

**Statement submitted by the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition to the
14th Asia Pacific Forum, Amman, Jordan, August 6 2009**

The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, comprising 18 international, regional and national women's rights and human rights organisations¹, and supported by women from the Arab region, would like to take the floor at the Annual Conference of the Asia Pacific Forum to call the attention of this gathering to the specific situation of women human rights defenders in relation to the present discussion on freedom of religion and belief.

We would like to highlight the contribution of women human rights defenders to the protection and promotion of human rights around the world, including their role in promoting freedom of religion and belief. We would like to acknowledge that many women human rights defenders often challenge cultural, social and religious norms that deny women's equality in order to carry out their work. This makes them especially vulnerable to attacks and violence as well as to prejudice, exclusion and repudiation from state and non-state actors, including from members of their families and communities. There are many examples of human rights defenders, including women, who have been penalised for defending the freedom of religion and belief in the Asia Pacific region.

We draw your attention to the work of Ms. Asma Jahangir, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief,² in which she has highlighted discriminatory and harmful practices against women and girls that are justified in the name of religion and belief and called for government action to prevent and prohibit such discrimination. Ms. Jahangir's annual reports to the UN Human Rights Council have also addressed the ways in which existing discrimination against women interacts with discrimination on the basis of religion or belief to enhance the disadvantages and denial of rights experienced by women. In the context of our intervention on behalf of women human rights defenders, perhaps we should recall here that Ms. Jahangir herself has been subjected to attack and intimidation because of her work.

We would also like to express our grave concern regarding current attempts to limit freedom of expression of religion and belief on grounds of 'defamation of religion'. We hold all human rights, including, freedom of religion and freedom of expression to be inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing. To justify verbal or physical attacks against women human rights defenders on grounds of defamation of religion undermines existing human rights standards that guarantee women's equality, hinders the work of women human rights defenders and legitimises targeted attacks on them.

We bring these concerns to the APF and to the NHRIs gathered here because of our understanding of the particular role that can be played both by the APF and by individual national human rights

¹ * Amnesty International (AI), Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum Asia), Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL), Front Line, Information Monitor (Inform), International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), ISIS-Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (ISIS-WICCE), International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific-AP), The Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights (CLADEM), Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Baobab for Women's Human Rights, Human Rights First, International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), MADRE (an international women's human rights organisation), Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF), Women's Initiative for Gender Justice (WIGJ)

² Report of Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion and belief: A/HRC/10/8, Jan 2009

institutions in supporting states to defend the rights of freedom of religion and belief and also to defend the rights of women human rights defenders in this context.

We reaffirm that non-discrimination is an overarching principle that applies to all human rights. Therefore the prevention and elimination of all forms of discrimination on the basis of religion and belief should form a critical part of the mandate of all national human rights institutions.

We urge the national human rights institutions gathered here to do the following:

1. Adopt a policy on non-discrimination and where established, collaborate with national women's commissions, to enable better scrutiny of matters relating to discrimination on the basis of religion or belief;
2. Integrate the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion and Belief into their work, including creating special measures to encourage and support the dismantling of laws and structures that legitimise violence against women and violations of the rights of women's human rights defenders;
3. Enhance the focus on the situation of human rights defenders in their work, paying particular attention to gender-specific and gender-based violations faced by human rights defenders as they carry out their work and raising their visibility with their respective governments; and
4. Create mechanisms that enable quick and effective responses to violations of the rights of women human rights defenders.

We urge the APF to ensure implementation of the commitment to mainstream the issue of human rights defenders into the work of the APF, including the Advisory Council of Jurists, and in its work with NHRIs, and to ensure specific attention to the issue of women human rights defenders.

We also welcome and encourage continued engagement with the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Ms. Margaret Sekaggya, by the APF and by national human rights institutions in the Asia Pacific region, obtaining her expertise on how to best address the concerns of women human rights defenders. In this respect, we appreciate the steps taken by the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines to meet with Ms. Sekaggya in Bangkok during the 3rd Regional HRD Forum in January 2009.

Thank you Chair.