

## *Notes & Comment*

### **What's in a Name? Contested Identities of Grassroots Environmental Defenders in Thailand and their Gendered Dimensions**

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This research note explores the identities of environmental defenders in Thailand, including their gendered dimensions, and the ways in which environmental actions manifest as a result. It illustrates that dominant notions of environmentalism in Thailand often do not capture the various manifestations of environmentalism as lived reality, and that many displays of environmental protection are marked by class and gendered dimensions that are related to livelihoods, autonomy and land rights. Elucidating the intersecting, yet often ambiguous, identities of defenders helps expand what “environmentalism” entails and may provoke more holistic policy responses that address the interests of more communities.

**Keywords:** Thailand, environmental defenders, grassroots environmentalism, gender, environmental narratives, everyday activism.

In recent years, the term “environmental human rights defenders”, or simply “environmental defenders”, has gained mainstream uptake to describe individuals fighting to protect themselves and their communities against environmental degradation, dispossession and extractive resource use. While the increasingly common use of the term has generated supportive international frameworks, notably the

United Nations Environment Programme's 2018 policy on "Promoting Greater Protection for Environmental Defenders", the term itself is a contested one, with scholars pointing out its tendency to homogenize diverse actors with various goals and strategies (Verweijen et al. 2021, pp. 38–39). Scholarship has also highlighted the differentiated experiences and challenges that women environmental defenders often face in their fights against dispossession (Deonandan and Bell 2019; Jenkins 2017; Tran 2021), which are often not captured by mainstream narratives around environmental defenders. Thus, while a common notion of "environmental defenders" has paved the way to increased awareness and to important policy frameworks, an overly simplified understanding of the term can risk being reductionistic and dilute the complexity of what environmental action, and subsequently defender identities, may entail. Against this backdrop of "environmental defenders" terminology as a "mixed blessing", better understanding of the heterogeneity of environmental defenders and environmental action may help elucidate the nuances of defender identities and work in order to inform and pave way for more inclusive protection policies.

This complexity has played out in Southeast Asia, where environmentalism has been a driving civil force since the 1980s, spotlighting various environmental problems ranging from deforestation to industrial pollution and rapid urbanization (Forsyth 2016, p. 71; Simpson 2015, p. 187; Simpson 2018, p. 165). Across the region, environmental challenges are intrinsically intermeshed with issues of equality, justice and social activism (Simpson 2018, p. 165). As such, environmental defenders pursue diverse objectives and assume complex identities, with a variety of environmental movements having adopted an environmental justice framework which encompasses broad social and political values that extend beyond environmental conservation (Simpson 2018, p. 165). While environmentalism in Southeast Asia has generally been viewed as a democratizing force in the past decades, it is also argued that there are two sides to the coin. As Forsyth (2007, p. 2110) notes, environmental social movements can be socially exclusive, as

dominant strands of environmentalism risk excluding certain voices, while oversimplified narratives of complex environmental problems can distort public understanding of the issues (Forsyth 2016, p. 69).

This research note uses Thailand, a country characterized by a vibrant civil society with a long and dynamic history of environmental activism, as a case study to provide a snapshot of the complex identities of environmental defenders, including its gendered dimensions, and the diverse ways in which environmentalist actions may manifest. Historically and currently, environmentalism in Thailand varies greatly depending on the actors' political, socio-economic and ideological backgrounds, as well as their strategies to promote social transformation and development (Hirsch 1994; Pinkaew 2017, p. 470). The country has witnessed both claims to protect the environment—particularly to preserve and expand forest areas—and efforts to defend the land-rights access of poor farmers and rural communities, especially Indigenous communities (Chantana 2004, pp. 234–35; Forsyth 2001, pp. 5–7; Forsyth 2004; Forsyth 2007). However, while the goals of environmental protection and other social justice objectives often intertwine, mainstream strands of “environmentalism” have long been in tension with non-environmental forms of activism, such as the fight for economic justice and livelihoods (Forsyth 2001, pp. 2–3). Similarly, mainstream feminist discourse in Thailand has long excluded the voices of rural women, whose feminist causes are tightly interlinked with issues around access to natural resources and land (Pinkaew 2017, p. 479). Against this backdrop, this research note offers a preliminary exploration of the following questions. How do grassroots environmental defenders in Thailand fit within the broader framework of “environmentalism” in the country? What are the gendered dimensions of environmental defender work and identities in Thailand, and what kind of complexities arise from them? And what are the social equity challenges that result from competing notions of “environmental defender”?

This note investigates these questions via a qualitative approach based on interviews with personnel from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and with academics working with environmental

defenders in Thailand. It does not aim to provide definite answers to the questions raised, but instead offers observations on the subject within a Thai context, with the goal of promoting future discussion. The note proceeds as follows. First, it contextualizes the phenomenon by providing an historical overview of environmentalism and its related discourses in Thailand. Then it explains the methodological approach, followed by a presentation of the results. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections explore the implications of the findings. While it is acknowledged that “environmental defenders” is a contested term, for the sake of coherence, the paper will nonetheless use “defenders” to refer to individuals engaged in grassroots environmental protection activities.

### Environmentalism in Thailand

Environmentalism in Thailand encompasses a wide variety of actors across various scales, taking the forms of grassroots initiatives, livelihoods-based NGOs, urban activists (such as student groups or those affiliated with NGOs), nature-protection agencies, business-based institutions, and various initiatives within governmental agencies. The diversity of Thailand’s environmentalism stems from a mixture of evolving sociopolitical structures, competing views towards the country’s economic trajectories, growing environmental awareness among members of the middle class, and increasing resource competition between the state and rural populations (Pinkaew 2017, p. 471; Quigley 1996).<sup>1</sup>

At this nexus of environmentalism, burgeoning social movements, and democratization in the country, social class has played a major role in influencing the interpretations of and the actions against environmental threats. Forsyth (2016, p. 79) argues that environmentalism in Thailand needs to be seen as a function of rapid social, economic and political transitions rather than as “the sudden adoption of unquestioned and universal ideas about resource and risk ... [or] the inevitable result of biophysical changes”. Furthermore, the same author asserts that the dimension of socio-

economic class within environmental movements not only affects the ways political resources are mobilized, but also influences “the construction of environmental discourse itself” (Forsyth 2001, p. 1). For example, in bringing forth the different ways that members of the lower and middle classes participate in environmental movements in the country, the term “green agenda” has been used to describe a more urban-based, largely middle-class-led form of activism that tends to advocate for the preservation of nature to avoid damage to forests and wildlife (Forsyth 2001, p. 5; Forsyth and Walker 2014, p. 414). Conversely, the “red-green” agenda, largely led by members of the lower class, takes on a livelihoods approach that focuses on how environmental depletion threatens the rights and livelihoods of rural peasants (Forsyth 2001, pp. 6–7). This latter strand of environmentalism aligns aptly with the broader literature on the “environmentalism of the poor”, which centres its stance on social justice and relates to activism and to the environment as a source of livelihood and survival (Martinez-Alier 2014, p. 240). The class divides of Thai environmentalism exist against the backdrop of intensifying environmentalist discourses and social movements. Contested priorities and issues within various environmental movements have meant that tensions have long characterized the relationship between progressive environmental movements, driven by principles of social justice, economic justice and political change, and the broader Thai civil society discourse that is driven by the more dominant middle class.

### Protecting “Pristine” Nature and Jeopardizing Local Needs

Despite the role of grassroots mobilization in Thai environmental movements, which are often guided by demands to address livelihood struggles, dominant notions of environmentalism and strategies for environmental protection in the country largely remain at the conservation level. They do little to address or make connections among the environment, local livelihood needs, and community livelihood resources. Furthermore, a number of environmental laws and

regulations, which aimed to mitigate climate change and strengthen conservation efforts, have instead led to devastating impacts on local inhabitants within the conservation sites. In particular, Indigenous communities, whose claims to traditional lands are threatened by conservative regulations, have disproportionately been affected (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2015; IPF and KNCE 2018; Sadanu 2021). For example, although the current Thai constitution guarantees Indigenous communities rights to their lands, resources and forests, existing forestry laws can be major obstacles in realizing this right as many of the laws classify Indigenous land areas as wildlife sanctuaries, national parks or no-hunting zones (Berger 2019, p. 314).

Furthermore, instances of green-grabbing in recent years have led to land and resource dispossessions that have further constrained the livelihoods of those who are often already economically or politically disadvantaged (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012, p. 238). For example, the declaration of protected areas and the enactment of conservation laws via the Forest Reclamation Policy of 2014 have been used to evict poor farmers, while the enclosures of Indigenous lands under the policy have led to displacement and violent land conflicts (Berger 2019, p. 313). Restricting access to forest lands and resources has resulted in many original inhabitants of forest areas being convicted as trespassers, leading to (often violent) evictions as their ancestral homes become national park territory (Wanpen 2021; Sadanu 2021, pp. 1–3). Thus, while top-down conservation efforts have become the dominant environmental approach on a governance level, state-led conservation's potential to negatively affect a community's cultural, social, political and natural assets may create tensions between community interests and governmental agendas, leading to local people's resistance to conservation initiatives (Bennett and Dearden 2014, p. 114).

## Methods

The data presented in this study draw on thirteen in-depth interviews conducted with key informants working with environmental defenders between September 2020 and December 2021. These interviews were

first carried out as part of a scoping study to inform and prepare for fieldwork with Indigenous Karen environmental defenders in Thailand's Kaeng Krachan National Park. The park's conservation status has triggered large-scale evictions and violent assaults by authorities on Karen communities, the original inhabitants of the land. Unfortunately, strict COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in place during the time of study made it impossible to carry out fieldwork. Furthermore, in response to the increased severity of lockdown measures in Thailand at the time, it was decided that it would be unethical to interview grassroots defenders amidst worsening livelihood hardships and political unrest during this phase of data collection. Despite this setback, the interviews conducted with key informants during the scoping phase nevertheless offered important insights into the concept of environmentalism in Thailand, the diverse embodiments of environmental action, and the ways in which dynamics of gender and class influence such discourses and self-identification. These insights form the basis of this note.

The key informants interviewed were from academia and NGOs that work with environmental defenders, who are defined by their involvement in activities that range from political activism to livelihood advocacy. The informants were selected for their first-hand experiences working with or supporting environmental defender activities. Furthermore, informants from academia provided insight into the historical and more theoretical context of Thai environmental movements. Explicit verbal consent was received at the beginning of all interviews, and anonymity of both the interviewees and the organizations that they represented were ensured because of the political sensitivity of some of the topics discussed. Interviews were all carried out in English and conducted either online or in person, based on individual availability. Transcripts have been coded manually using an inductive approach.

Because of the small sample size, indirect perspectives and the scoping nature of the study, the research does not aim for generalizability or for representativeness of environmental defenders or all dimensions of environmentalism in the country. Rather,

its purpose is to elucidate the heterogeneity and complexity of environmentalism and environmental activism, and thus to illustrate potential contentions or alignments between defender identities and objectives.

## Results

This section is organized according to the key themes that emerged in the analysis: interlinkages among identities, class and gender; forms of resistance; gendered motivations and experiences; and issues related to collective struggles and community autonomy.

### Identities, Class and Gender

A theme that emerged from the interview data is that environmentalism is, in many rural contexts, first and foremost about livelihoods and autonomy. When asked what the concept of “environmentalism” means to the grassroots defenders with whom they have worked, interviewees from NGOs noted that the very notion of “environmentalism” might not necessarily resonate with all, and that the concept of “environmental defenders” might risk implying environmentalism as a stand-alone issue. As one remarked, “A lot of times [defenders] don’t consider themselves as environmental defenders.... Most of the time their goal is about preserving their livelihood and traditional way of life.”<sup>2</sup> Another respondent said that “people define themselves as “fighters for their homeland.... It’s not necessarily focused on the environment.”<sup>3</sup>

Some respondents added that simply equating environmentalism and environmental defender work with “protecting the environment” might be insufficient to capture local realities.

When we talk about environmentalism, they are mostly Western ideas, like conservation. This is different from natural resource management. When we talk about environmental conservation, according to the national policies or ideas of people in urban areas, it’s different from people who live closely to the forests and people who work on farmland.<sup>4</sup>



Interviewees were clear that socio-economic class plays a major role in influencing the framing of environmental issues and the environmental priorities of different actors.

The class perspective in environmental movements is important... Environmental [awareness] in the city is always in conflict with what's happening in "real life"... Middle-class people think that the hill tribes in the North are polluting and destroying the forest [by practising swidden agriculture]. [They] blame the problem of PM 2.5 on them.<sup>5</sup>

Another said, "when we talk about deforestation to protect [the] forest in the idea of environmental conservation, many urban people blame people in the countryside".<sup>6</sup>

One interviewee further pointed out that many rural people engaged in environmental protection activities often identify as "land-labourers" or "land-workers" rather than as environmental defenders because environmental issues are intrinsically tied to land and worker rights. While their actions may have environmental ends, many such people do not explicitly highlight or recognize their actions as environmental protection per se. This interviewee said, "I don't know if a lot of the people we work with will call themselves environmental activists; I think they are more peasant activists. It's more focused on food provision and production."<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, an academic interviewee said, "Environmental activists do not really consider themselves as such—more like social activists. They see themselves as the common people."<sup>8</sup>

Interviewees further reflected on the conundrum of self-identification when considering the intersections of class and gender in environmental protection. While women are active in local environmental protection, for many the label of "environmental defender" does not resonate. They do not even align themselves directly with environmental protection movements per se. Moreover, when asked whether they collaborated with other social movements such as feminist movements or human rights movements in their pursuits, interviewees from both NGOs and academia revealed that

there was not necessarily a natural affinity with those movements. One interviewee summed the situation up by saying, “Many rural women who engage and act to protect the environment do so more on the basis of livelihood needs and would also not necessarily describe themselves as environmental defenders or feminists.”<sup>9</sup>

The same interviewee explained that women who were engaged in environmental activities were often hesitant to align with what they perceived as feminist or human rights causes as these concepts could feel foreign and did not immediately resonate with their own cause of preserving local livelihoods. Furthermore, interviewees from both NGOs and academia pointed out that many rural women who were engaged in local activism, such as land-rights movements, were often not part of or represented by either the more powerful and male-dominated environmental movement or the broader feminist movement in Thailand.

#### Forms of Resistance

As interviewees’ comments suggest, grassroots actors’ resistance to environmental degradation are embedded within their daily practices. In other words, notions of sustainability cannot be divorced from issues around livelihoods. As an interviewee succinctly stated, “Conservation as defined by the state is not always compatible with conservation practices of certain communities on the ground.”<sup>10</sup> Interviewees explained that the environmental defenders with whom they worked often did not assert their activism through protests or by taking over public spaces—which is what is typically conceived of as activism—but rather channelled their resistance via maintaining certain methods of food provision and production, with “environmental protection” as an underlying yet not always consciously articulated concept. For example, some peasant groups persist in using traditional farming practices as a form of resistance to practices and tools imposed by agribusinesses.

If you ask what an environmental [defender] is, [most people think of] someone protesting on the street against plastic bags. But it can also have a completely different meaning. It means

having people controlling over their means of production, and [ensuring] food security for rural people.... The ways activism is practised can vary, and among the groups we work with, sometimes activism is what you imagine it to be, but sometimes it's by running and operating agroecological farms.<sup>11</sup>

Or, in the words of another NGO representative, “The peasants are [trying to protect the environment] by just doing their traditional practices. They are not trying to preserve hiking trails.”<sup>12</sup>

When asked whether defenders mobilize around human rights rhetoric and principles, some interviewees suggested that certain activists, who might identify as environmental defenders, might not necessarily define their activities as protecting human rights and might decline to be addressed as human rights defenders themselves, believing that the term was not favourable for their movements. One of them shared, “A lot of [defenders] do not speak English and they do not use human rights–based language [in their advocacy]. Most of the time, their goal is about preserving livelihoods and their traditional way of life, not explicitly human rights.”<sup>13</sup>

Interviewees who expressed this sentiment note that it could be due to the belief that the term “human rights” was too politically charged, or that it may inhibit peasant movements and activists from carrying out certain agendas. Furthermore, just as the notion of “environmentalism” can be perceived as a Western and middle-class concept by some, the concept of “human rights” can be perceived in the same way and thus as something not applicable to local contexts. One interviewee said, “While most local movements are related to a human rights framework, local people are not necessarily educated by human rights frameworks. They know their rights to protest because of their networks, CSO and NGO actors.”<sup>14</sup> Another emphasized that “A lot of environmental defenders don’t know English and they don’t necessarily use human rights–based language.”<sup>15</sup>

#### Gendered Motivations and Experiences

When asked about the gender dimensions of environmentalism in Thailand, all interviewees framed environmental protection as a

gendered struggle. Often, women environmental defenders face a double and even triple burden when gendered divisions of labour—which ascribe heavy unpaid care burdens to women—intermingle with livelihood responsibilities and environmental protection work.

When you unpack a woman's role, they are not just environmental defenders, they are also breadwinners and providers of the family. You see them as a token for the movement, but you don't see the lived experiences behind that and how women have worked their way through the power structures. In addition to their roles as environmental defenders, they also hold the burdens of running a household.<sup>16</sup>

In contexts in which women are disproportionately burdened with tasks around resource management, environmentalism has deep gendered implications. As an interviewee working with Indigenous women activists explained,

When you talk about the land and the environment, that's [not the only thing it is]. Motherhood is central in environmentalism—the mother comes out to protect, and they are not just protecting the environment, but also their family.... Women are brave and become defenders because when you talk about land and environment, they are not just the land and environment, but they are the centre of ... the lives of their families.<sup>17</sup>

The interviewee further expressed the importance of understanding environmental protection as a matter of survival not only for the community but also for families: “If the land survives, the [woman's] family survive.”<sup>18</sup> This interviewee explained that environmental protection, in this context, could be understood as an extension of women's domestic duties and was a matter of necessity rather than choice.

Despite the central role of women in these movements, all interviewees agreed that environmental movements in Thailand remained a male-dominated realm. One of them noted, “In general, activist work is very hierarchal and patriarchal; it's always led by male leaders.”<sup>19</sup> Another interviewee noted that “all political spaces

are male dominated”.<sup>20</sup> Still another further elaborated as follows:

I found that mostly when locals want to gather to protest, many of them are women, but the leader is normally [a man]. When we talk about roles of [a] leader in community groups, women themselves mention they want men to be [the] leader.<sup>21</sup>

The rigidity of gender roles that respondents highlighted may lead to disconnection between environmental concerns and feminist agendas, in which gender concerns are often apparently overshadowed by the broader goals of environmental protection. As one interviewee put it, “A lot of environmental defenders are not aware of the micro-oppressions of women defenders and various gender rights, such as sexual harassment and discrimination, because they think they are confronted with bigger battles.”<sup>22</sup>

Both interviewees from NGOs and those from academia pointed out that, despite the momentum of women-led environmental movements in Thailand, the broader women’s movement—often divided by class interests—was not automatically in solidarity with the grassroots. As one interviewee viewed the situation, “Class is a big dividing factor. People who see themselves as feminist with gender consciousness are often not in touch with the grassroots.”<sup>23</sup> An interviewee from academia placed this observation within an historical context.

Feminism in Thailand has a long history. There are different routes. One route is Western, middle-class concerns about feminism and gender equality.... More grassroots-oriented feminisms are different from the middle class. [They are about] issues of livelihoods overlapping with gender roles.<sup>24</sup>

Another academic interviewee affirmed this view.

Explicit feminist movements have historically happened in urban areas.... The idea of feminism and gender studies is largely Western and academic. Women in rural areas and in agriculture are less aware of “gender equality”; they think that it is their role.<sup>25</sup>

### Environmental Defenders as Collectives and Individuals

A prominent theme in the interviewees' accounts is the importance of conceptualizing defenders not simply as individuals but rather as collectives or communities. One interviewee said, "When we talk about protection measurements, it's usually focused on individuals. But with environmental defenders, it's about collectiveness. They fight for their collective rights. There is a need to shift the focus on the activist collective."<sup>26</sup>

The expressed need to shift the focus from individual rights to collective rights in the struggle for environmental protection and community livelihoods can be observed in issues of land rights. One interviewee said, "When we say land rights, we do not need individual land titles, but community land titles.... When land becomes individual property, it can be sold to an outsider, which makes it easy for corporations and businesses to co-opt."<sup>27</sup>

By positioning activism as part of larger collective efforts, interviewees also stressed that it enabled defenders to harness momentum and support from their networks—a crucial basis for empowering defender work. One interviewee pointed out, "local people ... know their rights to protest because of their networks".<sup>28</sup>

As noted above, the goals of defenders' movements extend beyond environmental protection, and one important extension of the movements is the struggle for and the preservation of collective autonomy.

Titles like environmental defenders and human rights defenders give more legitimacy.... But people also define themselves as "fighters for their homeland". [It's] not necessarily about the environment. It's for the community's autonomy.<sup>29</sup>

In this vein, some environmental defenders have chosen the strategy of not involving their movements in national-level politics.

In Thailand, issues are easily polarized.... [Grassroot activists] are critical of the government but they are not part of the Bangkok [political] camps. They remain autonomous on critical perspectives to preserve civic space for locals.<sup>30</sup>

In the Thai context, [certain issues] are easily polarized and reduced to certain camps because of the Bangkok-centred politics.... [Some defenders] want to remain autonomous on critical perspectives and their efforts to preserve civic space for the locals.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, interviewees from both NGOs and academia observed that, once certain movements are pushed onto the national level, their agendas can be co-opted, with the resultant risk of dilution of those movements and their focus.

Some environmental movement leaders are reluctant to join the current pro-democracy protests in Bangkok because they want to preserve the strategy of focusing on local livelihoods and people. They do not see the upscaling of local issues to the national level as strategic.<sup>32</sup>

Since national politics tend to be volatile and susceptible to change, there is little predictability in how far environmental defenders can sustain the momentum of their agendas. New administrations or political unrest can easily undo progress. Thus, all interviewees expressed many defenders' preference to keep their movements relatively local and "home-based" to avoid the risk of co-optation.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, interviewees lamented that the existing legal protection measures, which largely focus on individual protection rather than on the community or the activist collective, were insufficient in protecting collective rights.

There isn't much consciousness around understanding defenders as collectives who need collective rights. Officially, there are no clear definitions on who constitutes as an environmental or human rights defender. There is a lot of ambiguity and very limited legal protection. Especially when the state classifies defenders as "anti-development" people.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, there are concerns regarding the ways that human rights protection frameworks in Thailand, while broadly conceived, fail to capture the specific nuances of the human rights challenges that different groups may face.

Issues that Muslims in the South of Thailand face cannot be dealt [with] in the same way as Indigenous issues. But according to the government, we are merged into the same group.... The government says we are all “equal” and implements the same measures for the whole country, but [our issues] are not the same.<sup>35</sup>

The localized nature of some of the defender movements, along with the challenges that defenders may face when seeking to access legal protection, arguably undermines the legitimacy of their resistance and collective demands.

## Discussion

Contested Notions of “Environmental Defender” and Environmentalist Activities Literature attests to the contingent nature of activism and the ways in which activists’ identities are often “messy, complex and multiple” (Jenkins 2017, p. 1445).<sup>36</sup> Amooore (2005, p. 7) and Jenkins (2017, p. 1445) emphasize the idea of the “everyday” when conceptualizing activism, particularly when persistent acts of resistance are sustained through a long period of time and in isolation. While debates around terminology may be of little immediate relevance to grassroots actors on the ground, different concerns over “environmental defender” terminology may translate into varying interpretations and understandings of environmentalism, with implications for what environmental protection and related policies should entail on a broader level. As the interviewees whose comments are cited in this note attest, the boundaries between activism and daily practices are blurry, and a definition for “environmental defender” is not straightforward. In light of this complexity, grassroots environmental defenders fit uneasily within the dominant framework of environmentalism in Thailand. This finding resonates with what Opart and Solot (2003, p. 59) point out as a gap between local realities and the broader “eco-consciousness” of Thai society, which risks depersonalizing environmental issues and action. They describe a dichotomous notion of “the environment” in Thailand—between the “lay population” in



rural areas whose notion of “the environment” largely relies on local knowledges, resource use and spiritual beliefs on one side, and the urban middle-class population whose conceptions are largely couched in mainstream scientific discourse and who see nature as separate from society on the other.

As the findings presented here establish, defenders’ resistance to environmental degradation and dispossession is often not manifested through dramatic action, but rather embedded in their daily routines, such as carrying on traditional agricultural practices in the face of external pressures. For women defenders, even the seemingly mundane and taken-for-granted act of providing food for their family can become an act of resistance, and thus politically significant. This blurring of boundaries between daily practices and activism has been reflected in studies on environmental resistance (Fincher and Panelli 2001; Jenkins 2017; Verweijen et al. 2021), and it highlights the importance of recognizing mundane acts within the conception of “environmentalism” that feed into broader long-term resistance.

#### Expanding Notions of Feminism in Environmental Defender Work

The results of the interviews undertaken also suggest that some women environmental defenders see their activism as an extension of their domestic responsibilities, such as providing food and water for their families. They are motivated to protect their environment as a means to fulfil their caretaking roles. While middle-class feminist discourse may view the domestic sphere as an oppressive space needing to be overcome, women dependent on rural livelihoods may, in contrast, view their natural surroundings as a direct extension of the domestic sphere—one that represents familial and livelihood security and that needs to be protected (Pinkaw 2017, pp. 479–80). This perspective may thus exclude them from mainstream feminist discourses, which may label them as “traditional”. In this vein, class-blind feminism may view rural ecological issues as “un-feminist” or irrelevant, thus marginalizing rural voices from more mainstream feminist agendas (Pinkaw 2017, p. 480). By overlooking gendered dimensions in

environmentalism, as well as class-based nuances in environmental and feminist concerns, feminist debates can become irrelevant to the situations of rural women, whose domestic roles are directly reliant on natural resources and serve as the basis of their defender work. To this end, Duanghathai (2017, pp. 15–18) expresses the need for feminist movements to extend beyond the goal of solely realizing women’s rights per se, and instead working towards highlighting the needs of women from diverse groups and including them in social and political agendas, including those within environmental movements.

#### Social Equity Challenges

A crucial social equity implication related to the ambiguity around what constitutes “activism” concerns defenders’ rights and protection. Although labels may be secondary to defenders’ day-to-day activities on the ground, Verweijen et al. (2021, p. 45) consider the ways in which the term “activism” may influence socio-environmental action. They note that it can both legitimize or delegitimize certain movements, struggles or actors. As mentioned, in the case of Thailand, while socio-environmental struggles do manifest in large-scale protests, many mundane yet subversive practices—such as carrying out agroecological practices in the face of agribusiness homogenization—are equally important in the resistance to ecological damage and land-use change. However, these acts are often delegitimized and not regarded as environmental protection, and defenders are often even labelled as “anti-development” by the government. On a policy level, since the conception of environmentalism and environmental protection is largely confined to nature conservation, activities focusing on livelihood preservation and community autonomy are often sidelined.

While existing laws in Thailand protect the rights of human rights defenders, the lack of definition of who constitutes a human rights defender, and the lack of association of some environmental defenders with the term, means that protection is often not extended to certain important groups. Even though various international bodies,

such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, have in recent years recognized environmental rights as human rights, there remains a conceptual disconnection between environmental degradation and its direct impacts on human rights in Thailand. This disconnection can also be observed at the policy level, where there has been no formal recognition from the government that environmental issues overlap with urgent human rights matters. As an example, while Indigenous communities in Thailand have often borne the brunt of environmental impacts and land loss associated with conservation or agribusiness development, there are no legal linkages between environmental rights and Indigenous rights. This is despite the clear intersection of those two sets of rights. Furthermore, although Thailand has adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and despite the existence of a well-established Indigenous Peoples movement in the country, there is currently no official recognition of Indigenous Peoples by the central government (Morton and Baird 2019, p. 26; Prasit 2019, p. 48). None of Thailand's constitutions or legislation mentions Indigenous Peoples or *chon phao phuenmueang*, and while there has been recognition of people from "ethnic groups" or *klum chattiphan*, there is no distinction between the rights of majority and minority ethnic groups (Prasit 2019, p. 46). As a result, existing legal frameworks for conservation and environmental protection in Thailand omit both Indigenous Peoples' rights and their role as environmental stewards (IPF and KNCE 2018).

Although a collective notion such as "environmental defender" and clear connections with human rights objectives may help build legitimacy for certain movements and present opportunities to access legal systems in the face of persecution, such labels may also bring inadvertent risks. For example, Verweijen et al. (2021, p. 45) note that labels such as "environmental defenders" may encourage the "individualization" of defenders, which on the one hand may facilitate access to important international networks but on the other hand may risk exposing individuals and making them easier targets for the state. Furthermore, the interviewees on whose comments this

note draws emphasized the importance of viewing environmental protection work not as an individual endeavour, but rather as a collective one. Individualizing defenders instead of seeing them as part of a larger collective may draw attention away from collective livelihood struggles and from needs for systemic change.

## Conclusion

This research note has captured a snapshot of the diversity of environmental narratives and environmental defender identities in Thailand, along with the gendered dimensions that contribute to such complexity. The results of interviews undertaken show that dominant notions of environmentalism in Thailand often do not capture the various manifestations of environmentalism on the ground, and that what constitutes an “environmental defender” is often not clear-cut. While the mainstream notion of environmentalism in Thailand is centred on protecting pristine nature, versions of environmentalism on the ground suggest that environmentalism is as much about livelihoods, community autonomy and rights to land as it is about protecting resources. Lines between environmental protection and daily practices are blurry, and acts of resistance and environmental protection by grassroots communities are often embodied via daily practices, not necessarily grand gestures or the taking over of public spaces. Individuals who are engaged in environmental protection may act more on the basis of livelihood protection and may not necessarily identify with the label of “environmental defender”. Women resisting environmental degradation may be driven by the need to carry out their domestic duties and sustain their families, instead of by environmentalism per se. The undefined line between resistance and daily life means that many of those involved in environmental protection often do not self-identify as defenders. At the same time, even those who do identify as environmental defenders may not align themselves with human rights or feminist agendas, despite their activities having implications for those agendas, because of preconceived ideas of what these concepts may mean.

The ambiguity of what exactly constitutes environmental defender work can make it difficult for individuals and communities to access legal protection.

Elucidating the complex, intersecting and often ambiguous identities of environmental defenders in Thailand helps paint a broader picture of what environmentalism entails. It may thus provoke more holistic policy responses that address the social and gender equity interests of communities. Ultimately, tackling these complex intersections at the policy level requires reimagining environmentalism as “pro-livelihood” and locally important, and finding ways to navigate controversies associated with “human rights” while protecting these very rights.

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### NOTES

1. Also see the contributions in Hirsch (1997).
2. Interview, representative from NGO 1, Bangkok, Thailand, Bangkok, 8 September 2020.
3. Interview, Academic 1, online, 10 December 2021.
4. Interview, representative from NGO 3, online, 20 December 2021.
5. Interview, representative from NGO 4, Bangkok, 27 October 2020. PM 2.5 is a measure of particulate matter in the air, commonly used as a gauge of pollution resulting from fires caused by the burning of crop land in Northern Thailand.
6. Interview, representative from NGO 8, online, 30 November 2020.
7. Interview, representative from NGO 4, Bangkok, 27 October 2020.
8. Interview, Academic 3, Khon Kaen, Thailand, 13 November 2020.
9. Interview, representative from NGO 6, online, 26 November 2021.

10. Interview, Academic 4, online, 24 November 2021.
11. Interview, representative from NGO 4, Bangkok, 27 October 2020.
12. Interview, representative from NGO 2, online, 1 December 2020.
13. Interview, representative from NGO 4, Bangkok, 27 October 2020.
14. Interview, Academic 1, online, 10 December 2021.
15. Interview, representative from NGO 1, Bangkok, 8 September 2020.
16. Interview, representative from NGO 7, online, 19 November 2020.
17. Interview, representative from NGO 2, online, 1 December 2020.
18. Ibid.
19. Interview, Academic 4, online, 24 November 2021.
20. Interview, representative from NGO 6, online, 26 November 2021.
21. Interview, Academic 1, online, 10 December 2021.
22. Interview, representative from NGO 5, online, 29 March 2021.
23. Interview, representative from NGO 4, Bangkok, 27 October 2020.
24. Interview, Academic 2, online, 24 November 2021.
25. Interview, Academic 4, online, 24 November 2021.
26. Interview, representative from NGO 1, Bangkok, 8 September 2020.
27. Interview, representative from NGO 2, online, 1 December 2020.
28. Interview, Academic 1, online, 10 December 2021.
29. Interview, representative from NGO 1, Bangkok, 8 September 2020.
30. Interview, Academic 2, online, 24 November 2021.
31. Interview, representative from NGO 7, online, 19 November 2020.
32. Interview, representative from NGO 4, Bangkok, 27 October 2020.
33. Ibid.
34. Interview, representative from NGO 1, Bangkok, 8 September 2020.
35. Interview, representative from NGO 2, online, 1 December 2020.
36. Jenkins here draws on Chatterton and Pickerill (2010, p. 479).

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