil society groups, grassroots movements, or other collectives, their organizations provide essential support to help members navigate risks and challenges related to their work. YHRDs we spoke to confirmed that support was available from various organizational types they were affiliated with, whether university-level collectives or organizations with regional and national networks.¹⁷⁶ Examples include establishing internal well-being committees, enforcing safety protocols, and providing access to mental health services and legal support when needed.

Beyond organizational support, YHRDs also reported that they engage in proactive practices on a personal level to maintain their mental and emotional health. Mutya, a trans rights advocate and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TfGBV) survivor, shared that relying on friends for emotional support was a key coping strategy.¹⁷⁷ Many YHRDs reported finding comfort in friends who are also engaged in the same work or advocacy, as they better understand their struggles. Some also turn to family members for support, particularly those who affirm and encourage their advocacy efforts. Aside from seeking positive reinforcement and support from social circles, others adopt more internalized self-care practices, such as journaling, meditation, and gaming. These activities help them detach from negative experiences and later continue with their advocacy work.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Dakila, 13 July 2024; Interview with Kidlat, 14 July 2024; Interview with Urduja, 17 July 2024

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Mutya, 14 July 2024

8.2 COLLECTIVE CARE



Beyond individual measures, we also found that collective care measures were employed by organizations to help their members cope with experiences of harassment. Collective care refers to a broad range of activities or strategies undertaken by a group of people. Underlying these actions are a shared responsibility towards ensuring each other's and the overall group's well-being and mental resilience.

Collective care is as important as self-care. It includes taking time to create safe spaces within YHRD communities to nurture and take care of each other. This can include spaces to talk about issues, or wellness practices. Collectively, a common practice among almost all the interviewed YHRDs to protect their work and their allies, included being mindful and intentional about what they reveal on social media. YHRDs

explained they have become increasingly conscious of the content they publish online and the public attention it may receive. YHRDs including Tupas, Mayumi, and Bituin shared their practices, such as privatizing social media profiles (in Facebook, X, and others), limiting public access to posts, and removing or avoiding the disclosure of sensitive information are commonly employed.¹⁷⁸

While online harassment is often seen as a digital threat, as discussed above, it is directly linked to potential physical security concerns. As a result, some YHRDs reported they take several precautions to protect themselves. Four YHRDs also shared that their organizations have developed more proactive protocols regarding the sharing of content in social media which they have also applied to their own accounts.¹⁷⁹ For YHRDs like Dakila, who works closely with high-profile political prisoners, this includes crafting and following safety standard operating protocols and staying alert to potential threats.¹⁸⁰

This is similar for Isko, a peace advocate and development worker in Mindanao, who shared that maintaining a degree of anonymity, especially in volatile political environments, helps HRDs like him manage the risk of harassment and enhance his security.¹⁸¹ Other tactics include avoiding public recognition by limiting personal details and attending events with others for safety. Urduja shared that her organization implements simple yet effective measures such as travelling in pairs, wearing masks, and avoiding identifiable clothing during public demonstrations.¹⁸²

Additionally, some YHRDs use personal documentation for safety, such as taking pictures of their surroundings and sharing their whereabouts with others to prevent false accusations.¹⁸³ They also inform others about their travel plans, especially for long trips, to ensure someone knows their location. At an

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Tupas, 16 July 2024; Interview with Mayumi, 20 July 2024

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Dakila, 13 July 2024; Interview with Urduja, 17 July 2024; Interview with Mayumi, 20 July 2024; Interview with Panday, 20 July 2024

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Dakila, 13 July 2024

¹⁸¹ Interview with Isko, 14 July 2024

¹⁸² Interview with Urduja, 17 July 2024

¹⁸³ Interview with Mayumi, 20 July 2024

organizational level, protective protocols during protests are established,¹⁸⁴ and YHRDs are encouraged to share their whereabouts with family and participate in events with trusted friends to feel secure.¹⁸⁵

While collective care provides essential support, potential challenges could undermine its effectiveness, requiring further development and adaptation. For example, there may be resource limitations, lack of coordination, or inconsistencies in support across different levels of organizations. However, these challenges have not explicitly manifested among the interviewed YHRDs and were not further explored.

STAYING RESILIENT WHILE TRYING TO SAVE THE WORLD

Human rights are about making humans' lives better, including ourselves! Research suggests that social justice and human rights activists are especially susceptible to burnout. Being able to balance our well-being with our passion to drive change forward can lead to anxiety, stress and burnout. Amnesty International created a Well-Being Workbook for Youth Activists, drafted together with youth activists and informed by realities faced by Amnesty International youth activists across the globe. It aims to support youth activists in their journey to strengthen their self-care and make us all recognize the need to look after each other as we stand up for human rights.

Find out more: [Staying Resilient While Trying to Save the World \(Volume 2\): A Well-Being Workbook for Youth Activists](#)

While some YHRDs may find solace in self-care and collective care practices, it was pointed out that personal, internalized self-care should ideally go hand in hand with professional mental health support, as detailed earlier. A challenge arises for some YHRDs, as there is often a lack of attention to their mental well-being or a lack of access to the mental health resources that could further support their overall well-being. For those without adequate support, the burden of managing the toll of online harassment falls largely on their shoulders, making it more difficult to cope with the challenges they face.

8.3 ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES FOR ADVOCACY

YHRD's experiences of harassment and consequent use of self-care naturally led to a question about how these challenges have shaped their perception of digital technology. While the common response is to become cautious in recognition of the risks and damage associated with the internet as a public space, Alunsina, a law student, paralegal, and human rights worker, claimed to have found a positive alternative approach. She shared that in her organization, the concept of "hope-based messaging" has emerged as a strategy to reframe the narrative of human rights work in a more positive, empowering, and persuasive light.¹⁸⁶

However, Alunsina acknowledges a drawback to this approach. She notes that within her own organization, opinions on hope-based communication remain divided.



¹⁸⁴ Interview with Kidlat, 17 July 2024; Interview with Urduja, 27 July 2024

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Mayumi, 20 July 2024

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Alunsina, 15 July 2024

While some see its value in reducing harassment and even mitigating persecution, others criticize it as a form of sugarcoating. There are those who still favor a more direct, hard-hitting approach – one that confronts issues head-on with strong, uncompromising language. This divide reflects a broader tension in advocacy work, where striking a balance between assertiveness and approachability remains a challenge.¹⁸⁷

Despite being a unique case study, we want to highlight the importance of finding alternative strategies to continue advocacy work in a manner that protects one's mental and physical well-being.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Alunsina, 15 July 2024

9. HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK: ONLINE HARASSMENT AS A HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE

Online harassment – in its various forms – and how states respond to it, can impact many human rights. These include the right to: freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly; health and life, liberty and security of person; be free from discrimination; defend human rights; and an effective remedy. These rights are protected by several treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), among others. The Philippines has ratified these treaties and thus must comply with their obligations, including to respect, protect and fulfil the rights outlined in this chapter.

9.1 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

The right to freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 19 of the ICCPR and includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of any kind both online and offline.¹⁸⁸ Its fulfilment therefore plays a crucial role in enabling the work of human rights defenders.¹⁸⁹ To comply with their obligations, it is not sufficient simply not to interfere with freedom of expression, states must also promote adequate conditions for the full enjoyment of the right, including by lifting any barriers that may hinder it.

¹⁸⁸ ICCPR, Article 19

¹⁸⁹ UN General Assembly resolution 53/144: Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 8 March 1999, Article 6, UN Doc. A/RES/53/144.

Closely connected to this, under Articles 21 and 22 of the ICCPR, are the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. These protect the individual's ability to establish and participate in groups and gather non-violently with others, including in online spaces, for a common purpose.¹⁹⁰ The right to freedom of expression, including using the internet as a tool to communicate and mobilize, allows people to organize and participate in assemblies or associations.¹⁹¹ Therefore, undue restrictions and state-sponsored attacks on freedom of expression, including overly broad or misused legislation and various forms of online harassment, also jeopardize the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

Due to their interdependence, the guarantee of each of these freedoms is a condition for the enjoyment of the other. In other words, the fulfilment of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are fundamental conditions to meaningful participation in political, economic, social, and cultural life.



9.2 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

The right to freedom of expression is not absolute, but the ICCPR states that restrictions on the right must be provided by law and necessary and proportionate to achieve one of the limited legitimate aims. These are “respect of the rights or reputations of others” or “the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals”.¹⁹² In this respect, states are required to prohibit – though not necessarily criminalize – expression that amounts to advocacy of discriminatory hatred, hostility or violence.¹⁹³ Under relevant international human rights law instruments, sex, gender, including expression and identity, sexual orientation, and political opinion, among others, are all aspects of an individual's identity that are protected from discrimination.¹⁹⁴ As noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, since the rights to equality and freedom of expression, and the obligation of non-discrimination “are mutually reinforcing,” states must strive to protect and promote the speech of all, “especially those whose rights are often at risk, while also addressing the public and private discrimination that undermines the enjoyment of all rights.”¹⁹⁵

9.3 RIGHT TO HEALTH

The realization of equality and non-discrimination are closely linked to the fulfilment of the right to health, as noted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to health in 2017:

“Discrimination, harmful stereotypes (including gender) and stigma in the community, family, schools and workplace disable healthy relationships, social connections and the supportive and inclusive environments that are required for the good mental health and well-being of everyone. Likewise, discriminatory attitudes influencing policies, laws and practices constitute barriers for those requiring emotional and social support

¹⁹⁰ ICCPR, Articles 21 & 22; Human Rights Committee, General Comment No.37 (2020) on the right of peaceful assembly (article 21), 17 September 2020, UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/37, 17 September 2020, para. 4.

¹⁹¹ Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 37 (previously cited), para. 10.

¹⁹² ICCPR, Article 19.

¹⁹³ ICCPR, Article 20.

¹⁹⁴ ICCPR, Article 26.

¹⁹⁵ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, 9 October 2019, UN Doc. A/74/486, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/308/13/PDF/N1930813.pdf> Open Element para. 4.

and/or treatment. Consequently, individuals and groups in vulnerable situations who are discriminated against by law and/or in practice are denied their right to mental health.”¹⁹⁶

States have an obligation to take steps to progressively achieve the full realization of the right of everyone to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, as recognized and protected in several human rights instruments. Failure to respect, protect and fulfil the right to health can have far-reaching consequences that can negatively impact how individuals can enjoy and exercise their other rights. As the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has stated, the right to health requires that sufficient healthcare facilities and services be available, within reach and affordable to all sections of the population.¹⁹⁷ Yet mental health care in particular remains widely under-resourced and neglected.¹⁹⁸

Human rights defenders around the world face the double challenge of the distress and trauma caused by intimidation, threats and harassment, which many are exposed to in the context of their activism, and an all-too-common lack of affordable access to mental health services and resources that could help them to process and cope with such challenges to their health and well-being.¹⁹⁹

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders noted in early 2024:

"Human rights defenders around the world face the double challenge of the distress and trauma caused by intimidation, threats and harassment, which many are exposed to in the context of their activism, and an all-too-common lack of affordable access to mental health services and resources that could help them to process and cope with such challenges to their health and well-being"²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, Report, 28 March 2017, UN Doc. A/HRC/35/21, paras 45-46.

¹⁹⁷ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 14, 11 August 2000, UN Doc. E/C.12/2000/4

¹⁹⁸ UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health), Report, 15 April 2020, UN Doc. A/HRC/44/48, para. 1

¹⁹⁹ UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, "We are not just the future": challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders, 17 January 2024 (previously cited)

²⁰⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, "We are not just the future": challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders, 17 January 2024 (previously cited), paras 59-60.

9.4 RIGHT TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by consensus in 1998 and based on legally binding human rights treaties, affirms that “everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.”²⁰¹ With this, states recognized that HRDs have an important role to play in making human rights a reality and in overseeing their implementation, establishing the right to defend human rights.

The Declaration further affirms that states must protect defenders and that these “shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection [of HRDs] against any violence, threats, retaliation, [...] discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action,” and to protect them “effectively under national law”.²⁰² Over the years, this duty has been interpreted and further elaborated in a plethora of guidelines, resolutions, and recommendations by UN independent expert reports and treaty bodies, and by human rights courts.



This duty to protect involves both symbolic and practical steps. It includes the need to publicly recognize the value and legitimacy of the right to defend rights, establish a culture of respect and protection towards HRDs within state institutions, and ensure all public officials understand and comply with their duties.²⁰³ Concurrently, this also refers to the urgent need to stop the practice of stigmatization, including acts of defamation, smearing, and labeling of defenders as public enemies, terrorists, or foreign agents (or in the case of the Philippines, the practice of red-tagging). This is because stigmatization goes hand in hand with criminalization and violence, where “both stigmatization and criminalization increasingly serve as tactics to intimidate and silence human rights defenders.”²⁰⁴

The duty to protect the right to defend rights has also been elaborated as the need to provide a safe and enabling environment for all HRDs,²⁰⁵ “supported by a robust national legal framework, grounded in international law.”²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, UN Doc. A/RES/53/144, Art 1.

²⁰² Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, UN Doc. A/RES/53/144, Art 12

²⁰³ Declaration on Human Rights Defenders+25, annotated version, 2024, <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/declaration-25/>, p. 22.

²⁰⁴ Declaration on Human Rights Defenders+25, annotated version, 2024, <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/declaration-25/>, p. 35.

²⁰⁵ The main elements necessary for a safe and enabling environment are highlighted in the December 2013 Report of the former Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, UN Doc. A/HRC/25/55 and they were further elaborated in further reports, UN resolutions, regional human rights law and jurisprudence. Numerous other sources on the right to defend human rights are available in: *Declaration on Human Rights Defenders+25*, annotated version, 2024, <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/declaration-25/>.

²⁰⁶ Civil Society Space and the United Nations Human Rights System, A Practical Guide for Civil Society: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/CS_space_UNHRSystem_Guide_0.pdf.

9.5 RIGHT TO LIBERTY AND SECURITY OF PERSON

The right to liberty and security of person is guaranteed by Article 9 of the ICCPR.²⁰⁷ The right to security of person requires states to refrain from inflicting harm as well as to protect individuals from foreseeable harm and to address “patterns of violence” against at-risk groups, including human rights defenders and journalists.²⁰⁸ Highlighting the specific risks faced by YHRDs, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders recommended states to “adopt specific laws and policies enhancing protection for child and youth human rights defenders at the national level,” “explicitly refer to child and youth human rights defenders in model draft laws on human rights defenders” and “strengthen digital protection and security with regard to online human rights violations.”²⁰⁹

Women and LGBTI HRDs face additional risks at the intersection of their human rights activism and gender and/or sexual orientation, and therefore require enhanced protection. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, in a report to the Human Rights Council on child and youth HRDs, observed that at the global level, young defenders, especially women and girls, often faced “gendered attacks online” to “harass, control, blackmail or humiliate” them.²¹⁰

9.6 RIGHT TO AN EFFECTIVE REMEDY

States are also obliged to provide access to remedy for individuals whose rights have been violated by online harassment. The right to an effective remedy has been recognized under various human rights treaties and instruments,²¹¹ including those to which the Philippines is a signatory.

States have a duty to create an accountability framework that: provides equal and effective access to justice for all; establishes mechanisms for effective investigations, including access to relevant information; and offers adequate, prompt and effective remedies including non-repetition guarantees.²¹² Effective remedies can include compensation for physical or mental harm, rehabilitation including medical and psychological care, and legal and social services. Survivors should also be provided with satisfaction through measures such as effective investigations and prosecution of suspected perpetrators when appropriate or public acknowledgement of the facts and acceptance of responsibility and guarantees of non-repetition, through actions or reforms to prevent future abuses.²¹³

²⁰⁷ ICCPR, Article 9

²⁰⁸ UNHRC, General comment No. 35, 16 December 2014, UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/35, para. 9.

²⁰⁹ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, “We are not just the future”: challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders (previously cited), para. 117.

²¹⁰ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, “We are not just the future”: challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders, 17 January 2024, UN Doc. A/HRC/55/50, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g23/267/64/pdf/g2326764.pdf?token=IP7RQMbP7iyzN556uR&fe=true>, paras 43-44.

²¹¹ UDHR, Article 8; ICCPR, Article 2(3); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 2; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), Article 6; CEDAW, Article 2; CAT, Article 14; UN General Assembly, Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law, 21 March 2006, UN Doc. A/RES/60/147, among others

²¹² See: Corte IDH. Cuadernillos de Jurisprudencia de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos No. 13: Protección Judicial, 2021, https://www.corteidh.or.cr/sitios/libros/todos/docs/cuadernillo13_2021.pdf; Antônio A. Cançado Trindade, El derecho de acceso a la justicia internacional y las condiciones para su realización en el sistema interamericano de protección de los derechos humanos, Presentación del Presidente de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, Juez Antônio A. Cançado Trindade, ante el Consejo Permanente de la Organización de los Estados Americanos (OEA), Washington, D.C., OEA/Ser.GCP/doc.3654/02, 2002, <https://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/r08066-2.pdf>

²¹³ See: Corte IDH. Cuadernillos de Jurisprudencia de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos No. 13: Protección Judicial (previously cited); Antônio A. Cançado Trindade, El derecho de acceso a la justicia internacional y las condiciones para su realización en el sistema interamericano de protección de los derechos humanos (previously cited).

10. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report exposes the violent landscape that YHRDs must navigate as they practice digital activism in the Philippines. This context places young human rights defenders in precarious, if not explicitly dangerous, situations. Our data reveals that many YHRDs are subjected to multiple types of online harassment, including trolling, doxing, verbal violence, and red-tagging. The prevalence of online harassment is informed by legal and sociocultural contexts and worsened by the massive shift to online spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Online harassment becomes a significant hurdle that impedes the pursuit of human rights advocacy. In particular, online harassment leads to a chilling effect that manifests in manifold ways, particularly, as psychological distress, self-censorship, inactivity, isolation, downplaying negative impacts, and barriers to remedy and redress. In general, these manifestations discourage and demotivate activists, and may even lead to temporary or permanent disengagement from important causes.

These manifestations are further informed by the intersecting identities of YHRDs. Factors like SOGIESC and age, affect the intensity or kind of harassment one experiences. Online harassment thus emerges as a multi-layered experience that is often legitimized by the state and other sociocultural factors, and is further compounded by facets of identity that may be targeted by harassers.

Online harassment and the resulting chilling effect – an oppressive climate of fear and silence – impedes YHRDs’ exercise of fundamental human rights and freedoms, particularly freedom of expression, right to peaceful assembly, to health, to remedy, and to defend human rights.

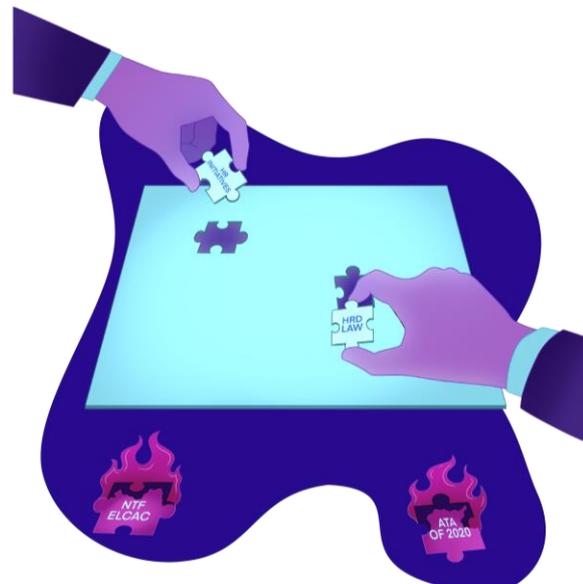
These human rights abuses are happening under the noses of those meant to protect YHRDs. Worse still, in some cases, it is the state itself that violates these rights or incites online harassment. In the absence of a duty-bearing state that respects, protects, and fulfills human rights, both perpetrators and YHRDs are left to their own devices. Perpetrators of online harassment are not effectively held accountable, while YHRDs must cope with the consequences on their own. Many YHRDs do not have any confidence in institutions that are supposed to protect their rights. Online harassment often goes unpunished.

Being a YHRD in the Philippines is not safe, comfortable, or ideal. As this report illustrates, online spaces oftentimes double as spaces for harassment. Yet, our conversations with YHRDs, themselves survivors of online and offline harassment, reveal that activism persists despite unfavorable circumstances. YHRDs continue to fight, spurred onwards by strategies for care and commitment to justice.

To ensure that these activists can continue the work that they do, we make the following recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT:

- End the practice of state-sponsored red-tagging, ceasing all forms of intimidation, harassment, threats, or attacks by government officials, state authorities, and security forces against human rights defenders, especially the youth.
- Abolish the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) by revoking Executive Order No. 70. Following this, establish a prompt, independent, impartial, and transparent investigation into NTF-ELCAC's practices and activities throughout its operational period. The goal of this investigation should be to address and mitigate impunity within the body.
- Repeal the Anti-Terrorism Act, also known as Republic Act 11479, which has been widely criticized as a threat to human rights for infringing on basic freedoms.
- Amend the Cybercrime Prevention Act or Republic Act 10175 to remove provisions such as libel clauses which have been used to suppress freedom of expression.
- Mandate a comprehensive, independent, impartial, and transparent investigation into abuses in the application of the Anti-Terrorism Act, focusing on cases involving human rights defenders, NGOs, and media workers.
- Develop and fund specialized programs through the Department of Health (DOH) and Department of Justice (DOJ) to provide psychological and legal aid for individuals who have been red-tagged or harassed online and offline. Establish a dedicated fund to ensure these support systems are accessible, sustainable, and capable of protecting those targeted.
- Direct the Department of Education (DepEd), Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), and the National Youth Commission (NYC) to collaborate with human rights groups in the development and integration of digital rights education and related information campaigns. These programs and campaigns should specifically address the dangers of red-tagging and offer resources for responsible online engagement.
- Direct the Civil Service Commission (CSC) to strongly enforce the code of conduct for government officials on social media, mandating ethical behavior with explicit anti-harassment policies.
- Improve the Commission on Human Rights' capacity to independently and effectively investigate reported human rights violations, including online harassment and red-tagging, ensuring the institution's independence, including through appropriate resources in accordance with the Paris Principles, as well as ensuring full cooperation from state authorities in CHR's investigations.

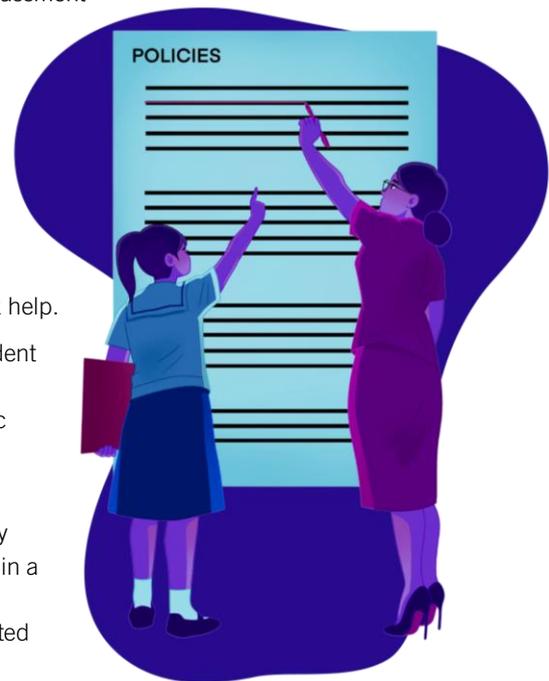


RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PHILIPPINE CONGRESS:

- Pass the Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill to provide formal recognition and protection for human rights defenders in the Philippines, with special attention to the risks and challenges faced by YHRDs and women defenders and those working on women’s rights and gender issues.²¹⁴ Harmonize the bill with existing laws, such as the International Service for Human Rights’ Model National Law on the Recognition and Protection of Human Rights Defenders. Define and criminalize red-tagging explicitly, to ensure that provisions are not weaponized against human rights defenders. These new protections must be sufficiently clear so as to pre-empt any potential abuse or interpretation to the detriment of human rights defenders. Ensure effective consultation of human rights defenders, including children and young people, so that protection mechanisms respond to their needs, are effective, do no harm and incorporate an intersectional lens.
- Enact the Campus Press Freedom Bill to institutionalize protections for student journalists, ensuring their ability to report on critical issues without fear of harassment or legal persecution.²¹⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

- Revise institutional policies to safeguard the rights of students to engage in political discourse and activism. Remove restrictive policies that impede students’ human rights advocacy.
- Create a registry to document red-tagging and online harassment incidents within educational institutions. Conduct annual analyses to inform policy decisions, ensuring accountability and proactive institutional lines of response.
- Set up comprehensive support systems for students, faculty, and staff who experience red-tagging and online harassment. Ensure access to counseling, legal assistance, and peer support, designating a confidential point of contact within each institution for victims to seek help.
- Implement protocols to protect the independence of student councils, campus publications, and youth organizations, supporting their role in fostering free expression and civic engagement without interference from administrative authorities.
- Uphold educational institutions as ‘Safe Havens’ explicitly prohibiting any military presence on campuses to maintain a neutral, safe environment for students. Ensure that any investigations concerning students or faculty are conducted with full transparency and involve coordination with the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and relevant rights groups to safeguard the rights and welfare of all parties involved.



²¹⁴ Numerous sources cite the importance of specific attention and protections towards defenders facing multiple forms of discrimination and inequality, the first of which is the 2013 Resolution on Women Human Rights Defenders, see <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/women-human-rights-defenders>

²¹⁵ Philippines, An Act upholding and promoting campus journalism and campus press freedom, repealing for the purpose Republic Act 7079, entitled "An Act providing for the development and promotion of campus journalism," penalizing violations against campus press freedom and other purposes, July 2022 https://docs.congress.hrep.online/legisdocs/basic_19/HB01155.pdf; Cherady Sulit, UP student pubs demand passage of campus press freedom bill, 18 August 2024, <https://www.tinigngplaridel.net/cpf-bill-solidaridad/>

- End any affiliations with the NTF-ELCAC. Given NTF-ELCAC's record of red-tagging organizations and individuals, institutions must assess the potential impact of such affiliations on the student body and prioritize protecting students from undue intimidation and stigmatization.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO FUNDERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS IN THE PHILIPPINES:

- Ensure sustainable funding for young human rights defenders and youth social movements, including adequate funding to ensure the health, safety and well-being of young human rights defenders in their communities.

ANNEX

Office of the President response



Office of the President Malacañang

2 April 2025

[REDACTED]
Amnesty International

Dear [REDACTED]

This responds to your e-mail communication dated 19 March 2025, sharing Amnesty International's research on the challenges of young human rights defenders. We acknowledge Amnesty International's request for responses and shall effectively address allegations found to be with valid basis.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the freedom of opinion and expression, Ms. Irene Khan in her preliminary observations on her official country visit to the PH from 23 January to 2 February 2024, states that "*Philippines is a forward-looking, vibrant democracy, committed to human rights and the rule of law*" and that the "*Philippines has a vibrant, dynamic civil society and media sector. Over 2,000 private media outlets and more than 60,000 non-government organizations are engaged in advocacy*".

The PH, through an independent parliament legislates relevant bills for the protection and promotion on human rights to ensure and maintain said vibrant democracy. Thus, Amnesty International's participation to enact a law relating to human rights defenders shall greatly impact efforts of Congress to make the PH the 4th among 193 UN member States to have such a law.

We note that incidents referenced in the research occurred prior to June 2022 and/ or were likely inappropriate expressions and/ or opinions by private individuals and/or non-state actors through their Facebook accounts. The alleged State-actor perpetrators cited in these incidents are no longer connected with government as of date. State mechanisms remain accessible to hold them accountable through the courts of law.

There is no indication that red-tagging is condoned nor maintained as a State-sponsored policy. In contrast, the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Deduro vs. Vinoya* highlights effective, accessible and independent State-sponsored remedies available against all forms of intimidation and harassment, including red-tagging.

We recognize Amnesty International's continued efforts to access the PH' enabling civic space in engaging with stakeholders, including State offices to seek responses in preparing reports.

Thank you.

Respectfully yours,

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

PRESIDENTIAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE SECRETARIAT
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The said letter alleged the recruitment of UP students to the Communist Party of the Philippines and the National People's Army as reason for the termination. However, we can only surmise what Secretary Lorenzana and the previous administration under former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte ultimately found to be justifiable cause for the abrogation of the Accord. One must note that even when the UP-DND Accord in force, the AFP, PNP, and the CAFGU may enter a UP campus under exceptional circumstances explicitly stated in the agreement, such as hot pursuit of a criminal offender, occasions of emergency, and ordinary transit through the UP campus. Any such entry in the campus should comply with the principles of mutual respect and cooperation, and the protocols established under the Accord. Whatever grounds were deemed by the DND to be sufficient to outweigh the valuable protective measures established by the Accord, the UP Administration then and now cannot determine with absolute certainty why the agreement was terminated. Unfortunately, the protestations of the UP community against such termination remained unheeded by then Secretary Lorenzana.

UP then formed a Crisis Management Sub-Committee on Students in Distress (CMC-SID) then on 28 July 2021, months after the termination of the Accord, the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, through the Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs (Student Affairs), issued **Guidelines to Address Students Involved in Red-Tagging Incidents** and encouraged the various UP constituent universities or campuses to formulate their own CU Crisis Management Playbooks to respond to red-tagging incidents.

More importantly, in its 1365th meeting, the UP Board of Regents issued a resolution urging members of the House of Representatives to pass a law that would uphold and protect the academic freedom of the University's constituents by institutionalizing the terms of the 1989 agreement. This resolution further

<https://up.edu.ph/up-protests-against-threat-to-academic-freedom/>.



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affirms UP's unwavering commitment to remain a safe haven for critical thinking, scholarship, and activism.

2. Following reports from students that the UP's National Service Training Program classes are being used as a space where students and organizations critical of the government are labeled communist sympathizers, what measures were undertaken to address these incidents and ensure the safety and well-being of the students? And has the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) had access or attempted to access the UP campus and student spaces (online or otherwise)? How has the University responded if so?

- Thank you for bringing these to our attention. It appears that certain attempts or actual entry into UP campus premises or UP student spaces were reported or publicly acknowledged by the then spokesperson of the NTF-ELCAC Lt. General Antonio Parlade² even before the DND's unilateral termination of the UP-DND Accord. UP was unaware of such attempts or consummated entries into UP premises, and if these indeed occurred while the Accord was in force, such actions would be in violation of the Accord.

In 2022, there was an incident involving a former major general in the Philippine Army Reserve who spoke to UP freshmen at a Zoom session about the state of the country's national security, as part of the NSTP. Based on reports by students and faculty members, UP students were tagged as "terrorists",³ to which the UP Baguio Chancellor responded, by: (a) taking responsibility for allowing the speaker to join the lecture; (b) affirming that UP Baguio would "fight all forms of abuse and harassment that victimize students" and issuing a statement denouncing the "malicious labeling of student organizations"; (c) coordinating

² UP under surveillance even while accord was in place, general confirms [Jan. 21, 2021]
<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/01/21/2072008/under-surveillance-even-while-accord-was-place-general-confirms>

³ Groups slam latest 'Red-tagging' at online lecture in UP Baguio [Nov. 9, 2022]
<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1690835/groups-slam-latest-red-tagging-at-online-lecture-in-up-baguio>



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with UP students and faculty to address the incident; and (d) pursuing the creation of a crisis management committee, treating red-tagging as a crisis that would trigger UP Baguio's crisis response protocols and actions.

UP Los Baños ("UPLB") also reported that during a common module forum in NSTP, a resource person allegedly red-tagged student formations. In response, the UPLB administration facilitated consultation and dialogue between the student council and the NSTP coordinator. This initiative aimed to address any misunderstandings or concerns arising from classroom discussions in a safe and open environment. The UPLB administration confirmed that we in the university "prioritize respectful discourse, encourage constructive engagement, and reaffirm that NSTP serves as a platform for civic education rather than political profiling,"

We are looking into whether there are more recent verified reports involving the monitoring, detection, or facilitation of arrest of alleged "communist sympathizers" through the use of the NSTP. If you have more specific and actionable information, we can investigate these reports or incidents.

On a related note, in 2021, a dialogue took place between UP Visayas and the Regional Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict in Region 6 (RTF-ELCAC 6).⁴ This was treated by the parties as an opportunity to exchange ideas and promote freedom of expression.

- 3. Prejudice against student activism have also led to the association of the University with negative stereotypes, often contributing to the vulnerability of its students, faculty, and staff to red-tagging and other forms of harassment. How does the University respond to red-tagging of its community, and the attempts to vilify UP as an institution and its members? And what are the steps the University has taken to address the misinformation perpetuating this prejudice?**

⁴ Nothing wrong with UPV, RTF6-ELCAC execs dialogue: ex-NPA cadre [Nov. 5, 2021]
<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1158935>



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As mentioned in #1 above, UP issued system-wide guidelines to help protect students from red-tagging, and various UP campuses have adopted these guidelines. Please see:

- o UP Diliman's General Guidelines to Address Students Involved in Red-tagging Incidents, which can be downloaded from <https://ovcsa.upd.edu.ph/resources/>
- o UP Cebu's 2022 Student Handbook, with a section titled "General Guidelines to Address Students Involved in Red-Tagging Incidents." This can be downloaded from <https://osa.upcebu.edu.ph/>

Other measures include the campaign for and creation of committees to safeguard faculty, students and staff against threats to their lives and freedom.

- o In 2024, certain sectors in UP advocated for the creation of the Committee on the Promotion and Protection of Academic Freedom and Human Rights (CAFHR). As a result, UP Manila, UP Cebu, and UP Manila established academic freedom committees. Please see: <https://up.edu.ph/up-units-establish-academic-freedom-committee-in-campuses/>
- o As mentioned above, in late 2022, UP Baguio expanded the reach and scope of their crisis management committee and classified red-tagging as "a form of man-made crisis" that will trigger an emergency response from the university. Please see: <https://thebaguiochronicle.com/top-story/up-baguio-red-tagging-is-form-of-crisis/> and <https://www.pressreader.com/philippines/philippine-daily-inquirer-1109/20221206/281788518089967>

4. What measures have the UP taken to foster a safer environment for student activism and provide support and recourse to students who are victims of online harassment – including for example, reporting platforms and procedures available for grievances, and/or referral system for those seeking action, support systems for students, faculty, and staff who experience red-tagging and online harassment? Is there

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access to counseling, legal assistance, and/or a confidential point of contact within each institution for victims to seek help?

- The University of the Philippines remains steadfast in its commitment to uphold academic freedom, human rights, and the active engagement of its student body in democratic participation and advocacy. Recognizing red-tagging as a crisis that endangers student welfare, the University has established protocols for rapid and coordinated responses to safeguard students.
- The UP System administration has consistently denounced red-tagging and stood alongside its students, faculty, and staff to protect their right to freedom of expression. "A university without academic freedom ceases to be a university and instead becomes a servant of the highest and most powerful bidder," said UP Diliman in a statement. UP Mindanao has also assured its students and constituents that it will take "legal action due to harassment, when necessary" to protect their welfare.
- In 2021, the University issued Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) Operational Memorandum No. 2021-24, entitled, "*General Guidelines to Address Students Involved in Red-Tagging Incidents.*" These guidelines were developed by the UP Crisis Management Sub-Committee on Students in Distress to guide the UP Constituent Universities (CUs) in formulating its own Crisis Management Playbook and to systematize the response to the red-tagging incidents within their respective jurisdiction.
- These playbooks include specific workflows, designated personnel, and support services tailored to local contexts of providing student assistance. Upon verification of a red-tagging incident, the Crisis Management Teams led by the Offices of Student Affairs (OSA) or Vice Chancellors for Student Affairs (OVCSA) coordinate protective measures, issue public statements when needed, and provide emergency support such as housing, transportation, legal aid, and psychosocial services. Coordination with barangay officials or law enforcement is also facilitated when necessary, in close consultation with the affected student.
- Commendably, UP Los Baños (UPLB) has institutionalized student protection initiatives through its 2021 University Council-approved Safe Haven Resolution. This resolution provides concrete support mechanisms to affected students such as transportation assistance for students who are required to attend legal

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proceedings, the issuance of official certifications to attest to a student's presence on campus during the alleged time of incident to counter false accusations, and coordinated efforts with faculty, administrative offices, and legal units to safeguard the academic standing and personal security of affected students. These initiatives highlight UPLB's deep commitment to protecting student activists, ensuring due process, and maintaining a campus environment that upholds democratic principles and student welfare. UPLB officials further note:

"We ensure that students facing legal challenges receive transportation assistance to appear in court when summoned, minimizing logistical and financial burdens. When students are falsely accused of being elsewhere during incidents in which they were allegedly involved, the university provides official certifications verifying their presence on campus. These measures reflect our commitment to protecting student activists, ensuring due process, and maintaining a campus environment that upholds democratic principles and student welfare. These are concrete actions that resulted from the University Council's approval of the Safe Haven Resolution in 2021."

- Across the UP System, these values are echoed in broader support structures for students who experience red-tagging. The University provides access to counseling and mental health services through its Offices of Student Affairs, legal support and referral through internal legal units or in collaboration with external human rights organizations, and confidential grievance mechanisms.
- In terms of data privacy and protection for its community members, the university has issued privacy notices for UP personnel, students, and alumni. UP Diliman has also established a Revised Privacy Policy for Students, Parents, and Guardians to protect personal data, which outlines how the university collects, stores, uses, and disposes of personal data, ensuring compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.
- These measures underscore the University's institutional resolve to provide a healthy and nurturing environment where students, faculty, and staff may freely engage in discourse and become advocates of social change without fear of reprisal. The University remains committed to continually refining its protocols

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and enhancing inter-unit coordination to effectively respond to emerging threats to safety and democratic participation.

The UP administration is currently revisiting the system-wide guidelines and working to strengthen mechanisms to ensure that:

- The University has robust and responsive systems for monitoring and reporting of red-tagging and other actions within the University that violate the rights of UP students, faculty and staff, or infringe on the exercise of academic freedom within University premises and spaces, and that such reporting channels and procedures are known and accessible to members of the UP community;
- Protocols in response to incidents of red-tagging and other violations are dutifully followed and enforced;
- Various forms of support are available and may be extended to victims of red-tagging and other violations, including but not limited to the continued provision of counseling and legal assistance; and
- We continue to create an ecosystem of trust and safety through educational and informational campaigns that promote respect for human rights in the University.

UP is unwavering in its commitment to protect and defend the rights of members of the UP community, and to preserve the University as a bastion of critical thought and freedom of expression.

We hope the information contained in this letter addresses your questions.

Respectfully yours,

[Redacted signature block]

Copy furnished:

[Redacted list of recipients]



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[REDACTED]

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