



MANILA OBSERVATORY

 Klima



The Philippine Context: Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Philippines, Mechanisms and Gaps (WEHRDs)

Policy Review

**Strengthening Women's Civil Society and
Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders'
Political Participation and Influence for a Just,
Green Future Philippines**

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I. Introduction

Women, particularly those from the most vulnerable sectors—such as farmers, workers, indigenous peoples, and urban poor communities—bear a disproportionate burden during disasters and crises, which are now further intensified by the climate emergency. These challenges compound the everyday realities of poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, and inadequate access to essential social services.

Yet, amidst these intersecting vulnerabilities, women continue to rise as agents of change. Across the world, they are organizing themselves into movements and collectives that advocate for climate justice, gender equality, and sustainable, people-centered development. Their leadership and participation are critical in shaping solutions that are both inclusive and transformative.

This policy review explores the landscape of Filipino women's empowerment in climate action, identifying the structural and institutional barriers that hinder Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) from fully realizing their potential to protect their communities and the environment. It also takes a closer look at the digital dimension of gender-based violence, examining how women EHRDs face online harassment, disinformation, and hate campaigns as a consequence of their environmental and human rights advocacies.

Through this analysis, the paper aims to highlight key policy gaps and propose measures that can ensure women's safety, amplify their voices, and strengthen their leadership in building a just and sustainable future.

Methodology

This policy analysis builds on the initial research conducted by the Klima Center of the Manila Observatory on Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs). To deepen the analysis, a qualitative analysis was conducted, including a desk review of existing literature (journal articles, studies, etc.), human rights reports, and documented cases of gender-based

violence (GBV) against WEHRDs, to understand the theoretical frameworks of gender-based violence in the Philippines, map and identify trends and patterns through the reports, and assess current policy responses.

To ensure accuracy, relevance, and inclusivity, the analysis will be validated through a participatory workshop with civil society organizations representing WEHRDs. This activity will provide an avenue for stakeholders to verify data, share lived experiences, and contribute contextual insights, which will help refine and finalize the policy recommendations presented in this paper.

II. Context and Situation of WEHRDs

Situation of Environmental Human Rights Defenders

The Philippines, as a biodiversity hotspot rich in natural resources, is also a hotspot for extractive industries, such as logging, mining, agribusiness, and commercial fishing, leading to the exploitation and plunder of its natural wealth. The Philippines' history of neoliberalism since Marcos Sr.'s presidency, and its ensuing free market transformations has marked an economy of deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization.¹ Ultimately, this has allowed for aggressive extractivism from private and, often, foreign industries—exacerbating economic conditions of marginalized communities, increased vulnerability to the climate crisis, and human rights violations in the form of displacement, harmful labor practices, and overt harassment.² Furthermore, while promulgated under the guise of “development”, these industries often hinder the constitutional right to a healthy environment. Thus, those most affected by these outcomes—oftentimes impoverished, rural, and marginalized communities—stand at the frontline of protecting their constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment and a safe and dignified life.

The UN Special Rapporteurs define environmental human rights defenders as defenders carrying out a vast range of activities that defend the constitutional right to a healthy environment, including those working on issues related to extractive industries, construction, and development projects.³ Due to the nexus of marginalization and environmental exploitation, oftentimes environmental defenders engage in this advocacy out of sheer necessity to preserve their community's safety and way of life.

Globally, attacks against environmental defenders are on the rise due to greater competition for natural resources, and the disparity in power and resources between defenders and corporations or state entities. Global Witness tallies that at least 2,253 defenders were killed or disappeared

¹ Robin Broad and John Cavanagh, *Plundering Paradise: The Struggle for the Environment in the Philippines* (1993).

² Broad and Cavanagh, *Plundering Paradise*.

³ United Nations Environment Programme, *Promoting Greater Protection for Environmental Defenders*, (2023), https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/22769/UN%20Environment%20Policy%20on%20Environmental%20Defenders_o8.o2.18Clean.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

from 2012 to 2024.⁴ The Philippines is no exception to this increase in violence. In 2024, 7 of the 146 defenders who were murdered or disappeared were Filipino defenders, making it the most dangerous country in Asia for environmental defenders for the eleventh consecutive year.⁵ Beyond this, environmental defenders in the Philippines face a broad range of threats to their liberty and security—from increased militarization in their communities to criminalisation, red-tagging, harassment, and illegal arrest. Increased state surveillance and restrictive governmental measures implemented during the COVID-19 lockdowns to curb the spread of the pandemic were doubly utilized to quash dissent and exercise overreaching controls over its population.⁶

Even as the pandemic abated, the situation of environmental defenders under current President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. remains precarious. While the Philippines has kept up with global narrative touting the importance of climate action and a shift away from emissions-heavy industries, the current administration's rhetoric is merely nominal. In his Presidential Address in 2025, President Marcos Jr. lauded renewable energy projects and expansion of natural gas projects as key climate priorities of his administration, despite clear evidence that natural gas projects can cause ecological destruction and a disruption in livelihoods, as seen with the case in Batangas.⁷ Due to the high level of local resistance, development projects are often heavily militarized, resulting in higher levels of harassment, intimidation, and abuse by state forces. Moreover, merely shifting into renewable forms of energy does not suffice in addressing the climate crisis. When developments in energy and climate technology forsake or, even, actively harm and displace local communities, one can argue that this is still a form of development aggression, like that of the logging and mining industries, but with a “clean and green” branding.

An even more alarming finding is the involvement of state forces in these human rights violations. Global Witness found that all of the arrests on trumped-up charges involving the military in Asia were all in the Philippines and that two-thirds of all cases of defender arrests in the country involved the military.⁸ In analyzing attacks against environmental defenders, this paper would be remiss not to acknowledge that violence against women defenders is a form of extractive violence and exists under the context of a Philippines that is at the behest of private corporate interests. Often, private corporations are backed by the Philippine state, defending private interests by silencing dissent from grassroots communities and, at times, becoming an instrument through

⁴ Global Witness, "Documenting Killings and Disappearances of Defenders," Global Witness, last modified September 17, 2025, <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/documenting-killings-and-disappearances-of-land-and-environmental-defenders/>.

⁵ Global Witness, "Roots of resistance: Documenting the global struggles of defenders protecting land and environmental rights," last modified 2025, <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/roots-of-resistance/>, 19.

⁶ United Nations, "'Toxic Lockdown Culture' of Repressive Coronavirus Measures Hits Most Vulnerable," UN News, last modified April 27, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062632>.

⁷ Dominique N. Flores, "What Little Marcos Jr. Said About Environmental Action in His 4th SONA," Philstar.com, last modified July 29, 2025, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/climate-and-environment/2025/07/29/2461636/disasters-mount-environmental-groups-slam-marcos-motherhood-statements>.

⁸ Global Witness, "Criminalisation of Land and Environmental Defenders in Asia," Global Witness, last modified September 17, 2025, <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/perverting-justice-the-criminalisation-of-land-and-environmental-defenders-in-asia/>, 10.

which violence is exercised against activists and marginalized communities. In validating the findings of this study with women CSOs, they shared the explicit and central role that state repression plays in the intimidation, harassment, and violence against environmental defenders.

With the heightening vilification, red-tagging, and criminalization of defenders, alongside the continued militarization and development aggression of extractive industries across the country, the work of defenders are simultaneously more salient and becoming more dangerous. This is even more evident in the case of women environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs). The next section of this paper will examine the gendered nuances and distinctions of the plight that women defenders undergo in their fight for climate justice.

Overview of WEHRDs' Roles and Contributions

Women, in particular, occupy a doubly integral and precarious position within the environmental advocacy landscape in the Philippines. Women are integral actors in the climate justice movement, due to the important and, often, unrecognized position that they occupy within Filipino familial society. Feminine altruism—coined to describe the uncompensated and unrecognized domestic work expected from women by heteronormative gender norms—are made more acute during times of conflict or disasters.⁹ Their decision to mobilize is gendered, as their concerns around environmental degradation and exploitation are heavily influenced by the increased burdens they experience on an already gendered division of labor. Feminine altruism often means that women are pushed to the frontlines of environmental conflicts or disasters out of sheer necessity due to the heavy burden they face to maintain their households and care for their family.¹⁰ This does not discredit the integral position that women environmental human rights defenders occupy within the movement. While these women are often compelled to act due to their immediate circumstances, their advocacy is unwavering in the face of continued attacks.

However, there is no denying that their vulnerability to violence is a gendered issue. Scholarship has shown that conflicts exacerbate underlying societal inequities, namely gender inequities, and precipitate the transformation of societal violence into direct violence (i.e., harassment, abuse, etc.).¹¹ Often, these underlying structural violence are also positioned at the intersection of class and other marginalized identities, such as indigeneity. For example, the Center for Women's Resources in 2024 reports that rural women are in the poorest sector with a 25.7% poverty incidence rate in 2021.¹² The wage gap between female and male agricultural workers also persists, alongside inadequate support for women by the government.¹³ Consequently, a study conducted showed that martyred women EHRDs occupied multiple marginalized identities alongside being a woman, such as rural, working-class, or Indigenous, showing how marginalization targets these demographics for extractive violence.¹⁴

⁹ Dalena Tran, "Gendered violence martyring Filipina environmental defenders," Elsevier, January 2023, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2023.101211>.

¹⁰ Tran, "Gendered violence martyring Filipina environmental defenders," 2.

¹¹ Tran, "Gendered violence martyring Filipina environmental defenders."

¹² Center for Women's Resources, "Ulat Lila 2024: Report on the Situation of Filipino Women," last modified March 2024, 5.

¹³ Center for Women's Resources, "Ulat Lila 2024," 7.

¹⁴ Tran, "Gendered violence martyring Filipina environmental defenders," 3.

The climate crisis also further complicates the burden women face in a heavily patriarchal society. As natural disasters become more frequent and its consequences more pronounced, women's care burdens are intensified in its aftermath, while their access to sexual and reproductive health services are weakened, their livelihoods are disrupted, their mental and emotional stress are heightened, and their risk for gender-based violence in evacuation areas are increased. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by environmental calamities.¹⁵ Ultimately, there is no question that the confluence of all these factors—socio-economic disparity, systemic discrimination, and environmental degradation—intensifies the burden placed on women and renders women EHRDs more vulnerable to violence. This recognition of the exploitation and vulnerabilities inherent to women environmental defenders are not meant to stereotype them as weak or mere victims, but to draw attention to the nuanced and gendered distinctions that women EHRDs face in their advocacy.

Risks and Challenges Faced

Globally, women EHRDs are victims of 11% of gender-based human rights attacks.¹⁶ In the Philippines, that statistic is even more striking. Women are victims of an estimated 38.6% of the human rights violations, not including extrajudicial killings, against environmental defenders.¹⁷ These violations include illegal arrest and detention, trumped-up charges, red-tagging, frustrated murder, displacement, threat and harassment, abduction/enforced disappearances, criminalization, and terrorist designations.

As seen in the table below, more than half of the human rights violations on women from 2016-2023 (not including extrajudicial killings) were in the form of illegal arrests and detention, and threats and harassment.¹⁸ And while women only make up ~10% of victims of extrajudicial killings, more than one-fifth (~22.2%) of violations against women EHRDs were in the form of extrajudicial killings. Women were also the sole victims of charges under the Anti-Terror Act, terrorist designations, and displacement. While the killings were most prevalent during the Duterte administration (2017-18), other forms of attacks have gained traction in recent years, precipitated by the passing of the Anti-Terror Act into law.

¹⁵ Selva Ramachandran and Remelizza Joy Sacra-Dejucos, "Her Stories beyond Numbers: Women at the Forefront of Typhoon Response and Recovery in the Philippines," UNDP Philippines, last modified March 29, 2022, <https://www.undp.org/philippines/blog/her-stories-beyond-numbers-women-forefront-typhoon-response-and-recovery-philippines>.

¹⁶ Global Witness, *Standing Firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis*, (Global Witness, 2023), https://gw.hacdnl.org/media/documents/GW_Defenders_ Standing_Firm_EN_September_2023_Web_AW.pdf, 10.

¹⁷ Center for Environmental Concerns - Philippines, Inc., "Women in Defense of the Environment and Human Rights in the Philippines: Situation of Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Philippines," last modified 2025, 12.

¹⁸Center for Environmental Concerns - Philippines, Inc., "Women in Defense," 13.

Table 1: Total of Human Rights Violations on women and non-women environmental defenders from July 2016-December 2023¹⁹

Violation	Non-women victims	Women victims
Extrajudicial killings	331	34
Illegal arrest and detention	23	56
Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP), Trumped-up charges	63	11
Red-tagging	37	21
Frustrated murder	1	1
Displacement	0	2
Threat and harassment	45	15
Abduction/enforced disappearance	29	6
Facing charges under Anti-Terror Act	0	4
Terrorist designation	0	3
Total	520	153

While the susceptibility of women EHRDs to violence was already explained in the sections above, a study on the martyrdom of women EHRDs further reveals that the circumstances of their murders were subtly gendered, from their pre-conflict vulnerabilities and how they mobilize, to how violence was carried out against them.²⁰ Their gender, alongside its intersection with socio-economic class, informed how susceptible they are to violence and attacks. Their marginalization is what puts them at the frontlines of risky and, potentially, dangerous situations. This is seen in the case of Cristina Morales Jose, a community leader, who was assassinated on her way to file a lawsuit against the militarization of relief operations in the Compostela Valley in the aftermath of Typhoon Bopha/Pablo.²¹ One can argue that Morales Jose was further marginalized as an urban poor woman for whom the militarization of relief operations is an especially salient and, even, severe crisis. In examining this through the lens of female altruism, the burden of seeking recourse for a starving family often falls on the mother. As a community leader, her decision to seek accountability and advocate for her community was shaped by her gendered vulnerability and her socioeconomic status compelling her, as a means of survival, to mobilize. The typhoon's detrimental effects were the trigger for the act of violence, but the bedrock to its foundation were

¹⁹ Center for Environmental Concerns - Philippines, Inc., "Women in Defense," 13.

²⁰ Tran, "Gendered violence martyring Filipina environmental defenders," 7-8.

²¹ Ej Atlas, "Typhoon Bopha's post-disaster climate injustices and relief corruption, Compostela Valley, Philippines," Ej Atlas, accessed October 24, 2025,

<https://ejatlas.org/conflict/post-disaster-injustices-and-climate-activism-in-the-aftermath-of-typhoon-bopha-philippines>.

pre-existing intersectional inequalities, government corruption, and military impunity that painted her life as easily disposable.

Women EHRDs' ability to mobilize is also heavily influenced by their gender. As already mentioned, their decision to mobilize is a reaction to the disproportionate gendered division of labor, made worse by environmental calamities. But women EHRDs don't necessarily always see this call to action as a negative thing. Some women EHRDs see their activism as an extension of their motherhood. A report by the Center for Environmental Concerns highlights the stories of women leaders in environmental movements and one key tenet to their advocacy persisted in these stories—these women see their roles as nurturers of their families extending beyond the immediate walls of their homes, and into the communities around them. This passion makes them an integral figure in environmental and social struggles.²² This dichotomy is two sides of the same coin—women EHRDs are both rendered vulnerable and empowered by their identity as women in their advocacy for climate justice. Moreover, while they maintain an active role in mobilization movements, that representation is not equivalent to their level of political participation in elected positions. Women in the Philippines are still disproportionately represented in public office. Since 2019, women comprise a mere 23% of total elected positions in the country, including local and national public positions.²³ The majority of elected women in office come from political dynasties or affluent families, so the share of WEHRDs holding public office as policy makers is an even smaller fraction of an already tiny pie.²⁴ In a society with a shrinking and threatened civic space, lack of representation in electoral politics further disenfranchises WEHRDs and their communities.

The study on the martyrdom of women EHRDs also reveal that, while gender does not preclude or specifically target EHRDs for murder, torture, and abductions, there are gendered nuances to the violations on women EHRDs in the Philippines. A significant number of women EHRDs were shot at home or in the presence of family members. This study notes the cultural and social significance of murdering women and girls, especially in the presence of their family, and how this emotional weight is often used as a terror tactic to quash dissent due to the symbolic meaning a mother or daughter carries within a community.²⁵ Moreover, violence in the form of sexual assault is more prevalent against women, reiterating the gendered nuances in the violence that women encounter in the civic space.

²² Center for Environmental Concerns - Philippines, Inc., "Women in Defense."

²³ Jean Encinas-Franco, "Sexism in the 2022 Philippine Elections: A Problem with No Name," FULCRUM, last modified September 2, 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/sexism-in-the-2022-philippine-elections-a-problem-with-no-name/>.

²⁴ "Women Make Up Only 24% of Elected Officials in PH, Highlighting Gender Gap in Politics," PIDS - Philippine Institute for Development Studies, accessed December 19, 2025, <https://www.pids.gov.ph/details/news/press-releases/women-make-up-only-24-of-elected-officials-in-ph-highlighting-gender-gap-in-politics>.

²⁵ Tran, "Gendered violence martyring Filipina environmental defenders," 8.

Case Study#1: The Abduction and Criminalization of Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro

In April 2023, **Jhed Tamano** (22) and **Jonila Castro** (24)—young women environmental defenders—were reported missing after they were last seen in **Orion, Bataan**, where they had been supporting coastal communities opposing large-scale reclamation and development projects that threatened marine ecosystems and local livelihoods.

For nearly two weeks, their whereabouts were unknown, causing grave concern among their families and civil society organizations. When they resurfaced, both women stated that they had been **abducted, detained, and interrogated by military forces**, questioned about their environmental and community-organizing work, and pressured to identify other activists. State authorities denied these allegations, asserting instead that the two had voluntarily surrendered—claims strongly contested by the women, their families, and human rights groups.

After speaking publicly about their ordeal, **criminal charges were filed against them**, initially including **perjury**, which were later dismissed. Subsequently, the military pursued **grave oral defamation charges**, alleging that their statements accusing the Armed Forces of abduction damaged the institution's reputation. Human rights advocates widely criticized these charges as **retaliatory and intended to silence and discredit their environmental advocacy**. In 2025, the court eventually **dismissed the grave oral defamation case**, affirming that their statements did not constitute a criminal offense.

The case of Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro has become emblematic of the **multiple and compounding risks faced by Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs)** in the Philippines—ranging from enforced disappearance and intimidation to legal harassment and disinformation. It underscores the urgent need for effective protection mechanisms, accountability for abuses, and safeguards against the use of the justice system to suppress legitimate environmental and human rights work.

III. Policy on Paper, Failure in Practice: *Existing Mechanisms Recognizing and Safeguarding Women Environmental Defenders and Gaps*

Women's ability to lead and participate meaningfully in climate action is deeply tied to their broader rights to socio-economic development and political participation. When these rights are denied, they are left more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and excluded from shaping the solutions.

International mechanisms and policies have increasingly recognized this connection between gender equality and effective climate action. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), through the Lima Work Programme on Gender and the Gender Action Plan, has made clear that climate policies must be gender-responsive. The Paris Agreement further emphasizes that women's empowerment is essential for just and sustainable climate action.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) reinforces this by urging governments to integrate gender perspectives into climate and disaster policies. Its General Recommendation No. 37 highlights women not only as vulnerable populations but as leaders with crucial knowledge for adaptation and mitigation.

These commitments echo across other frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action, which calls for women's active participation in environmental decision-making; the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which link gender equality (SDG 5) with climate action (SDG 13); and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which stresses women's leadership in building community resilience.

These policies affirm that empowering women—socially, economically, and politically—is not just a matter of justice but of effectiveness. Women's full and equal participation ensures that climate strategies address real community needs, harness local knowledge, and promote inclusive and sustainable outcomes. True climate justice, therefore, depends on dismantling the structural inequalities that limit women's access to resources and decision-making power, and on ensuring that their voices shape the path toward a resilient and equitable future.

National Policy Landscape (Philippines)

The State possesses a relatively rich set of constitutional guarantees and sectoral statutes—pertaining to gender equality, Indigenous rights, environmental protection, and public order—that, in theory, should provide substantive protection to women who defend land, water, and ecosystems. While the Government has produced many policies and laws relating to climate change, there is a distinct lack of implementation on the ground²⁶.

In practice, protection is undermined by interrelated dynamics: (1) weak implementation of laws and institutional capture by economic and security interests; (2) the securitization and criminalization of dissent (including red-tagging and broad counter-terrorism powers); and (3) persistent socio-economic and political exclusions (poverty, limited access to social services, and constrained political participation) that constitute the structural roots of women's disempowerment. Unless policy reform addresses both the legal/institutional failures and these socio-economic foundations, formal protections will remain insufficient. More importantly, issues of criminalization of dissent, state power abuse, and weak institutional foundations, endangering the lives of defenders, are merely products of the state's acquiescence to the interests of private interests, whose primary goal is to pillage the Philippines' natural resources at the expense of

²⁶ Fry, Ian, and Elisa Morgera. *Visit to the Philippines: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Context of Climate Change*. A/HRC/56/46/Add.2. Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council, August 9, 2024. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4064730>

local communities. Aside from direct policy reforms, this paper would be remiss not to recognize that a decoupling of the state from private interests is the most meaningful step towards protecting WEHRDs and the communities they fight for.

Constitutional and gender law foundations

The **1987 Philippine Constitution** lays the normative basis for the protection of environmental defenders and women's rights. It guarantees both the right to a balanced and healthful ecology (Art. II, Sec. 16) and the right to equality before the law (Art. II, Sec. 14). It also mandates the State to ensure the fundamental equality of women and men in all spheres of life. Together, these constitutional provisions situate environmental protection and gender equality as intertwined obligations of the State.

Indigenous peoples and FPIC

The **Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (RA 8371 / IPRA)** establishes the right to ancestral domains, self-governance, and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) administered through the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). IPRA is explicitly designed to secure Indigenous autonomy and protect community custodians of the environment—roles frequently exercised by Indigenous women. In theory, IPRA's FPIC mechanisms should protect Indigenous women who contest extractive projects; in practice, procedural weaknesses and contested NCIP practices weaken those protections.

Environmental statutes and participatory remedies

Statutes such as the Clean Air Act (RA 8749), Clean Water Act (RA 9275), and the Environmental Impact Assessment System (PD 1586) promote public participation, transparency, and access to justice through administrative and legal remedies—including civil suits and the *Writ of Kalikasan*, a constitutional remedy allowing citizens to seek redress for environmental harm affecting life, health, or property.

Among national agencies, the **Climate Change Commission (CCC)** plays a crucial role in integrating gender perspectives into environmental and climate policies. Established under the **Climate Change Act of 2009 (RA 9729)**, the CCC is mandated to coordinate and monitor national climate change efforts and ensure gender-sensitive and pro-poor approaches in all climate policies and programs.

Laws and instruments that have been used to constrain defenders

The **Anti-Terrorism Act (RA 11479)** and the **Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act of 2012** has been heavily criticized by local and international actors. There is grave concern over the misuse of these counter-terrorism laws to clamp down on dissent, shrinking the civic space. The Anti-Terrorism Act explicitly uses an overly broad definition of terrorism and this overly broad definition has allowed for the law to be used against human rights organizations, activists, and

environmental defenders.²⁷ Human-rights advocates argue that these laws and practices have facilitated red-tagging and other forms of stigmatization that directly endanger WEHRDs by making them targets for surveillance, harassment, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arrest and violence. Meanwhile, the Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act is doubly used to handicap civil society organizations. These two laws work in tandem and invoke the Anti-Money Laundering Council in freezing the assets of organizations, severely restricting their ability to fulfill their mandate and aid civil society.²⁸ The vast majority of terrorism financing cases involve individuals or organizations that the government has accused of having ties to the CPP-NPA.²⁹ Given the concerning use of red-tagging as a way to silence dissent, it is not a far-reach to conclude that the government is fabricating links to rebel groups to handicap civil society organizations. The chilling effect on organizing and collective action is profound.³⁰

The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and Marcos Jr.'s “National Action Plan for Unity, Peace and Development” (MC83) similarly pose significant risks to WEHRDs. Under the “Whole-of-Nation Approach”, the NTF-ELCAC was formed by former President Duterte to defeat local communist terrorist groups and attain “sustainable and inclusive peace throughout the Philippines”.³¹ This “Whole-of-Nation Approach” put forth by EO70 is further operationalized under Marcos Jr.’s Memorandum Circular 83. A distinct feature of the “Whole-of-Nation Approach” that distinguishes it from previous anti-insurgency efforts is its mobilization of government agencies beyond military and police forces. It mobilizes government forces at all levels, from national to barangay. Marcos Jr.’s MC83 pushes this further by calling on the private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders to aid its implementation.³²

Under the guise of national security, the Task Force has been implicated in systematic red-tagging and vilification of environmental activists, including women leaders from grassroots and Indigenous communities. Such labeling not only delegitimizes advocacy work but also enables gender-based violence and harassment, creating a climate of fear that suppresses women’s participation in civic and environmental spaces. The “Whole-of-Nation Approach” and its mobilization of government at all levels have made it so that the state is more heavily implicated, even complicit, for the harassment and violence against grassroots leaders. Its collaboration with LGUs have allowed it to destabilize, sow division, and stoke fear in local communities.

The Cybercrime Prevention Act (RA 10175) criminalizes a range of online conduct, including cyber-libel—an instrument that has been used, in some high-profile cases, to prosecute

²⁷ Amnesty International, "Philippines: Dangerous anti-terror law yet another setback for human rights," Amnesty International, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/philippines-dangerous-antiterror-law-yet-another-setback-for-human-rights/>

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: Terrorism-Financing Charges Abused," Human Rights Watch, last modified March 26, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/12/philippines-terrorism-financing-charges-abused>.

²⁹ "Philippines: Terrorism-Financing Charges Abused," Human Rights Watch, last modified March 26, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/12/philippines-terrorism-financing-charges-abused>.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: New Anti-Terrorism Act Endangers Rights," News Release, June 5, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/20>

³¹ "About," NTF-ELCAC, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.ntf-elcac.gov.ph/about>.

³² "Palace Orders Adoption of Nat'l Action Plan for Unity, Peace and Dev't," Philippine News Agency, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1249625>.

journalists and critics. The weaponization of cyber-libel and related digital-era provisions creates legal risk for defenders who document abuses, publish evidence, or mobilize via social media. Beyond statutory prosecution, coordinated online harassment, disinformation, and doxxing campaigns—often gendered in tone and effect—extend the range of harm against women defenders into the virtual sphere.

The Mining Act of 1995 liberalized the Philippine mining industry by allowing 100% foreign ownership and large-scale extraction of mineral resources through Financial and Technical Assistance Agreements (FTAAAs). While intended to promote economic growth, it has been widely criticized for enabling environmental degradation, displacement of indigenous communities, and human rights violations, particularly against women environmental defenders protecting ancestral lands.³³

Institutional actors: protection roles and patterns of failure

NCIP: mandate versus practice

The NCIP has been repeatedly accused by Indigenous women of facilitating extractive and development projects that encroach on ancestral domains. In numerous documented cases, its decisions have aligned with the interests of mining and energy corporations, effectively disempowering Indigenous women leaders who defend their lands and natural resources. This institutional bias undermines both Indigenous self-determination and gender equality in environmental governance. These institutional failures disproportionately affect Indigenous women leaders who rely on collective Indigenous governance for legitimacy and protection. (See FPIC case studies documenting these tensions).³⁴ Women CSOs in the validation workshop expressed that NCIP policies and procedures, while meant to advocate for the self-determination of IP communities, have presented bureaucratic obstacles and exacerbated gaps in the IP communities' ability to advocate for themselves.

Indigenous peoples organizations claim that the FPIC process is conducted divisively—IP leaders in favor are selectively given representation in the process, while those who oppose are shunned.³⁵ This has allowed private interests to manipulate NCIP procedures by disallowing wide and meaningful representation in garnering FPIC from IP communities. NCIP guidelines and policies are also subject to bureaucratic obstacles and the changing whims of each administration, resulting in policies that are constantly changing without meaningful engagement with those most affected. The latest revision of the FPIC guidelines was allegedly rushed and done without meaningful representation from a wide swath of the NCIP's IP constituency. Revisions in the guidelines include allowing energy projects, under the Energy Virtual One-Stop Shop Act (EVOSS)

³³ Center for Environmental Concerns - Philippines, Inc., "Women in Defense."

³⁴ UN-REDD Programme, *Indigenous Peoples' Experiences on Free, Prior and Informed Consent: A Collection of Case Studies (Philippines)* (Bangkok: United Nations REDD Programme, 2021), <https://www.un-redd.org/sites/default/files/2021->

³⁵ Acastillobcmi, "Mundane Thoughts - Is the NCIP a Friend or Foe of Indigenous Peoples?," Baguio Chronicle Media Inc, last modified April 24, 2023, <https://baguiochronicle.rappler.com/241/mundane-thoughts-is-the-ncip-a-friend-or-foe-of-indigenous-peoples/>

of the Energy Regulatory Commission, to be automatically approved if necessary certifications from the NCIP are not processed within a timeframe.³⁶ This is just one illustration of the many ways in which processes meant to protect indigenous communities and activists are manipulated for the benefit of private interests.

Case Study #2 The Case of Eufemia Cullamat: A Woman Indigenous Leader and Defender

Eufemia Cullamat, a Manobo leader from Surigao del Sur and a former member of the House of Representatives under the Bayan Muna Partylist, is among the most prominent Lumad women defenders of ancestral land and self-determination. Before entering Congress, she was deeply involved in community organizing and education initiatives among Indigenous Peoples in Mindanao, advocating for the protection of their territories against large-scale mining, logging, militarization, and displacement.

Despite her contributions, Cullamat became a target of state vilification and political persecution. The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), through its appointed Indigenous People's Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) in her region, declared her *persona non grata*—a move widely seen as politically motivated and reflective of the deep divisions within state-imposed Indigenous leadership structures. Since then, she has not been able to return to her home community or reunite with her family, underscoring the severe personal and collective costs faced by women environmental and human rights defenders.

Cullamat's experience exemplifies how institutional mechanisms meant to protect Indigenous rights can be instrumentalized to silence dissent, particularly when women challenge extractive interests or state-aligned leadership. Her case highlights the urgent need to uphold the autonomy of Indigenous communities, ensure the protection of women leaders, and prevent the misuse of state agencies against those defending land, life, and the environment.

CHR, local GAD councils, and enforcement shortfalls

The **Commission on Human Rights (CHR)**, local Gender and Development (GAD) offices, and other oversight institutions have limited budgets, constrained enforcement powers, and limited investigative capacities. While these bodies produce important reports and recommendations, their operational limitations mean that complaints of harassment, threats, and violence against WEHRDs frequently remain unresolved or receive delayed remedies.

³⁶ Iya Gozum, "Indigenous People, Groups Seek 'genuine Consultations' on Revision of FPIC Rules," RAPPLER, last modified June 13, 2024, https://www.rappler.com/philippines/statement-indigenous-people-consultations-fpic-guidelines-june-2024/?cx_testId=5&cx_testVariant=cx_1&cx_artPos=o#cxrecs_s.

Socio-economic and civil-political rights as root causes of empowerment / disempowerment

Protection of WEHRDs cannot be decoupled from the broader distribution of socio-economic and political power. Two domains in particular matter:

Socio-economic rights: material foundations for meaningful defense

Access to health care, education, secure livelihoods, social protection, and land tenure are not peripheral to defender protection; they are foundational. Women who lack economic security are more vulnerable to coercion (economic inducements, forced migration) and less able to sustain long-term organizing or legal action. Policies such as the Universal Health Care Act (RA 11223) and conditional cash-transfer programs (e.g., the institutionalized Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program, RA 11310) represent important state commitments to social protection and human capital development. Yet the efficacy of these laws depends on implementation—gaps in coverage, bureaucratic barriers, and under-resourcing blunt their protective impact on rural and Indigenous women defenders.

Civil and political participation: voice, representation, and legitimacy

Political inclusion—meaningful participation in decision-making bodies, secure avenues for representation, and the ability to organize without fear of criminalization—is central to empowerment. When women are excluded from governance (local councils, FPIC decision-making forums, or formal consultation processes), their capacity to defend territory, to influence environmental assessment outcomes, or to hold state actors to account is severely diminished. Criminalization, red-tagging, and administrative marginalization strip defenders of legitimacy and constrict political space.

Taken together, these institutional and systemic weaknesses illustrate how formal legal recognition of women's rights does not automatically translate into substantive protection or empowerment. The persistence of gender-blind governance, securitization/criminalization of activism, and unaddressed digital and procedural vulnerabilities reflect a broader failure of state institutions to uphold a rights-based and gender-responsive approach to environmental protection. Strengthening accountability mechanisms, enhancing the gender capacities of state actors, and institutionalizing the meaningful participation of women defenders in environmental decision-making are therefore essential to ensuring that national agencies fulfill their protective mandates rather than perpetuate harm.

VI. Policy Recommendations

This policy review, supported by data on the scale and severity of attacks against women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs)—arising from political repression, economic precarity, gender-based violence, and exclusion from decision-making—underscores the urgent need for stronger, more effective, and genuinely enforced protection mechanisms. In the face of these systemic attacks, women defenders must be empowered not only to survive but also to

assert their rights to a safe, healthy, and sustainable environment—an essential component of human dignity and social justice.

Some of these recommendations will be further developed as consultations with WEHRDs will push through as part of this project. WEHRD participants of the consultations will determine which of the recommendations will be prioritized based on their situations and its urgency.

The first two recommendations underscore the critical importance of directly supporting Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs), as they are central actors in identifying, shaping, and sustaining the protection mechanisms they require. Their lived experiences and frontline knowledge place them in the best position to determine what forms of support are effective in enabling them to safely continue their work, advance their advocacies, and achieve long-term empowerment. The first two recommendations are directed to all stakeholders within the gender and climate justice movement—including the Philippine government, WEHRDs themselves, academic institutions, media practitioners, advocates, funding institutions, and international organizations—to collectively pave the way for a safe, enabling, and dignified environment for women defenders.

1. Enhance Political Participation and Leadership of Women

To address women underrepresentation in environmental decision-making bodies, despite bearing the brunt of environmental harm and state violence.

- **Support women's leadership training and advocacy capacities.**
Fund programs that strengthen women's technical, legal, organizational and communication skills in environmental and climate governance.
- **Ensure women's representation in environmental decision-making.**
Enforce gender quotas or representation requirements in local environment councils, FPIC panels, CSO participation in local and national legislation, etc.

2. Promote Evidence-Based Advocacy and Knowledge Co-production

To address disinformation against climate harm, WEHRDs and disrespect of community knowledge, weakening accountability and policy influence. Access to well-documented evidence—such as environmental damage, rights violations, and gendered impacts—strengthens their position in courts, hearings, and policy negotiations.

- **Support community-based documentation and research.**
Provide grants to women's organizations to collect data on environmental conflicts, rights violations, and gender impacts of extractive projects.
- **Strengthen linkages with academic and scientific institutions.**
Partnerships between WEHRDs and research centers can produce credible, evidence-based advocacy materials that counter misinformation and policy capture.

This paper asserts that the Philippine government should urgently implement the following recommendations. Rather than assigning responsibility to specific agencies, the paper calls for a system-wide policy integration recognizing that gender equality and the protection of Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders must be integrated across all sectors and levels of the State. Incorporating gender-responsive policies in environmental governance, justice, security,

social protection, and development planning requires coordinated action, shared accountability, and sustained political commitment from the entire government apparatus.

3. Address Socio-Economic Root Causes of Disempowerment

Many women defenders are forced to choose between survival and advocacy work due to poverty, insecure livelihoods, and unpaid care burdens—conditions that heighten vulnerability to violence.

- **Integrate protection with social and economic development programs.**

Link defender protection measures with access to health care, education, and livelihood programs, ensuring that women defenders—especially from rural and Indigenous communities—are economically secure to continue to participate in politics.

- **Guarantee women's access to land, resources, and tenure security.**

Implement just family living wage, agrarian reform that prioritize women's ownership and management rights. Land security provides both a livelihood base and political autonomy.

- **Invest in care and social protection systems.**

Recognize and redistribute unpaid care work through state support (childcare, healthcare, social insurance), freeing women defenders' time and energy for leadership and advocacy roles.

4. Strengthen Legal Protection and Accountability Mechanisms

To address WEHRDs vulnerability due to systematic criminalization through red-tagging, counter terrorism laws and technology facilitated gender based violence, with little accountability for perpetrators:

- **Enact the Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill.**

Institutionalize the State's obligation to respect, protect, and promote the rights of all human rights defenders—especially women and Indigenous leaders—and provide clear mechanisms for protection, investigation, and redress.

- **Repeal Anti-Terrorism Act** and related implementing rules that have enabled red-tagging and criminalization of legitimate activism.

- **Reform the Cybercrime Prevention Act.**

Decriminalize cyber-libel and develop digital-safety provisions that punish online harassment and doxing, particularly those targeting women defenders.

- **Disband National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict** as it is abusing its powers and targeting environmental human rights defenders and members of Indigenous Peoples (Adapted from the recommendation of UN Special Rapporteur for Climate Change and Human Rights Ian Fry)

- **Strengthen enforcement of environmental laws.**

Ensure the *Clean Air Act*, *Clean Water Act*, and *EIA Law* are implemented with gender-sensitive and community-based mechanisms for participation and monitoring.

- **Repeal Mining Act of 1995**

This emphasizes the need for a new framework that prioritizes ecological sustainability, community rights, and gender justice in natural resource governance.

5. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Gender-Responsive Governance

To address the weakening institutional oversight which enables manipulation of consent processes and impunity for attacks against WEHRDs:

- **Reform NCIP operations to ensure genuine FPIC.**
Establish independent oversight of the FPIC process, with indigenous women's participation at every stage, and penalize manipulation of consent for extractive projects.
- **Empower the Commission on Human Rights (CHR).**
Provide the CHR with prosecutorial authority or stronger referral powers for cases involving harassment or killings of WEHRDs. Increase its budget for community-based investigations.
- **Institutionalize WEHRD protection within local Gender and Development (GAD) programs.**
Encourage LGUs to allocate part of their GAD funds for emergency protection, psychosocial support, and legal aid for women defenders facing threats.

6. Strengthen Digital Safety and Information Resilience

Women defenders are increasingly subjected to online gender-based violence, surveillance, and coordinated disinformation campaigns, which frequently escalate into real-world harassment and physical threats.

- **Develop a National Digital Safety Framework for Human Rights Defenders.**
This should include preventive measures against online gender-based violence, state and non-state surveillance, and coordinated disinformation campaigns.
- **Partner with technology platforms.**
Require social media companies to establish rapid takedown mechanisms and local liaison units for cases of online harassment targeting activists and journalists and WEHRDs
- **Build WEHRDs' digital literacy and cybersecurity capacities.**
Provide training and tools for digital protection, secure communications, and counter-disinformation strategies, particularly for rural and Indigenous women.

7. Improve Access to Justice and Rapid Response Mechanisms

Delayed or inadequate responses to threats often result in escalated violence and impunity. Thus further continues the cycle of GBV against WEHRDs. In order to correct this:

- **Create a national protection mechanism for defenders.**
A multi-agency mechanism should coordinate urgent protection—legal aid, relocation, and security assistance—for threatened WEHRDs.
- **Establish local rapid response teams.**
Local governments, in partnership with civil society, can maintain emergency funds, legal hotlines, and psychosocial services for defenders facing imminent danger.
- **Ensure gender-sensitive investigations.**
Law enforcement should integrate gender and human rights training to address violence and harassment cases with empathy, confidentiality, and due diligence.

8. Mainstream a Gender and Environmental Justice Approach

Climate and environmental policies often fail to protect defenders or address gendered impacts.

- **Integrate WEHRD protection in climate and environmental policies.**
Require all national and local climate strategies (e.g., NDC implementation, Climate Change Commission programs) to include gender and human-rights protection measures.
- **Align the Philippines' compliance with international mechanisms.**
Harmonize national reporting under CEDAW, the *UN Guiding Principles on Human Rights Defenders*, and the *Paris Agreement Gender Action Plan* to strengthen accountability to international norms.

9. Monitoring and Evaluation

The lack of reliable data and transparency obscures the true scale and patterns of attacks against Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs). At the same time, weak monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation allow gender-based violence and other attacks to persist unchecked—and in some cases, to escalate further.

- **Develop national indicators on WEHRD protection.**
Track metrics such as incidence of threats, prosecution rates, access to legal aid, women's leadership representation, and budget allocations for protection.
- **Require public transparency reports.**
Agencies handling environmental and human-rights cases should release annual progress reports to enable civil society oversight.

10. Strategic Transformative Goal

Ultimately, protecting women environmental defenders must move from **individual protection** toward **structural empowerment**. Laws and mechanisms should not merely respond to attacks, but dismantle the socio-economic and political conditions that make women vulnerable—poverty, marginalization, exclusion from decision-making. Genuine protection is realized when women have equal access to **resources, power, and participation** in shaping the country's development and ecological future.

VI. Conclusion

For the Philippine state to genuinely protect women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs), it must go beyond policy declarations and address the structural conditions that perpetuate women's vulnerabilities. Protection cannot be fully realized in a context marked by poverty, inequality, and limited access to social services, where women's participation in public life remains constrained by both economic, cultural and state-imposed barriers. The mechanisms and policies currently in place—though significant on paper—will never suffice if they are poorly implemented and if the underlying social and gender inequities that expose women defenders to risk remain unaddressed. This paper presented evidence that the situation of women EHRDs on the ground is a far cry from the goals and outcomes that these laws and policies aim to achieve.

A transformative approach to protection must be two-fold. On one hand, the state must ensure that existing frameworks are fully operationalized, gender-responsive, and rights-based, with

accountability mechanisms that effectively deter and respond to violence, harassment, and discrimination. On the other, women environmental defenders themselves must assert their participation, thus must be capacitated—through access to resources, training, and platforms for participation—to strengthen their organizations, solidarity networks, and leadership in environmental governance.

Equally crucial is the need for evidence-based and grounded advocacy, enabling WEHRDs to challenge misinformation, counter red-tagging, and articulate alternatives that connect environmental protection with social justice and human rights. Only through such a holistic and participatory approach can the Philippines move toward a genuinely enabling environment where women defenders can safely and meaningfully contribute to sustainable and democratic climate action.

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