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## APMA Association's Solidarity Statement for the People of Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Palestine\*

*September 26, 2021*

We, the Global Campus of Human Rights and Asia-Pacific Masters alumni community, express our full support and solidarity with the people of Myanmar, Palestine, and Afghanistan, three war-torn countries which are facing escalating human rights violations, shrinking civic spaces, and impunity.

We are deeply concerned about how the socio-political crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar have affected vulnerable groups such as women, LGBTQI+, children, and ethnic and religious minorities, who are often excluded from their government's political processes.

We strongly condemn the military junta's barbaric takeover of Myanmar in the wee hours of February 1. The country's military illegally seized power and arrested and detained duly-elected officials, including State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President, Win Myint, representatives from ethnic and religious minority groups, general strike committees, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CPRH), and human rights activists from the Civil Disobedience Movement. We demand the immediate release of all, including our alumni member Saw Lin Htet, who have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention and judicial harassment by the military junta.

We are alarmed at the reports of targeted attacks on women, media workers, human rights defenders and civil servants following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, a country that has long suffered the spillover effects of a 20-year conflict between the Taliban and the US-led military.

### **New Master of Social Justice Degree at the University of Sydney**

The human rights program at the University of Sydney has joined forces with degrees in development and peace and conflict to create a brand new postgraduate degree, the [Master of Social Justice](#). It will combine the terrific teachers from the previous degrees – Dany, Dinesh, Susan and Ihab – with a broad interdisciplinary lens meant to help students understand and address social justice globally. Dr. Susan Banki is the new the degree director. Please feel free to reach out to her with any questions at [susan.banki@sydney.edu.au](mailto:susan.banki@sydney.edu.au)

You can read more about the degree here: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/news-and-events/news/2021/07/28/new-degree-launch-master-of-social-justice.html>

Taliban's rise into power tinges fear among minorities, especially women and girls, who were subjected to the harsh and regressive rule of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001.

As the sole effective governmental power throughout Israel and the occupied territory, the Israeli state bears the greatest responsibility for the unfolding tragedy. It is this State that is directly engaging, or licencing Jewish supremacist mobs to engage in, the eviction of Palestinians from their homes and communities.

In this regard, we urge the Myanmar military and the Taliban to:

- Immediately cease all acts of hostility, attack, intimidation, and threat towards human rights defenders, civilians, especially women, children, and ethnic and religious minorities;
- Ensure the safety and unhindered access of humanitarian organizations such as the International Red Cross and UN Refugee Agency to all asylum-seekers and victims of the ongoing crises in Myanmar and Afghanistan.

We call on the government of Israel to:

- To immediately end its violent occupation of Palestinian lands and to dismantle the apartheid legislative regime.

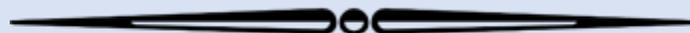
In this regard, we urge UN and its main bodies to:

- The UN Human Rights mechanism must establish an independent investigative mechanism to monitor and report on violations and abuses of international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and all applicable international law by all parties, including the Myanmar military, Taliban, and the Israeli State and to ensure accountability for such violations and abuses;
- Facilitate the speedy process of asylum-seeking high-risk citizens of Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Palestine for their resettlement to a safe country;
- Provide sufficient humanitarian aid, such as food, medicines, clean water, and COVID-19 personal protective equipment to refugees stranded along the borders of Myanmar and those who fled Afghanistan and Palestine;
- Demand resettlement countries to refrain from repatriating or deporting refugees from their respective territories;

We also recommend civil society organizations and other human rights groups to:

- To stand in solidarity with the people of Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Palestine as they struggle to assert their human rights and protect themselves and their families in these trying times.

*\* This solidarity statement was presented in the General Assembly of the APMA Association on September 26, 2021 and circulated among wider alumni calling for inputs. It was finalised after incorporating the comments.*



## Message from the APMA Program Director

Dear Alumni,

We are about to start another academic year, the 11th for the APMA program, in a period of uncertainty. The COVID crisis, which this time last year we assumed would only be a one-year problem has not left us. In Thailand, as this is written, we are at the level of highest infections ever. Travel is still difficult with quarantines in many countries and vaccines needed to enter others. The APMA program, as you all know, has made mobility a feature of the learning. Studying in two countries with a group of people from many different places is part of the experience and the knowledge students get from this program. We're trying to keep alive this feeling of studying at a truly regional level and students learning from each other, even if it is on a computer screen. But it is difficult. There may be a generation of APMA students who never experienced studying in Nepal, Philippines, Indonesia, or Sri Lanka. They also miss out on living in Salaya. Still, we hope when they join the Alumni over the next year they will get to experience the diversity of the graduates, and the interesting areas you all work in.



Another great concern we have is for the deteriorating situations in the region. There is the recent turmoil in Afghanistan, where there are some APMA students. And there is Myanmar which has fallen into unrest as a distrusted and disliked military government took power. Myanmar has more APMA graduates than most countries. Given our long history of working in Myanmar at Institute of Human Rights (IHRP) we have been able to scramble together a few programs to contribute to the civil society there. This year APMA will be taking on 9 scholars from Myanmar, most of them who are active in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) movement (and a further 14 in other programs). We are also working on human rights research projects with a number of Myanmar lecturers, most of who resigned or have been sacked from their posts because they would not support the military. Also, as a first, we are going to be delivering some undergraduate courses to the many students who have refused to return to a university system run by the unelected Military. All these efforts are really just small dots in comparison to the instability, protests, and people claiming their rights. With millions of students refusing to return to their places of education, we are only supporting a handful. Of the tens of thousands of lecturers laid off, we'll work with a couple of dozen. While we won't be changing the country, we will be ensuring that human rights education has a place inside Myanmar.

As a final note, typically how I end these notes, is a thank you to all alumni who are keeping in touch through the Alumni network. One of the main justifications for the APMA degree is that the Alumni do something. That is why the European Union keeps funding it and probably why most of the lectures keep teaching in it. We are not expecting individual alumni to change the world, but that in your own ways, in your own places, that you're making things better. Much like taking on a huge problem like Myanmar, we're all doing our small bits. But it adds up.

*Dr. Mike Hayes is the APMA Program Director at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies in Mahidol University, Thailand.*



## State Crackdown on Protests in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Erandika de Silva



The government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) is facing a series of crises as thousands of disgruntled citizens have taken to the streets to protest against the government for various reasons.

Starting from protests in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the US, protests against the lack of government support/subsidy to people in lockdown-imposed localities, farmers' protests against the shortage of organic fertilizer, fisheries community protesting the GoSL's apathy to their lack of livelihoods resulting from the X-Press Pearl ocean catastrophe to teachers' and principals' trade union protest action against the GoSL for their perennial salary anomalies and protests against the Kotelawala National Defence University (KNDU) education bill that threatens the free education system in Sri Lanka have stood out among many other protests. These protests that continue to happen amidst the global Covid-19 pandemic are subject to government crackdown and assault as well as scathing criticism by the general public.

Protesting in a global pandemic unarguably has two sides to be wary of: Firstly, the effect protests have on the life of thousands of people around us, and secondly, people's right to protest or the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Despite differing views of legal experts, public health experts worldwide decry protests as dangerous gatherings at a time of a global pandemic and the case is quite similar in Sri Lanka. A letter written by the Director-General of

Health Services (Ministry of Health) to the Inspector General of Police mandated the police to implement the Quarantine Law prohibiting large gatherings of public meetings and protests. The GoSL – even prior to this - launched a violent crackdown on dissidents of every kind including social media users.

### Protests in the pandemic, trends and developments

A noticeable trend among Sri Lankan dissidents during the pandemic is their abidance of Covid-19 preventive measures. However, there is a violent crackdown on dissidents who protest against the GoSL and it is a legalistic approach to protest repression. During the pandemic, this legalistic approach is cemented by several legal provisions: The Quarantine Law, Offences Against Public Property Act (No. 12 of 1982), and Section 59(2) of the National Thoroughfares Act No:40 that permits the law enforcement to arrest anyone (without a warrant) for the obstruction of road, public road and national highway. It goes without saying that student protesters are generally arrested under the latter two legal provisions and on the grounds of forming "unlawful assembly". On August 3, student activists from the Inter University Students' Federation (IUSFSL) were arrested<sup>1</sup> for protesting against militarisation<sup>2</sup> and privatisation of higher education. Further arrests were made on the charges of violating inter-provincial travel restrictions by transporting protesters to the capital in vehicles, violating the Quarantine Law and gathering unlawfully, injuring the Police OIC during the protest, and most importantly for damaging the road by burning a coffin. In addition, 42 people engaging in a

<sup>1</sup> Five student activists including IUSF convener arrested. Available at: [http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_21A/Aug06\\_1628232293CH.php](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_21A/Aug06_1628232293CH.php)

<sup>2</sup> Jayasinghe, C. "Sri Lanka university students block p'ment road in protest of defence uni bill."

Available at: <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-university-students-block-pment-road-in-protest-of-defence-uni-bill-84533/>

massive series of strike action called by fourteen trade unions including teachers' unions<sup>3</sup> were arrested. Similar arrests were made during a peaceful protest organized by the fisheries community. The commonality in all these arrests is that they were made on the charges of breaking the Quarantine Law and posing a public health risk.

The GoSL headed by the Rajapaksa regime has always been notorious for its abduction of dissidents and this trend is once again visible during the pandemic. In August 2021, the convener of the IUSFSL, and the president of a university student council were abducted by unknown men in plain clothes.<sup>4</sup> An attempted abduction of Aminda Lakmal, a Lecturer from Sri Jayawardenapura University, who had been travelling in a bus was thwarted by his fellow-academics.<sup>5</sup> These abductions, failed abductions and arrests are only a handful of cases that have gained public attention. With close scrutiny of these cases, it is obvious that the GoSL's response to protests is protest repression.

### **The place of female protesters**

The place of female protesters in Sri Lanka during the pandemic is heart-wrenching. Police brutality cases are skyrocketing as Sri Lanka Police continues to intimidate and assault female protesters of all ages. Similarly, in the case of teachers' protests, a public opinion about female protesters is fashioned through disparaging rumors in order to prevent them from participating in protests. Local newspapers reported a story of a female teacher who was found in a hotel

with a male teacher during the teachers' protest movement. Such negative public opinions are fashioned in order to curb public dissent. Abductions, assaults, and intimidation of dissidents in the guise of protest policing go undiscussed, unpunished and it is justified on the basis of public health concerns/preventing the spread of the pandemic. It is clear that the GoSL's response to protests in the pandemic is protest repression. However, the judiciary's response to these incidents upholding the principles of democracy is noteworthy.

### **Response of the judiciary**

With regard to arrests on the charge of breaking the Quarantine Law, Colombo Additional Magistrate Lochani Abeywickrama announced in open court that the Quarantine Law should never be above the people's right to expression, freedom of speech and right to protest, that have been enshrined in the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.<sup>6</sup> In another case, as the police opposed the release of arrestees spuriously arguing that the arrestees broke the quarantine law, participated in an 'unlawful assembly' and violated thoroughfare laws, the magistrate ruled that the police had failed to justify their contention. Moreover, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka expressed concern that allegations of causing hate/disunity or the Quarantine Law should not be misused "in order to stifle the freedom of speech and expression which is a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution".<sup>7</sup> In July it shared its "grave concern at the arrests and detention of protestors. Public protests straddle three

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<sup>3</sup> "Forty-four arrested after protest by striking Sri Lankan teachers in Colombo" Available at:

<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/08/07/slte-a07.html>

<sup>4</sup> "Several persons including IUSF convener arrested." Available at:

<https://srilankamirror.com/news/24153-several-persons-including-iusf-convener-arrested>

<sup>5</sup> "Several persons including IUSF convener arrested." Available at:

<https://srilankamirror.com/news/24153-several-persons-including-iusf-convener-arrested>

<sup>6</sup> "Quarantine Law NOT above People's Rights, enshrined in the constitution." Available at:

<https://www.newsfirst.lk/2021/08/17/quarantine-law-not-above-peoples-rights-enshrined-in-the-constitution/>

<sup>7</sup> Hensman, S. "Misusing the Pandemic to Silence Sri Lankans".

Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2021/08/07/misusing-the-pandemic-to-silence-sri-lankans/>

important Fundamental Rights in the Constitution namely the Freedom of Speech and Expression, the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and the Freedom of Association” and “strengthen the Freedom of Thought”. These views show resemblance to the Australian courts’ ruling that protest remains central to our [their] democracy even in a pandemic and that restrictions on protest action that do not pose a threat to public health may be unlawful.<sup>8</sup>

### **Double standards with regard to gatherings during the pandemic**

Except for two occasions in the early stages of the global pandemic, Sri Lanka remained open for the most part for continued economic activity. As of now, most workplaces have resumed work except for the operation of schools, universities, night clubs and casinos, pubs and bars, and large gatherings in parties/events, places of worship, cinemas/theatres, children’s parks, and carnivals/musical shows. At the same time, hotels, rest houses and guest houses remain open along with the government’s easing off of the restrictions on wedding ceremonies allowing limited capacity of guests. Much to everyone’s surprise GoSL has also allowed an annual religious procession (Kandy Esala Perahera) to take place with a directive on adhering to health guidelines. However,

the live telecast and online streaming of the procession show that only certain groups in the procession adhere to the health guidelines. Against this backdrop, it is clear that GoSL exercises double standards with regard to gatherings in the Covid-19 pandemic. When a Buddhist religious procession of over 5,000 people that parades for about five to eight long hours is allowed by the GoSL, a question worth asking is why it deems protests organized in abundance with Covid-19 preventive measures as a public health threat. The GoSL’s double standards with regard to social gatherings is evident from incidents like this.

The implications of these are that (1) the Rajapaksa regime silences anyone protesting the GoSL and its socially-regressive policies, and (2) the GoSL imitates a ‘legalist type’ behavior to legitimize its arbitrary, state-sanctioned violence on dissidents. As the Bar Association rightly points out, public protests extend across three important Fundamental Rights in the Constitution (stated above). Therefore, the State crackdown on public protests infringe on three fundamental rights of Sri Lankan citizens. The pandemic has shown an increase in protest repression in Sri Lanka through the quarantine law in the guise of preventing the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

*Erandika de Silva is an APMA graduate from the 2017-2018 batch. She uses a multidisciplinary approach to voice against social injustice, violence, and cruelty.*

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<sup>8</sup> “Explainer: Protest Rights in the COVID-19 Pandemic”. Available at: <https://www.hrlc.org.au/protest-rights-covid19>

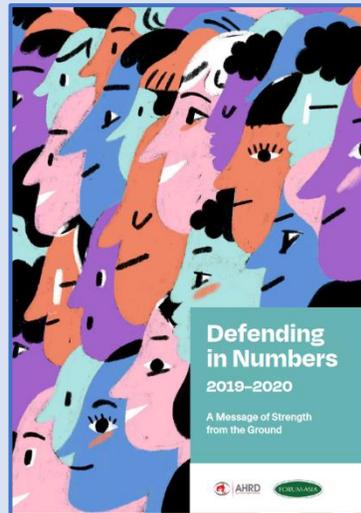
## HRDs in Asia Endure Increased Hostility

By Nir Lama

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Asia faced unprecedented challenges and their existing risks were exacerbated by new threats like the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2019 and 2020. A new report by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), [Defending In Numbers – A Message of Strength from the Ground](#), highlights the risks and challenges faced by HRDs in Asia in the past two years. The report, based on the monitoring and documentation conducted by FORUM-ASIA and recorded in its [Asian HRDs Portal](#), presents the regional patterns of violations against HRDs in Asia and provides an analysis of these trends to show the situation in which they operate.

### Violations in numbers

FORUM-ASIA recorded 1,073 cases of violations against HRDs in 21 countries in Asia from January 2019 – December 2020. At least 3,046 among HRDs, their family members, CSOs and communities were affected in these cases. Judicial harassment was the most common form of violations with 535 cases, accounting for nearly half of the cases documented. This was coupled with denial of a fair trial (101 cases). Arrest and detention followed with 422 cases, most of which were arbitrary. These two forms of violations were perpetrated by State mostly to silence the HRDs and criminalise them for expressing their dissent, and to stop them from continuing their human rights work, including by holding them in prisons and trials for a prolonged period. One such case is the arrest and harassment of Indian HRDs, including Father Stan Swamy, Anand Teltumbde, Gautam Naulakha, among



others by the National Investigation Agency over the 2018 Bhima Koregaon case. 306 cases of intimidation and threat against HRDs and their family members were recorded, out of which 29 were death threats. This included online attacks and harassment (48 cases) as well.

FORUM-ASIA also documented 268 cases of physical violence, which included 71 cases of killings resulting in the death of 82 HRDs in 10 countries. FORUM-ASIA reported that it was common for HRDs to face multiple violations simultaneously.

Among the categories of HRDs affected in these cases, pro-democracy defenders were the most affected in 253 cases where mostly students and youths (142 cases) led pro-democratic movements. Thai pro-democracy leaders including Panupong Jadnok, Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, Parit Chiwarak, Anon Nampa, among others faced judicial harassment, surveillance, house searches for organizing peaceful rallies calling for new elections and constitutional reforms. This was followed by Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), who were targeted in 242 cases. FORUM-ASIA documented as many as 205 cases against community-based defenders – comprising land, environmental and indigenous people's rights defenders.

State actors were the perpetrators in 847 cases of violations against HRDs, accounting for 80% of the cases recorded. Police was involved in 585 of the cases perpetrated by the State. Of those cases of violations by non-state actors, businesses including corporations

were involved mostly in cases against community-based defenders. The cases by non-state actors are increasing. There were 71 cases where perpetrators were not identified which provided a challenge to ensure accountability for the violation and thus contributing to the climate of impunity for the perpetrators. Many HRDs who expressed dissent against the government's handling of COVID-19 were harassed across Asia and these governments further weaponized emergency laws and policies to silence dissent.

### **Situation in South Asia**

Violations against [HRDs in South Asia](#) followed the overall trend of cases in Asia. FORUM-ASIA recorded 333 cases of violations in seven countries of South Asia, affecting 620 HRDs, their families, communities and CSOs in 2019-2020. Judicial harassment was also the most common violation recorded in South Asia with 137 cases. This was followed by intimidation and threats with 122 cases and then physical violence 117 cases, in which 38 HRDs lost their lives. Arrest and detention, which was the second most common violation in overall Asia, was documented in 112 cases.

Among the categories of HRDs being victims of violations, media workers were the most affected in 130 cases. The media workers were targeted in the South Asian countries for their investigative work by both the State and non-state actors and reporting on the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. WHRDs, who also experience violations for their identity as women, were affected in 80 cases.

Community-based defenders were recorded as being victims in 45 cases. 34 cases against minority rights defenders and 27 cases against students were documented respectively. State actors were involved in 203 cases, of which police accounted for 176. Among the 44 cases where non-state actors were involved, extremist groups and corporations were also the perpetrators while in a majority of the cases (24), the perpetrators were not identified.

India recorded the highest number of cases (177) in the whole of Asia, followed by China with 160 cases. The number of cases documented in both countries is higher also due to their large population. In its course to authoritarian rule at the end of 2019 through discriminatory laws on citizenship, the use of violence against peaceful protesters and judicial harassment by use of repressive laws, the Indian government commonly harassed and intimidated HRDs. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal saw a disproportionate number of media workers being affected. They were subjected to intimidation, disappearances and killings. Most worryingly, this sub-region recorded the highest number of killings of HRDs in overall Asia, making India (13 cases), Pakistan (12 cases) and Afghanistan (11 cases) the deadliest countries for HRDs. Fatima Khalil, staff at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) was one of those killed in a bomb attack while travelling in an office vehicle in Kabul on 27 June 2020. Afghanistan's situation was further exacerbated by the armed conflict and the threats by Taliban forces to media workers, WHRDs and NGO staffs to stop their human rights work.

*Nir Lama is an APMA graduate from the 2017-2018 batch. He is one of the incumbent Executive Council members of the Asia Pacific Masters Alumni Association (APMAA) and the editor of the APMA newsletter.*



# The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impacts on Sex Workers

By Mariah Grant



Mariah Grant was part of the first MHRD cohort and is the current General Secretary of APMA. She is a human rights and migration specialist based in Washington, DC where she focuses on migrant and sex workers'

rights, freedom of movement, and labor exploitation. As the Research and Advocacy Director of the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center, she oversees policy advocacy efforts and development of original research. She recently published the preliminary findings of groundbreaking research in an essay titled, "[The Covid-19 Pandemic Endangers Sex Worker Health and Safety, Underscoring Need for Structural Reforms.](#)"

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected people across all walks of life, among them sex workers. In this essay based on their SSRC-funded research, Denton Callander, Étienne Meunier, and Mariah Grant examine how the pandemic has impacted sex workers in the United States, analyzing the role stigma plays in heightening the health, social, and economic threats posed by the pandemic. To ameliorate sex workers' conditions, the authors argue for decriminalizing sex work and providing long-term support.

The publication concludes with the following critical recommendations:

**1. Decriminalize sex work.** Many of the pandemic's effects unique to sex work are fostered by its criminalized nature. Decriminalizing sex work would not only address many barriers that exacerbate the pandemic's harms but also stands to improve health and well-being in many other domains. As

decriminalization gains traction in some parts of the United States, rigorous and community-centered social research can help advance this important work, including by highlighting the pandemic-specific effects and implications.

**2. Support sex work organizations.** We find that the pandemic's worst effects are often ameliorated by social support from sex work communities. Continuing a tradition of public health engagement,<sup>8</sup> sex work organizations have responded to the pandemic with "safer sex work" guidelines,<sup>9</sup> financial aid programs, housing and food initiatives, education and support forums, distribution of risk reduction equipment, and other important programs. Dedicated public funding would help expand this work in the United States, which researchers can support through data-driven advocacy and rigorous evaluations of impact.

**3. Redevelop anti-trafficking initiatives.** Human trafficking is an important issue, but current training for health and support services problematically ignores the nuances of consensual sex work while enforcement initiatives largely capture sex workers and not traffickers. Redeveloping these initiatives with recognition of consensual sex work and centering sex workers as partners in the fight against trafficking would address barriers to care illuminated by the pandemic, support the destigmatization of sex work among service providers, and could even help advance anti-trafficking work.

Read the entire essay here: <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/covid-19-fieldnotes/the-covid-19-pandemic-endangers-sex-worker-health-and-safety-underscoring-need-for-structural-reforms/>

*Mariah Grant is a graduate of the first cohort of the Master of Human Rights and Democratisation (Asia Pacific) program and the current General Secretary of APMAA.*

## How MHRD Transformed Me as a Person

By **Samani Abro**



I still remember the moment when I received email from the Master of Human Rights and Democratisation (MHRD) Program with the message: “We are pleased to inform you that you are accepted ...” A sudden flash of excitement and happiness went through my whole existence. I was working in my office and as I cried out with excitement, the colleague sitting next to me asked: “Are you okay?” I came back to reality and ensured everything was okay. Still, I wanted so bad to celebrate the moment that I went to the terrace where nobody can see me and jumped with excitement as many times as I could. Later, I informed my workplace and family about this new journey. However, I was completely unaware what laid ahead.

Leaving the country for the first time in my life and adjusting to the culture was not as a big challenge as the way of teaching in the department. We were already told that it is going to be an intense program, so we had to be mentally prepared. But for a person like me who only studied in Pakistan in the institutions that I could afford belonging to a financially struggling family, I hardly ever thought about the intensity of the challenge that I had to face. I remember calling my father and sharing with him how hard it was to grasp from the many readings and then working on the papers. He always told me, “It is new, it is different, and it is challenging, but once you overcome this difficulty, you will realize how much it helped you to grow.” That was all true. When I was submitting the final draft of my thesis, I realized it is not the thesis

that is the final product from these challenging years of my life, but it is the person that I have become after all these learnings. I am the final product.

Furthermore, it was not only the education that affected me but also the other life lessons during that period. We were a class of 26 students from 20 different countries. I never imagined how interesting that experience would be -- having different points of view with such diversity, having a difference of opinions but still presenting that difference with kindness and grace. I learned not to be rigid; I learned that learning never stops and it is okay to embrace differing opinions whenever they are presented with convincing arguments. We were not only learning about the democratization in different countries but also on how to evolve within and have democratic values on a personal level. We not only had so much to learn but also so much to teach each other from our own corners of the world.

One of the biggest transformations that the course brought in me was about being comfortable with people that may be different than me. It is not that I was a person with prejudices; I have always been considered a person with an open mind but that all experiences were within my own country and culture, and it was limited. If there was any interaction with the international community, it was only because of my workplace (I was working in an international humanitarian organization for 6 years in Pakistan before coming to MHRD). But having a transgender person as my class fellow on one side while another form queer community on the other side was

completely new to me. It was so interesting to live with them, learn from them, knowing their experiences, their pain, the discrimination they face in this very world. All those experiences kept expanding my heart every day. Being part of that beautiful institute made me kinder, gentler and it taught me to have more tolerance.

We left MHRD but MHRD did not leave our hearts. All the lessons of humanity that I learned remained with me and I always try to be a good ambassador of my institute wherever I indulge in a discussion or action. I cannot thank enough to MHRD for the experience

they provided. I try to bring an inclusive approach; I try to positively affect peoples' minds wherever I feel people are being discriminated against. I know that we," the people trying to be change agents" (I am sure many of you doing amazing things at your own pace) are in small numbers and there is so much that needs to be changed or fixed. But I will keep doing it with the thinking that, "I know I can't change the world alone and make it be like me. The world might always remain as messed up, but I do it because I don't want this world to change me and make me like itself."

*Samani Abro is from MHRD batch 2016-2017. She is working in Thailand with the United Nations since 2018. She occasionally writes blogs in English, Sindhi and Urdu Languages; some of her opinion pieces have been published in Pakistan in these languages.*

### Profile

Gianna Francesca M. Catolico is an APMA graduate from the 2017-2018 batch. She is the incumbent treasurer of the Asia-Pacific Masters Alumni Association (APMAA).

### Motivation to pursue human rights studies, and impact of regional master's on my learning and career prospects

Coincidentally, Mahidol University happened to be the first international university I visited in my life. In early 2015, I went to the Faculty of Social Sciences and



Humanities for a study tour with my classmates and our college professor. I instantly fell in love with Mahidol University and wished to pursue further studies there. Crazy, isn't it?

At that time, I was also writing articles on Philippine politics and current issues while joining protests against the repression of campus publications and incessant tuition fee increase affecting the poor and marginalized students in Manila. My undergraduate thesis was about CSO lobbying and advocacy in relation to the extrajudicial killings under the turf of the late President Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino. I applied for many vacancies in

NGOs but they turned me down because of my lack of experience. I eventually landed a job in the media but didn't utilize my undergraduate degree in Political Science.

Some of my fellow activist friends and I supported President Rodrigo Duterte, who then promised to eradicate red tape and bureaucracy in the government and pledged to engage in peace talks with the communist and Muslim insurgents. However, the first few weeks of his evil regime made my stomach churn — heartbreaking photos and tales of extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary arrests have stormed the broadsheets and screens, including my media company's newsroom and monitors. I realized that I have voted for a misogynist and tactless politician who has little regard for human rights and this unsettled me.

I came through the APMA call for applications on Facebook. When I saw the words "human rights" and "Mahidol University" in the post, I applied for the opportunity without any hesitation. I needed to delve deeper into the human rights discourse and how the human rights situation in the Philippines is interlinked

with the global shrinking of civic spaces and the evolution of authoritarianism. Also, I wanted to try my luck in applying for vacancies in the CSO and development sector after finishing this program.

### **One of my best achievements in the human rights field**

Graduating from the MHRD program amid the hurdles was the best achievement in my career. Unlike my classmates and peers in the APMA community, I joined the program with no professional experience in the CSO or development sector. I had to learn everything from scratch and start from the basics. Despite being a rookie in the human rights field, I utilized my master's degree to enhance my skills, knowledge, and capacity as a human rights activist. My master's degree paved the way for me to work with local and regional CSOs for over three years and counting. But the learning process doesn't end there. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I attend virtual workshops and webinars, feed my mind with facts, learn from my colleagues, and review the IHRP reference materials from time to time.

*Gianna Francesca M. Catolico is an APMA graduate from the 2017-2018 batch. She is the incumbent treasurer of APMAA.*



## Children's Book on Impact of War

By **William Sparling**



In March this year I published my debut children's book called 'Camouflage Kids'. The publisher is Little Steps Publishing.

My grandfather's service during the Second World War, including as a prisoner of war, and my experience as a volunteer with the charity Legacy, inspired me to write the book.

The book is aimed at children aged 7+ and

Anzac Day is Australia's most sacred day and I think children should learn more about the impact of war on soldiers and families.

seeks to inform readers of the meaning of Anzac Day and issues that affect military families, through adventure, humour and loss.

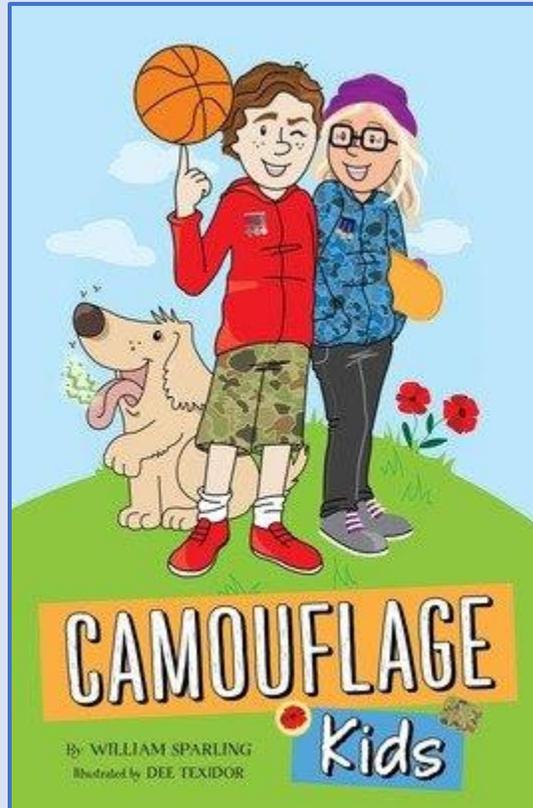
The story is told through the perspective of two nine-year-old friends, Stan and Poppy.

It's Anzac Day and Stan has to attend his first dawn service at his primary school.

His dad is a former Army soldier, Afghanistan War veteran and Victoria Cross recipient, yet Stan is unaware of the significance of this.

Poppy's mother served in the Iraq War with the Air Force.

The book enables children to gain a greater understanding of the sacrifices made by our servicemen and women in contemporary conflicts, and the challenges faced by their families.



Legacy supports the families of veterans and I've volunteered with them since 2007.

I've donated a number of copies of the book to Legacy, with proceeds from sales going to the charity.

I found the publishing journey interesting and exciting. I had no idea what to expect and went in open minded.

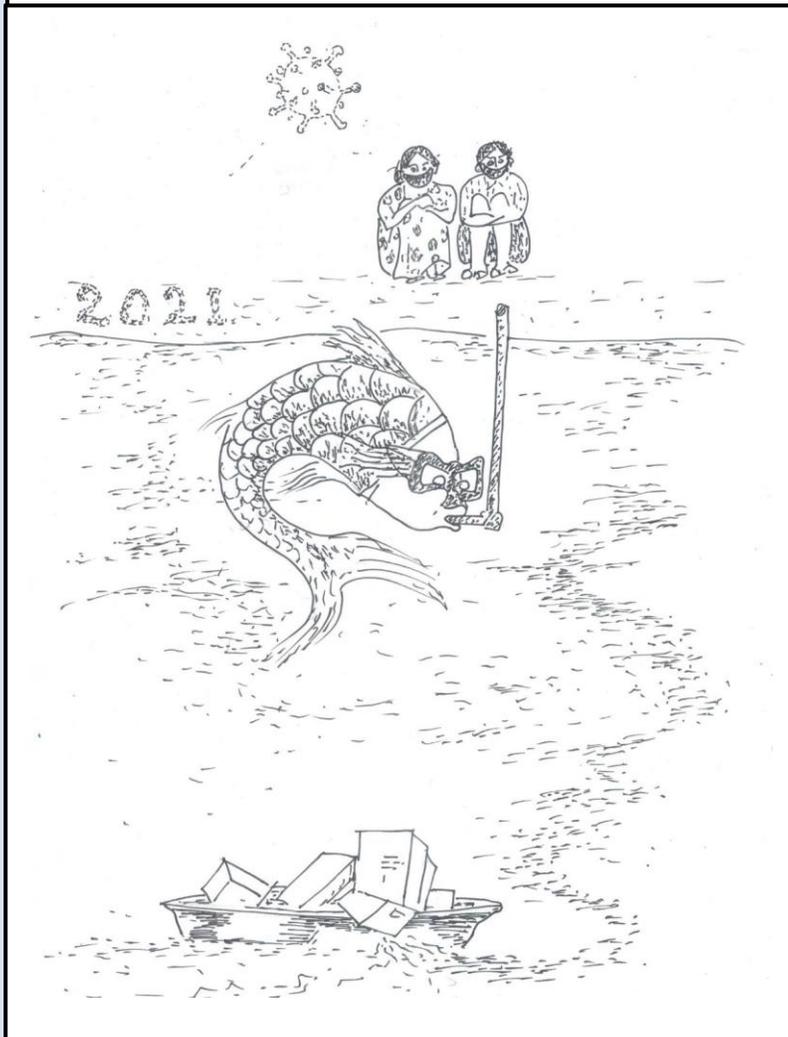
There were so many people involved in the production process who I worked with, including an editor and illustrator.

I'm a part time writer and work full time as a Senior Media and Policy Adviser to a senior NSW Government Minister. I live in Sydney.

The book is available at some bookstores and online via Dymocks, Booktopia, Angus & Robertson and others.

*William Sparling completed his Master of Human Rights in 2010. He has worked for the NSW Government for more than 10 years and is currently a Senior Media and Policy Adviser to the NSW Minister for Digital and Minister for Customer Service Victor Dominello. He has found the degree to be very useful, particularly with regard to policy analysis, stakeholder engagement and developing communications strategies.*

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Pass' to the Virus !



Vasuki Jeyasankar is a feminist visual artist and rights activist from the North & East of Sri Lanka. She combines her commitment to feminisms, human rights and social justice with her creative skills. She expresses herself through cartoons, paintings, installations, and works together with women and youth communities to make collective expressions.