

X-ray of Human Rights Defenders: Dialogues Between Southeast Asia and Latin America

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Together for Human Rights

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Executive Summary

The project *X-ray of Human Rights Defenders: A Dialogue between Latin America and Southeast Asia* presents a diagnosis of the current situation of human rights defenders in both regions.

Since 2016, there has been increasing discussion about the rise of the New Right, marked by Donald Trump's first electoral victory, which is understood as the starting point of the rightward shift in the twenty-first century (Traverso, 2019). This move toward more conservative political positions spread to other countries and shared one common feature: the growth of political narratives that seek to undermine the human rights approach and, with it, the work of those who promote and protect human rights. In this context, it becomes especially important to analyze the situation ten years after the beginning of this phenomenon.

At the same time, the Global Campus Alumni 2025-26 cross-regional projects scheme created the opportunity to make a comparative diagnosis between Latin America and Southeast Asia. This analysis is particularly relevant because of the current political context in Southeast Asia, especially after the military coup in Myanmar in 2021 (Amnesty International, 2025). The comparison between both regions shows that some of the challenges faced today by human rights defenders in Southeast Asia are similar to historical experiences following authoritarian military governments. It also makes it possible to identify limitations on rights that hinder the defense of human rights in both regions.

This study examines the obstacles faced by human rights defenders in their work and the resilience strategies they have developed in each region. Before that it presents a systematization of the profiles of the interviewed defenders, providing the context needed for a better understanding of those obstacles.

To achieve this goal, a total of 16 interviews were conducted with human rights defenders: 3 from Argentina, 3 from Brazil, 2 from Colombia, 1 from Venezuela, 1 from Nicaragua, and 1 from Guatemala. In Southeast Asia, 3 interviews were conducted in Myanmar and 2 in Thailand. The interviews were divided into three sections. The first focused on building an intersectional profile of each participant, considering gender, age, education, workplace, and other characteristics. The second explored the obstacles they had faced, and the third documented the resilience strategies they had developed.

After organizing the information on profiles, obstacles, and resilience strategies, an interregional dialogue brought together human rights defenders from both regions to share experiences and lessons from their different backgrounds. The meeting also helped confirm some of the ideas expressed during the interviews and organize the findings in a consistent way.

The profiles of the interviewees revealed that, in both regions, involvement in human rights defense often begins at an early age, during adolescence or young adulthood, and is closely connected to activism. The study also highlighted the leading role of women in the defense of human rights. In addition, it showed that this work is mainly carried out through a combination of academic work and activism in both regions. Despite the different context, the interviewees from both regions identified the State or State policies as the main obstacle to their work. At the same time, support networks were described as the main source of resilience.

This diagnosis allowed us to experience the value of dialogue among human rights defenders and to recognize the importance of their work. Despite adversity, they continue their work because they see the defense of human rights as a commitment that cannot be abandoned. At the same time, they work to ensure that this work can continue over time by building support networks to improve, and sustain human rights defense.

No one can make it alone.

Introduction

This project developed within Global Campus Alumni 2025-26 cross-regional projects scheme, presents a diagnosis of the current situation of human rights defenders in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

The project was coordinated by Luis Vergara, with the support of Carmela Mollinedo Garay, both from the Latin America program, and with the collaboration of Arthur Sai Khun from the Asia-Pacific program, who conducted the interviews in Southeast Asia.

Since 2016, following Donald Trump's first election as President of the United States, there has been increasing discussion about the rise of the New Right (Traverso, 2019). This global political phenomenon has reshaped democratic public debate by giving greater visibility to narratives that question the legitimacy of human rights. In Latin America, these narratives mainly target gender equality, LGBTIQ+ rights and environmental issues involving Indigenous Peoples and rural communities (Dvoskin, 2022).

In Argentina, Javier Milei, President since 2023, has become one of the clearest examples of this trend, openly questioning gender equality policies and even the agenda of memory, truth, and justice related to the military dictatorship (Franco, 2025). In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro's government (2019–2022) promoted an ultra-conservative agenda linked to religious views, weakening human rights and environmental policies (Vital da Cunha and Evangelista, 2019). In Colombia, the country's first left-wing government, from 2022 until 2026, was unable to secure a second term. In June 2026, De la Espriella was elected President after campaigning on a tough-on-crime platform that could affect the defense of human rights (Guarnizo, 2026). In Venezuela, during Nicolás Maduro's government, from 2013 until his military capture in January 2026, serious human rights violations were widely reported (Amnesty International, 2025).

More recently, United States involvement has raised concerns about Venezuela's territorial sovereignty and may set a worrying precedent for international human rights by questioning the legitimacy of institutions such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Aguirre-Lanegra, 2026). In Guatemala, Jimmy Morales's election in 2017 marked the beginning of a period of institutional weakening, during which the justice system was used to prosecute journalists, Indigenous leaders, and human rights defenders (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2025). In Nicaragua, the deterioration of human rights and the situation of human rights defenders has been closely linked to the persecution of political opponents, which intensified after April 2018, when Daniel Ortega's government violently repressed protests against the new social security system (Minutti, Mantilla and Minutti, 2026).

In Southeast Asia, the situation of human rights defenders has its own characteristics, especially in Myanmar and Thailand. In Myanmar, the military coup in 2021 led to armed conflict, repression, and serious human rights violations. In Thailand, there are restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as well as legal proceedings against human rights defenders, journalists, and activists (Amnesty International, 2026).

Within this context, the main goal of this project is to provide a diagnosis of the current situation of human rights defenders, ten years after the beginning of the global trend to the New Right. Through a comparison between Latin America and Southeast Asia, the study identifies the main obstacles faced by human rights defenders in each region and examines the resilience strategies they have developed at the community and institutional levels.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative analysis based on testimonies collected through interviews, supported by secondary sources as academic papers and news. An intersectional approach was used to select the interviewees, this means that the selection considered gender, nationality, areas of

work, sexual orientation, age, and the human rights issues they focus on. Understanding the profiles of the participants helped provide social and political context.

Former classmates from the Master's degree in Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America were also considered during the selection process. The initial group included three former classmates, with priority given to representation from Central America. A snowball sampling process then followed, including former colleagues, friends from human rights movements, classmates, former professors, and researchers from academic networks. During this process, the partnership between Global Campus and Right Livelihood facilitated an interview with a Right Livelihood Laureate whose identity is withheld in this report at their request. The interview provided valuable insights that informed the analysis presented here.

The Latin American region includes a larger number of interviewees because the project team had greater access to contacts in the region. Even so, the selection was limited to a maximum of 3 participants from Argentina, 3 from Brazil, 2 from Colombia, 1 from Nicaragua, and 1 from Guatemala. During the research, 1 interview from Venezuela was added because of the participant's extensive experience and the country's unique situation. Southeast Asia is represented by 5 human rights defenders: 3 from Myanmar and 2 from Thailand. In this region, priority was given to representing different areas of human rights work.

List of interviewees:

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Region / Country	Professional Role	Institution	Identity / Vulnerable Group
Natalia Fernández Huertas	31	Female	Colombia /Latin America	Civil society organization and academia	Alexander von Humboldt Biological Resources Research Institute	Woman

Irina Pérez	38	Female	Colombia /Latin America	Territorial Leadership	ACVC-RAN (Peasant Association of the Cimitarra River Valley National Agroecological Network)	Internally displaced peasant woman
Yamila Goldfarb	45	Female	Brazil/Latin America	Civil society organization and academia	University of São Paulo and president of Associação Brasileira de Reforma Agrária (ABRA)	Woman
Mercedes Solá Pérez	39	Female	Brazil/Latin America	Academia	Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul	Woman
Felipe Milanez	45	Male	Brazil/Latin America	Academia and territory	Federal University of Bahia	N/A
Bárbara Juárez	30	Female	Argentina/ Latin America	Civil society organization	Center for Legal and Social Studies	Woman
Ariadna Espíndola	37	Female	Argentina/ Latin America	Civil society organization	Northwestern Argentina Lawyers for Human Rights and Social Studies	Woman and Indigenous descent
Ricardo Vallarino	43	Male	Argentina/ Latin America	Activist	100% Diversity and Rights	LGBTIQNB+ communities
Lourdes López	27	Female	Guatemala/ Latin America	Civil society organization	Oxlajuj N'oj Foundatio	Young woman

Anonymous	39	Male	Venezuela/ Latin America	Academia	Venezuelan Observatory of Political Ecology	Politically exiled person
Anonymous	73	Female	Nicaragua/ Latin America	Territorial Leadership	-	Indigenous woman Politically exiled
Anonymous	30	Female	Myanmar/Sout heast Asia	Civil society organization	Activist organization of Human rights	Woman
Anonymous	30	Female	Myanmar/Sout heast Asia	Civil society organization	Organization dedicated to the enviroment	Woman
Anonymous	40	Female	Myanmar/ Southeast Asia	Freelance Activism	Child rigths	Woman
Anonymous	25	Female	Thailand/ Southeast Asia	Civil society organization	Organization dedicated to migrant rights	Young woman
Anonymous	45	Female	Thailand/ Southeast Asia	Civil society organization and academia	Organization dedicated to Human Rights Education	Woman

Profiles of Human Rights Defenders

Protecting and Promoting Fundamental Rights

Before examining the experiences and backgrounds of the interviewees, it is important to explain that this study follows the definition of human rights defenders adopted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. According to this definition, human rights defenders are all people, groups, or organizations that, individually or collectively, promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms ([OHCHR](#), n.d.). This broad definition includes both formal and informal actors, regardless of their profession, affiliation, or institutional recognition, as long as their actions are aimed at the peaceful defense of fundamental rights. It therefore includes community activists, journalists, lawyers, members of civil society organizations, and many others whose work is essential for the protection of rights and the strengthening of democratic societies.

One of the first common characteristics identified among the interviewees is that they became involved in their causes at a very young age. Many of them described their first experiences in human rights work during their teenage years or early adulthood. Lourdes López, a human rights defender from Guatemala, explained: "(...) *I was about sixteen years old when I had the opportunity to volunteer in my first research project on maternal mortality, which is still a serious issue in Guatemala today (...).*" A participant from Southeast Asia said, "*I started my career when I was young, learning about human rights and working with human rights organizations. Around 2016 and 2017, I began working with regional groups.*" Another participant from the same region explained that their involvement began between 2014 and 2015, when they took part in community groups in their village as a young person. Likewise, argentinian interviewees from the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) and Lawyers from north of Argentina of Human Rights and Social Studies (ANDHES) linked the beginning of their human rights work to activism during their early adulthood, while starting their professional studies or even before.

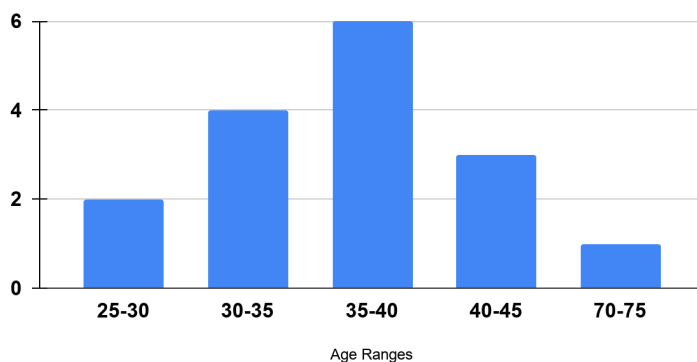
These experiences show a common profile across both regions: most of the interviewees began defending human rights during their youth or early adulthood. Today, most of them are between thirty-five and forty years old. One interviewee, however, is over seventy years old and represents a lifetime dedicated to the defense of human rights. This reflects the commitment, resilience, and long-term dedication that this work requires.

In summary, the first responses show that a wide range of experiences marked the beginning of the interviewees' commitment to human rights activism. These included the need to protect the rights of their own communities, campaigns to promote laws that guarantee equality, national contexts where human rights movements were growing, natural disasters, and both personal and collective experiences that motivated them to become involved.

In this sense, the interviewees show that the defense of human rights is a lifelong commitment. Although the way they do it may change over time, their commitment remains strong and continues despite difficult circumstances.

Distribution of Interviewed Participants

Interregional Sample



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Young Human Rights Defenders: A Current Challenge in Latin America

Although many of the interviewees in both regions began their human rights work when they were young, the current situation appears to be different. One of the main concerns shared by the interviewees from Latin America is the challenge of encouraging young people to become involved in human rights organizations and movements. Ricardo Vallarino, President of 100% Diversidad y Derechos, believes that young people are no longer participating with the same enthusiasm seen during the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties, after Argentina returned to democracy. He suggests that one reason may be a growing distrust of organizations, which are often seen as slow and ineffective, making it harder to believe in collective action.

From Brazil, Yamila Goldfarb, Master in Human Geography, from São Paulo University and specialist of agrarian geography and rural sociology, also points to the limited interest and involvement of young people in human rights issues. However, she highlights two important points. First, she sees greater awareness, education, and dialogue about racism and gender-based violence, as well as stronger positions against sexism and better communication between generations on these issues, which she considers structural problems in Brazil. Second, she notes a growing shift of young people toward right-wing political ideas. Similarly, Bárbara Juárez, an Argentine lawyer at the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), explains that the lack of interest in human rights is also a concern for her organization. As a result, they have developed specific programs to engage young people in the agenda of memory, truth, and justice.

Irina Pérez, a human rights defender from the Peasant Association of the Cimitarra River Valley National Agroecological Network (ACVC-RAN) in Colombia, explains that it is challenging getting new generations to embrace the cause, and one strategy for reversing this situation is engaging young people in organizational work, "to encourage, motivate, and strengthen their connection to the territory, their long-term commitment, and the continuity of this political and organizational process."

In summary, the interviews show that one of the main concerns among human rights defenders in Latin America is how to encourage greater participation by young people. Compared to previous decades, they believe there is less enthusiasm for human rights work. In contrast, this issue did not appear as a major concern among the interviewees from Southeast Asia. However, this does not mean that youth participation is not a challenge in the region, it simply was not identified as one of the main concerns raised during the interviews, and this study couldn't explore those reasons.

Girls just wanna have (Fun)damental Human Rights

Women play a leading role in the defense of human rights in both Latin America and Southeast Asia, leading efforts to protect fundamental rights. In this work, women defenders of human rights face not only the same threats as other defenders, such as criminalization, surveillance, threats, physical violence, and even murder, but also specific forms of violence aimed at silencing them because they are women. These include sexual violence, smear campaigns based on gender stereotypes, attacks against their families, online harassment, and challenges to their legitimacy as leaders (Amnesty International, 2018).

Despite these violations, women continue to play a key role in the defense of human rights and environmental justice in both regions (Oxfam, 2026). This is quantitatively reflected in the interviews conducted for this project; of the 11 interviewees from Latin America, 8 are women and only 3 are men. In Southeast Asia, all 5 interviewees are women.

It is also reflected qualitatively through the testimony of the interviewees, Yamila Goldfarb from Brazil gave a clear and direct testimony:

"Always greater, always much greater. Because the mothers of the young people who have been killed are always the first to act. Women are the first to put their bodies on the line. Women are the ones who stand in front of the police to stop them from killing someone. It is always women. That never changes."

From Colombia, Irina Pérez reinforces this view by describing the growing leadership of rural women despite deeply rooted sexism. As she explained, *"Since 2014, a woman has served as the legal representative of this organization (ACVC-RAN)."* Irina noted that women now make up the majority of those leading the organization's work. She also highlighted the growing role of rural women and the proposal to create a coordination area for Indigenous women, both with their own agendas and an intersectional approach.

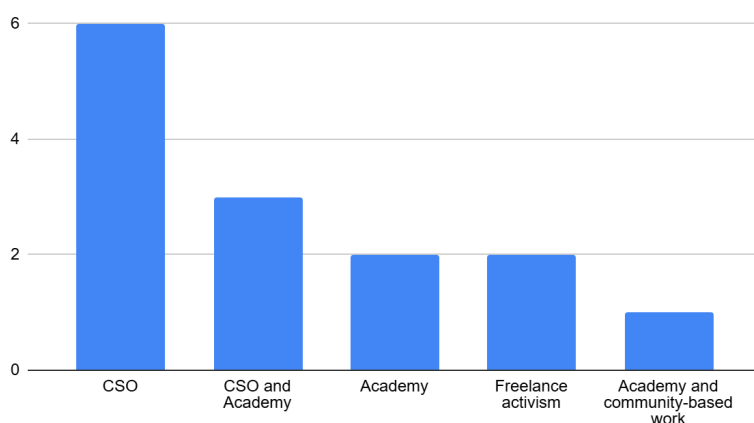
And finally, Irina added that involving male colleagues in the gender workshops organized by women was essential to achieve these changes. Finally, she emphasized the importance of past national public policies that have supported the leadership of Black, Afro-descendant, and Indigenous women.

Organization, academia, and territory: What do the settings where human rights defense takes place tell us?

The institutional settings where the interviewees carry out the defense of human rights help us identify, from the proposed intersectional perspective, the autonomy level to organize within their respective States.

Among the interviewees, the most common workplace is civil society organizations (CSO), followed by a combination of civil society organizations and academia. The third most common setting is academia alone, including both research and formal or informal teaching. This is followed by independent activism, finally, one interviewee combined academic work with community-based action. It is important to clarify that, in this project, the distinction between civil society organizations and community-based action or territory action does not mean that they are mutually exclusive. It rather refers to the difference between institutionalized organizations and non-institutionalized community action. This distinction is important when analyzing obstacles from an intersectional perspective.

Scope of Work



It is also important to note that most of the interviewees working in civil society organizations were either founders of those organizations in their respective countries or joined them during their early years. This suggests that civil society organizations are an important space for people beginning their work in the defense of human rights.

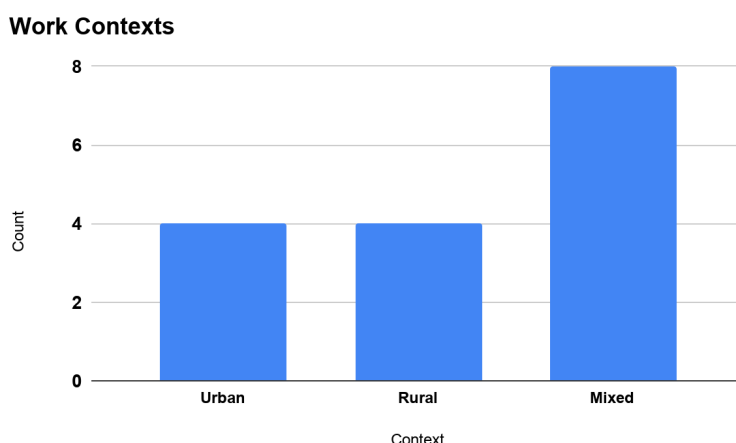
Organizational diversity is important because it allows different agendas and to visualize levels of free expression. According to the CIVICUS Monitor¹, which tracks the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression in 198 countries and territories, four of the countries included in this study are classified as Obstructed: Guatemala (40), Colombia (40), Brazil (55), and Argentina (59). In contrast, Nicaragua and Venezuela are classified as Closed, with scores of 5 and 14, respectively. It is important to note that the interviewee from Nicaragua had been living in exile for several years because of political persecution.

It is also important to note that working through civil society organizations, academia, and in community-based organization involves different challenges in accessing funding. In general, across both Latin America and Southeast Asia, civil society organizations, non-institutionalized activist groups, and research teams face limited access to stable, long-term funding (CIVICUS and Innpectia, 2022; Sciortino, 2022).

In addition to national funding cuts, they also face growing competition for increasingly limited international resources, demanding administrative requirements from donors, and, in many countries, State restrictions on foreign funding for organizations working on human rights, environmental justice, or the defense of Indigenous Peoples (CIVICUS, 2025). This creates an unequal distribution of resources, benefiting institutions with greater administrative capacity while leaving those working directly with communities in a more vulnerable position, even though these are the places where social and environmental problems require sustained support. intersectional approach to the profiles of the interviewees.

¹ https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2025_es/

Rural-Urban. Within this framework, the rural–urban axis is an important factor to consider. This issue shows regional and within-region differences related to the percentage of the rural population in each country and the historical role that rural areas have played. According to the World Bank², an average of about 20% of the population in Latin America lives in rural areas. Argentina is below the regional average, with 7.73% of its population living in rural areas, followed by Venezuela with 10.71%, Brazil with 12.1%, and Colombia with 21.48%. The two Central American countries included in this study are above the regional average, with rural populations of 43.54% in Nicaragua and 49.88% in Guatemala. Southeast Asia has higher rural population rates, generally between 40% and 60%, although there is considerable variation across the region. In the cases of Thailand and Myanmar, the World Development Indicators report rural population rates of 58.1% and 71.14%, respectively.



Among the interviewees, the places where they carry out their work are fairly distributed. As shown in the graph, 50 % of the human rights defenders work in both rural and urban areas, while the other half is evenly divided: 25% work exclusively in urban areas and 25% work exclusively in rural areas. This is important because, despite the differences in the size of rural and urban populations across countries and regions, the interviewees are distributed equally

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?end=2024&start=1960&view=map&year=2008>

across these settings. This may suggest that they consider the different forms of vulnerability present in both rural and urban areas to be more important than the size of the population itself.

Exile. The interviewees from Venezuela and Nicaragua were living in exile at the time of the interviews. Both described experiencing increased criminalization between approximately 2014 and 2024. Both are environmental defenders and work on land or territorial rights. Despite the different contexts in their countries, they both stressed the importance of exchanges among human rights defenders and of building strong networks. They also explained how this becomes much more difficult in contexts of social fragmentation and authoritarian regimes. In different ways, both said that their identity as human rights defenders was shaped in their home countries. For this reason, even while living in exile, they continue to look for ways to stay connected to their countries and to the defenders who continue working on the ground.

In Southeast Asia, it is well known that the military coup in Myanmar led to a large wave of people forced into exile, including political opponents, journalists, activists, academics, public officials, and others opposed to the regime. Many of them found refuge in Thailand (UNHCR, 2026). However, this study did not include interviews with exiled defenders. Even so, the interviewees from Myanmar and Thailand also highlighted the importance of support networks.

Interconnection of Human Rights. Although most of the organizations where the interviewees work have specialized areas of focus, several issues cut across all of them. For example, the defense of the environment and land rights are common concerns regardless of each defender's specific area of work. Many interviewees work exclusively on these issues, but environmental challenges such as climate change, extractivism, environmental degradation, and natural resources, as well as land-related issues such as forced displacement, territorial boundaries, and land rights for Indigenous Peoples, were discussed in every interview.

The interviewees work variously in areas: Indigenous Peoples rights, rural communities, LGBTIQ rights, people deprived of liberty, and children's rights. Across these different areas,

they also address popular education, environmental protection, land rights, gender equality, institutional violence, and police repression during protests.

Human Rights Defenders: Resistance

In summary, the profiles of the human rights defenders interviewed show that:

- ☒ Most of the interviewees are between 35 and 40 years old, although they began their human rights work during adolescence or early adulthood.
- ☒ Women play a fundamental role in the defense of human rights.
- ☒ The most common combination of work is between academia and activism, carried out in both urban and rural settings.
- ☒ Human rights are understood through an intersectional approach and as interconnected rights.

In summary, this first section highlights the importance of understanding the profiles of the interviewees, as they help explain the political and social contexts in which they carry out their work as human rights defenders. Looking at these profiles through an intersectional approach also helps identify some of the first obstacles they face now a days, while showing both shared experiences and important differences.

From this intersectional perspective, it is significant that most of the interviewees are young or began their work at a young age. This suggests that young people have played, and continue to play, an important role in the defense of fundamental rights. However, many Latin American's interviewees expressed concern about encouraging greater participation by younger generations, making this an important challenge that many organizations are now trying to address.

Most of the interviewees in both regions are women, and they themselves highlighted the central role of women from an intersectional perspective. The findings confirm how important women are within the community of human rights defenders. This diagnosis supports what previous

studies have already shown: women play a fundamental role in the active defense of fundamental rights because they often take on responsibilities related to community coordination, collective care, and organizational leadership, even though these roles are not always recognized by traditional political structures (Fraser, 2008). This role becomes even more complex because several of the women interviewed also belong to historically marginalized groups and experience different forms of violence linked to gender, class, ethnicity, or territory (Sekaggya, 2010).

Looking at the interviewees through an intersectional approach also makes it possible to understand the heavy workload carried by many human rights defenders throughout their activist careers. Human rights work takes place in many different settings, including community-based action, independent activism, academia, and civil society organizations. In most cases, interviewees combine academic work with community-based action or civil society organizations. This reflects the need to develop broad strategies to respond with integral strategies to complex and interconnected human rights violations (Rodó-Zárate, 2021). Defending human rights therefore means defending both their own rights and the rights of other structurally marginalized groups, while connecting environmental, gender, Indigenous, labor, education, memory, and many other agendas.

This situation becomes even more challenging in political contexts where academic work and community organizing are constantly questioned and face funding cuts. Even under these conditions, human rights organizations continue to learn, grow, and resist. Human rights defenders carry out their work despite different forms of insecurity, emotional exhaustion, and constant risk. Perhaps this is one of the most important findings of this study: the defense of human rights continues, adapts, and grows stronger despite these challenges.

This reflects not only a strong ethical and political commitment, but also a collective capacity for resilience that turns the defense of human rights into a lasting practice of mutual care and democratic transformation.

The State: A Source of Risk and a Guarantor of Rights

What obstacles and threats do human rights defenders face in Latin America?

First of all, it is necessary to clarify that in this study the terms "**obstacles**" and "**threats**" are used as synonyms. Both refer to anything that puts human rights defenders at risk or limits or makes their work more difficult for different reasons. Therefore, actions that threaten the lives and physical integrity of human rights defenders are understood as obstacles to the defense of human rights, together with other forms of interference that affect their work.

The analysis of the interviewees' profiles already suggested some of the obstacles and threats faced by human rights defenders in each region. When directly asked about this issue, however, the interviewees identified State harassment as the main threat in Latin America. They referred primarily to the national State, followed by local governments and security institutions such as Ministries of Security, police forces, and, where relevant, the armed forces. This suggests that different levels of the State share responsibility for creating risks for human rights defenders.

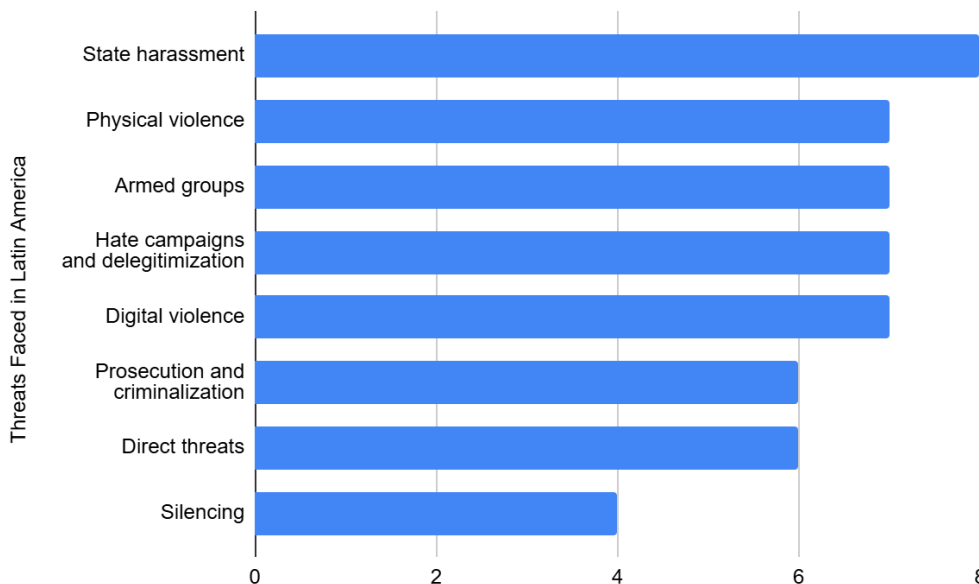
The second most common group of threats includes direct and structural violence, especially physical violence, online attacks, campaigns of hatred and delegitimization. In some countries, these risks become even greater because of the actions of armed groups. The combination of State and non-State violence increases the risks faced by human rights defenders. For example, interviewees from Argentina highlighted the role of both the national government and subnational authorities in the escalation of violence. They explained that this often begins with hostile public statements by the President or government ministers against groups such as the LGBTIQ+ community, feminist movements, and left-wing movements. These narratives are later reflected in repressive policies against demonstrations organized by these groups, together with other forms of non-State violence.

From Brazil, Felipe Milanez, PhD in Sociology and journalist specialized in political ecology, explained how police violence and structural racism affect Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities defending the environment and their territories in different ways:

"(...) Racism in Brazil affects different racialized groups. Most racism is directed at Black people, but also at Indigenous Peoples, Roma people, caboclos, and mixed-race communities. (...) There are places with intense conflict, where a long history of violence has been organized by the elites. Southern Bahia is now a place with high levels of violence, especially against the Pataxó³ Indigenous Peoples, even more than against rural communities. So, calling yourself an environmental defender there may or may not involve risk. It depends on who you are and what you are defending. If you are protecting sea turtles on the beach with international funding and supporting tourism, you are also an environmental defender, but you are unlikely to face conflict. However, if you are a member of the Pataxó people fighting for your land, even against Brazil's Environmental Agency, which created a national park on Indigenous ancestral land, then those leaders face a very high risk of death, murder, and criminalization."

In simple terms, criminalization and direct threats appear as systematic mechanisms of discrimination and control, often accompanied by strategies of stigmatization carried out by different levels of the State. In other words, even when other forms of obstruction are mentioned, State harassment remains the main obstacle identified by the interviewees. As noted by some interviewees, even many of the actions carried out by armed groups (which are also identified as obstacles to the defense of human rights) are closely linked to the actions of the State.

³ An Indigenous people from the southern region of Bahia, Brazil, with an approximate population of 12,800 individuals.



The Third Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in the Americas (IACHR, 2025) states that 79 % the killings of human rights defenders worldwide in 2023 took place in the Americas. These figures are based on the global analysis carried out by Front Line Defenders, which reported 257 murders of human rights defenders in 2024. Colombia recorded the highest number, with 157 murders, followed by Guatemala with 29 and Brazil with 15, all countries included in this study. Taken together, these data show that Latin America is the region where human rights defenders face the highest levels of violence, especially those defending the environment and land rights.

Exile. In these contexts, exile becomes an extreme consequence. It is often the last option available for human rights defenders to protect their lives, while at the same time becoming a new obstacle to their work. Being forced to leave their country separates defenders from their support networks, increases isolation compared to the persecution they experienced in their own territories, and limits their ability to continue defending human rights.

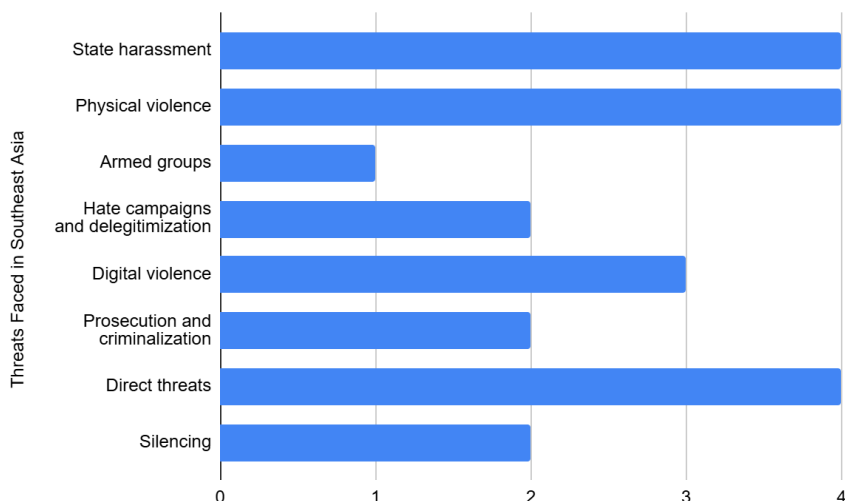
"For us, human rights defenders, the word 'safe' is an illusion. We are never safe. Even though I am no longer in my country and now live in exile, transnational repression means that I am still at risk. Physical exile does not stop the reach of the Nicaraguan State. Do you understand? Even though I managed to escape after a long journey through rivers and mountains, the Nicaraguan regime has a long reach. That is why I used to tell the younger generation in my community that one day they would no longer see my face, they would only hear my voice. Now I tell them that one day they will not even hear my voice." — Interview with a Nicaraguan human rights defender, 2026.

Taken together, these findings show that the threats faced by human rights defenders in Latin America are not only multiple but also part of a broader structural pattern. Although the State has the institutional responsibility to guarantee human rights, in interaction with non-State actors and in contexts of high social conflict, it also plays a central role in creating or enabling risks for human rights defenders.

What threats and obstacles do human rights defenders face in Southeast Asia?

As in Latin America, State harassment emerged as one of the main threats, receiving the highest number of mentions together with direct threats. This pattern suggests that the risks faced by human rights defenders come not only from concrete actions but also from ongoing intimidation carried out through State institutions. Other State actors, such as local governments and security forces, were mentioned less frequently but still appeared as a constant source of risk.

The interviews also identified forms of violence that combine physical and digital dimensions. Physical violence and digital surveillance were among the most common threats, showing that repression is carried out not only through direct attacks but also through monitoring and digital control. This is particularly important in contexts where States continue to strengthen their capacity to monitor online spaces and regulate digital communication.



The interviews also identified criminalization, campaigns of hatred and delegitimization, online attacks, and media silencing, showing that different strategies are used together to delegitimize human rights defenders and restrict civic space. These dynamics often reinforce one another. Formal criminalization is supported by smear campaigns and by limiting the public visibility of complaints and human rights violations. Armed groups were mentioned less frequently, suggesting that the main source of risk in Southeast Asia comes from State action rather than from non-State actors.

Overall, the findings show a pattern in which the State not only holds coercive power but also controls the channels of expression and the flow of information, creating an environment where civic space is increasingly restricted.

Comparative Analysis of Threats Across Regions

The comparison between Latin America and Southeast Asia reveals both important similarities and significant differences in the threats faced by human rights defenders. In both regions, the State, especially the national State, is identified as the main source of risk. State harassment

appears as the most common threat, showing a shared pattern in which State institutions are used to limit the work of human rights defenders.

However, the forms that violence takes differ across the two regions. In Latin America, physical violence is more common, particularly in conflicts related to land and territory. This creates a context of hybrid violence, where State and non-State actors operate with same objectives. In contrast, Southeast Asia is characterized by more centralized and technologically forms of surveillance, in the same level appears criminalization and media silencing. This suggests a more institutionalized and less fragmented model of restricting civic space.

From an analytical perspective, Latin America reflects a context of high social conflict with multiple sources of risk, while Southeast Asia shows a pattern where risks are more concentrated within the State and its control over public and digital spaces. This difference is important for understanding resilience strategies, as these strategies must respond not only to the level of risk but also to the specific actors and forms of violence present in each region.

It is also important to consider how exile is understood in this comparison. As explained earlier, it was not possible to interview exiled human rights defenders from Myanmar, although it is well known that many have sought refuge in Thailand following the military coup in 2021. By contrast, the interviewees from Venezuela and Nicaragua were living in exile at the time of the interviews. They described exile as a direct consequence of State harassment and criminalization, and as a necessary measure to protect their lives. At the same time, exile represents a major obstacle to human rights work because it separates defenders from their support networks, increases isolation, limits communication, reduces access to information, and makes it more difficult to carry out activities that require a direct presence in the territory.

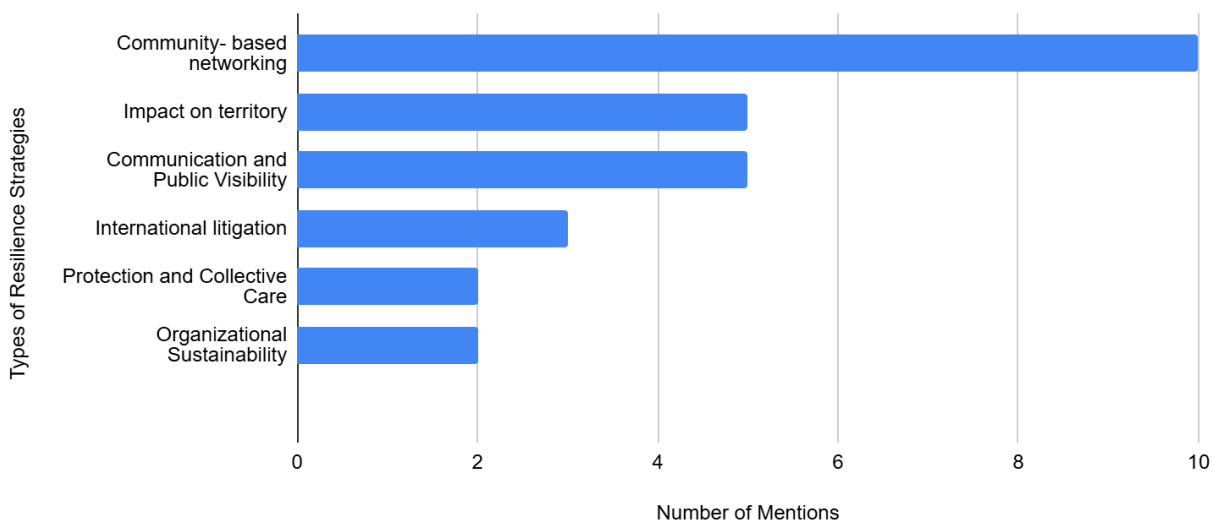
Resilience: Regional Strategies of Human Rights Defenders

What are the resilience tools in Latin America?

In Latin America, support networks and other forms of collective action emerged as the main resilience strategy. The second most common group of strategies includes institutional and legal advocacy, such as strategic litigation, documentation, and the monitoring of human rights violations.

Less frequently mentioned were the use of international mechanisms, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, as in the case of the Nicaraguan interviewee, to request precautionary measures or thematic hearings. Individual self-protection measures were mentioned with the same frequency.

Resilience Strategies LATAM



What resilience strategies do human rights defenders use in Southeast Asia?

Among the interviews with human rights defenders from Myanmar and Thailand, the most frequently mentioned resilience strategy was the use of support networks and coordination among defenders, just as in Latin America. However, in this region, interviewees emphasized the need to build these networks in a discreet and low-profile way. Community-based work and other forms of direct engagement with local communities were mentioned with the same frequency.

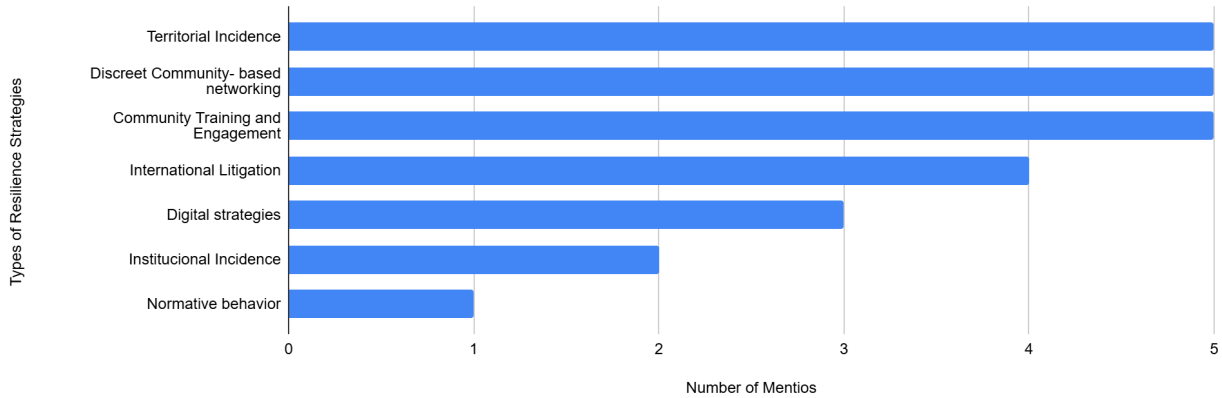
A second group of strategies involves the use of international human rights mechanisms. In Southeast Asia, human rights defenders engage with mechanisms such as the Asean Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and relevant United Nations human rights procedures, which serve a role comparable to that of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in providing avenues to raise concerns about alleged human rights violations. This was a recurring theme in the interviews with defenders from both Myanmar and Thailand, who highlighted the importance of international human rights bodies as trusted spaces to report human rights violations and to increase public awareness and media attention.

This is followed by the use of digital tools to make situations of risk visible. In this sense, the digital environment appears to play a contradictory role. On one hand, it can be used to monitor and persecute human rights defenders, on the other hand, it provides an important platform to report abuses and raise public awareness.

Southeast Asia also shows a distinctive resilience strategy. Just as States use new technologies for surveillance, human rights defenders use digital platforms to report violations and communicate internally. At the same time, they rely on encrypted communication channels to avoid State surveillance and continue their work. In other words, adapting their ways of working has become an important strategy to reduce the risks of State monitoring. This includes the use of encrypted social media and messaging platforms that are considered safer and more effective, as well as changing working hours when necessary. These adaptive strategies are also accompanied by efforts to avoid State institutions whenever possible. Interviewees explained that they try not to carry out research or other activities through State institutions because the State is not only a source of surveillance but also creates administrative barriers that make the protection of human rights more difficult, exhausting, and ineffective.

Finally, education and community-based work appear as cross-cutting resilience strategies, with a strong focus on human rights education and the training of local actors.

Resilience Strategies in Southeast Asia



Comparative Analysis of Resilience Strategies Across Regions

A comparison of the two regions shows important differences in the use of international human rights protection mechanisms. According to the interviewees from Latin America, there is a more skeptical view of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. By contrast, the human rights defenders interviewed in Southeast Asia expressed greater trust in their international mechanisms, as the Asean Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), even described them as essential spaces for reporting human rights violations.

Another important difference is the use of technology. In Latin America, digital tools were mentioned only occasionally as a way to make situations of risk or human rights violations more visible. In contrast, the interviewees from Myanmar and Thailand described technology as having a double role: it is both a tool for raising awareness and a tool of surveillance that supports State harassment.

At the same time, both regions identified support networks and collective action as the main strategy for sustaining human rights work. However, there is one important difference. In Southeast Asia, interviewees stressed the need to build "discreet" networks in order to avoid

State persecution, while in Latin America, despite State harassment, these networks generally continue to operate openly in the public sphere.

Other strategies, such as community-based work, institutional advocacy, and legal or policy actions, appeared in both regions at similar levels. However, none of these strategies was identified as the main resilience tool by the interviewees in either region.

"No one can make it alone": Resilience and Community Organization

The regional contexts are very different. In Southeast Asia, the State appears as the main obstacle and threat to those defending human rights. It is even described as a "Big Brother" that uses technology to monitor and persecute people. In Latin America, by contrast, threats are less centralized. They come from different actors, sometimes from the State at different levels of government, and other times from armed groups, criminal organizations, or paramilitary and para-State groups.

Despite these different contexts, interviewees in both regions identified support networks as their preferred resilience strategy. Whether these networks can operate publicly or must remain confidential, human rights defenders choose mutual support, collective action, and collaboration, and they place their greatest trust in one another and in their own organizations.

In this sense, the networks created by human rights defenders can be understood as collective spaces of resistance, where the defense of human rights does not depend only on individual efforts but also on community, personal, and political relationships that help people face violence and insecurity. These networks do more than bring people together around shared demands. They also create spaces of care, organization, and shared goals in response to increasingly exclusionary and authoritarian contexts (Svampa, 2021).

"That is why we maintain support networking to sustain long-term activism."

(Interview with a Nicaraguan human rights defender, 2026).

Support networks are described as essential spaces for sustaining both the work and the lives of human rights defenders. They make it possible to share information, exchange strategies, and face difficult situations together. In short, resilience is built through networks and collective action.

Dialogue Roundtable

Exchange Among Human Rights Defenders from Latin America, and Southeast Asia

After completing the interviews and organizing the findings, an interregional dialogue roundtable was held with human rights defenders from Latin America and Southeast Asia. The idea behind this meeting was to take advantage of the value that exchanging experiences and knowledge could bring, not only to the project but also to the defenders themselves. It gave them the opportunity to meet, learn about each other's work, and reflect on the importance of support networks. This dialogue also made it possible to explore experiences, obstacles, and situations of vulnerability in greater depth than had been possible during the individual interviews.

Despite the language barriers, the interpretation service made it possible to discuss the main topics with participants from both regions. They shared their views on the State as both an actor that can obstruct the defense of human rights and as a guarantor of rights. They also discussed resilience strategies in greater depth and exchanged experiences about their different contexts and the areas of human rights in which they work.

The State: A Double-Edged Actor

The dialogue session made it possible to build a shared comparative map of the threats and resilience strategies identified by human rights defenders from Latin America and Southeast Asia.

In both regions, the State was described as both an actor capable of providing protection and a source of harassment, surveillance, criminalization, and restrictions on civic space. This dual role appeared especially in relation to security forces, national governments, and State bureaucratic institutions.

Resilience

Regarding resilience strategies, participants highlighted the role of civil society organizations and community groups as spaces for support, coordination, and collective action.

The discussion also revealed different views about the role of international organizations. These differences show how important local contexts are, including the social, cultural, economic, and historical conditions in which these organizations operate.

The dialogue also highlighted growing concerns about digital surveillance, information control, and the shrinking of civic space, especially in authoritarian contexts or in countries with high levels of political conflict. The situations in Colombia, Thailand, and Myanmar were mentioned repeatedly. In response to these challenges, participants emphasized the need to strengthen transnational support networks, international protection mechanisms, and collective strategies of care.

Exchange of Experiences Across Regions

The opportunity to learn about the realities faced by human rights defenders from different national contexts, at a time when hostility toward human rights work is increasing around the world⁴, made it possible to explore in greater depth the situation of specific groups, such as the LGBTIQ+ community in Myanmar.

⁴ The discussions also shed light on the current situation in other countries in the region, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Taiwan, particularly regarding their complex relationship with China

The context of serious human rights violations in Myanmar affects the population as a whole, including migrant communities living in neighboring countries such as Thailand. Arthur explained that the hostility comes both from the military government that took power after the 2021 coup and from armed revolutionary groups operating across large parts of the country. These are non-State armed actors with significant territorial control. Before 2021, there were no laws or public policies aimed at protecting LGBTIQ+ people. Today, violence against this community has become even more severe, including cases of murder based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

The exchange among participants from the different regions was rich and covered many topics of shared interest. One particularly meaningful discussion took place between a human rights defender from Colombia and the representative from Myanmar about peace processes during and after authoritarian governments. They discussed the role of human rights defenders in these processes. The Colombian defender described the long history of active participation by human rights defenders, not only as mediators but also in drafting and negotiating peace agreements. The representative from Myanmar shared this view and emphasized that the role of human rights defenders is to act as mediators who do not take sides in the conflict but remain committed only to peace.

Once again, the dialogue highlighted the importance of regional and international cooperation to strengthen protection mechanisms, exchange experiences, and provide collective support in increasingly restrictive environments for the defense of human rights.

Conclusion: A Current Snapshot of Human Rights Defenders in Latin America and Southeast Asia

The intersectional analysis used to build the profiles of the human rights defenders interviewed in Latin America and Southeast Asia was essential for understanding their work. It also helped

identify the obstacles and resilience strategies that shape their contexts beyond the experiences described by each interviewee.

This approach made it possible to examine age as an important factor. All of the interviewees began defending human rights during adolescence or early adulthood, usually through activism connected to the rights of the communities to which they belonged. Today, however, many of the Latin American interviewees believe that a new period has begun, in which encouraging young people to become involved in human rights has become an important challenge. The study also highlighted the central role of women in the defense of human rights. Women often take on responsibilities related to community coordination, collective care, and organizational leadership (Fraser, 2008). This was also strongly reflected in the experiences and testimonies shared by the interviewees.

The study also considered the different settings in which human rights work takes place and how this work is carried out in each region, including community-based work and independent activism, academia, and civil society organizations. In most cases, interviewees combined academic work with community action or civil society organizations despite direct persecution, hatred and criminalization campaigns, and funding restrictions, because they considered comprehensive human rights strategies to be essential.

One of the first lessons shared by the interviewees was that the defense of human rights is unwavering. Even in difficult circumstances, it continues to grow, adapt, and remain active.

The study then explored the interviewees perceive about obstacles they face. According to the interviews, State harassment is one of the main obstacles in both regions. At the same time, the forms it takes differ. In Latin America, interviewees from countries such as Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela also identified paramilitary and other armed groups as major sources of risk.

The findings also show that exile makes these obstacles feel bigger because it separates human rights defenders from their support networks. This further highlights the importance of networks

as a resilience strategy, since they were identified by interviewees in both regions as their main source of support. In other words, despite the wide range of threats identified by the interviewees, their strongest response is to rely on collective action by sharing information, listening to one another, and building connections.

Within this framework, an interregional dialogue was organized among the human rights defenders who participated in the study. The exchange was extremely valuable, not only because it allowed participants to deepen the discussion on threats and resilience strategies explored throughout this diagnosis, but also because it created an opportunity to share knowledge about their different national contexts. Participants discussed different protection policies for the LGBTIQ+ community and showed particular interest in peace processes. While peace agreements are a defining part of Colombia's history, they are also part of Myanmar's current reality, where human rights defenders continue to play a role that is both essential and highly risky, yet one they remain committed to carrying out.

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