# SAIH

ACTIVISM UNDER ATTACK

2024

"Because of your conduct, you do not have the right to get a degree"
University Students' Experiences of Activism, Repression and Community

About the Authors

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Amy Kapit is an independent researcher and Senior Program Officer for Advocacy, at Scholars at Risk. She leads the work on the Free to Think report series and the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, tracking attacks on higher education communities. Previously she was a Visiting Assistant Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies at Swarthmore College. Her research and teaching have focused on the relationships between education, armed conflict, and violence; paradigms of humanitarian aid; critical analysis of global indicator frameworks; academic freedom; and university student activism. She holds a PhD in International Education from New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development and a BA in Religion and Peace and Conflict Studies from Swarthmore College. Amy is also the mother of a chaotic, opinionated, and delightfully stubborn toddler, who she can only hope will be as courageous, caring, and passionate about the fight for social justice as the students whose voices appear in the pages that follow.
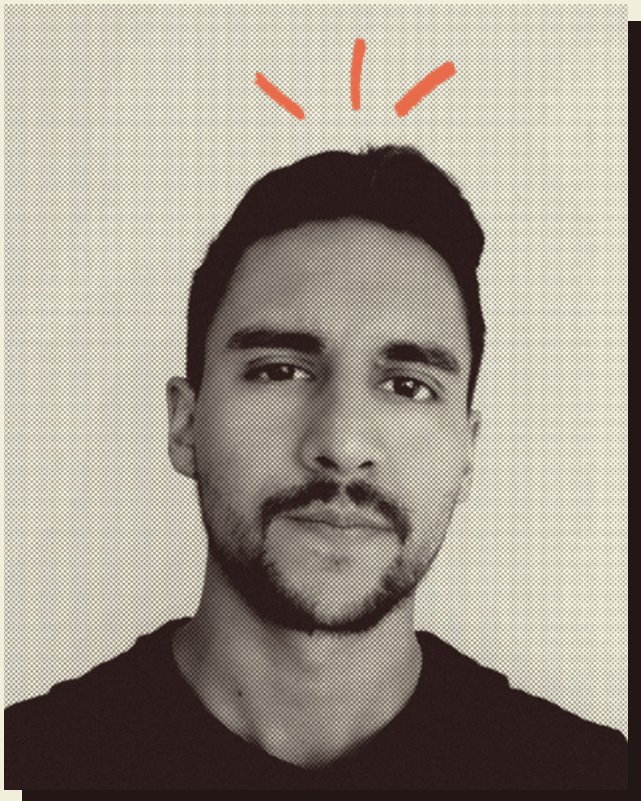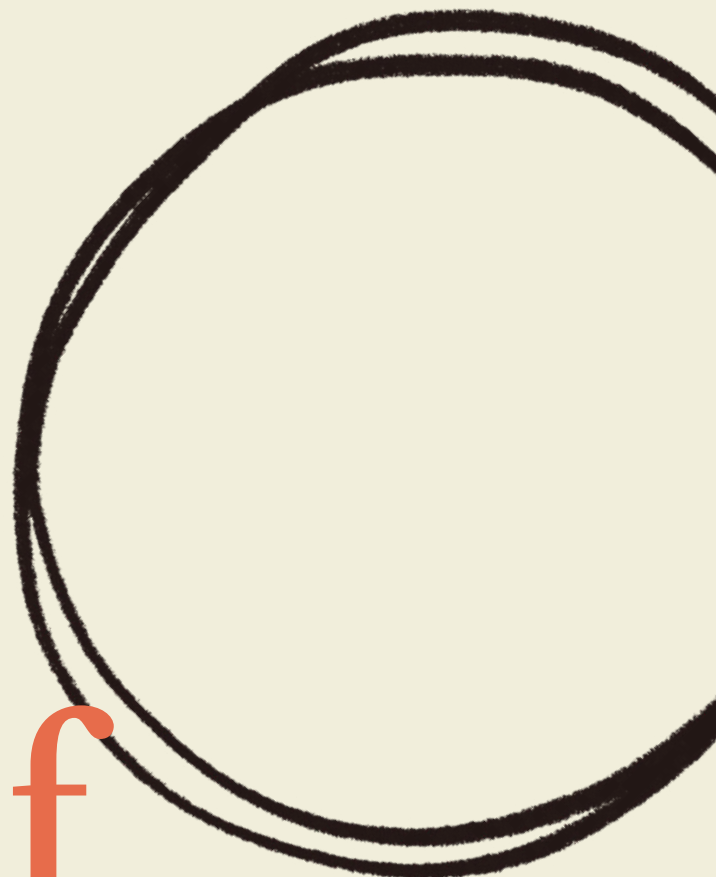
Héctor Ríos-Jara

Héctor Ríos-Jara is a Postdoctoral Researcher and member of the Max Planck group for Economics and Society at Universidad Central de Chile. He specializes in the study of social conflict, social policy and neoliberalism. He has conducted comparative studies in Chile, the UK and the USA, exploring the links between fees and loan policies and student movements. He holds a PhD in Social Science from the University College of London (UK), an MSc in Social Research from Bristol University and a BA in Social Psychology from Universidad de Santiago. Héctor also has been an activist for free education during the last two decades. He was part of the free education campaign in Chile between 2006 and 2015. In the UK, he was involved in student movements and cooperated with information on the design of the free education policy for the Labour Party in 2019. In 2023 and 2024, he worked as a special advisor for the Ministry of Education of Chile in the design of a student debt cancellation policy and the reform of the student loans system.

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Selma Bratberg

President of SAIH

Since the beginning of 2024, a wave of student-led protests has taken over university campuses worldwide. Solidarity encampments, demonstrations and teach-ins are just some of the ways that we as university students have organized and mobilized in response to Israel's genocide in Gaza and the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people.

In response, students have faced severe rights violations at the hands of state authorities and university administrations. Numerous incidents have been reported globally where universities have involved law enforcement to arrest, detain, and forcibly remove students from protests. Many more have endured academic reprisals, including suspensions and expulsions.

Even though this wave of global student protests is more widespread than we've seen in a long time, neither the activism nor the reactions against it are something new.

Students have always been one of the first groups to take to the streets when justice, equality and human rights are on the line. In the late 1900s, students were key in the fight against Apartheid in South Africa. In 2014, students in Hong Kong led a series of pro-democratic protests, later known as the Umbrella revolution due to the students' use of umbrellas to protect themselves from the tear gas and pepper spray used by police. Throughout the last year, we've seen students protesting in several countries such as Iran, India, Zimbabwe, Thailand and Argentina, just to mention a few. And as I write this preface, the Bangladeshi government has been ousted as a result of a historic student-led uprising. Students are bold, courageous voices that ask critical questions, challenge the status quo and demand accountability.

Our activism is an integral part of a vibrant university campus and helps fulfill the university's role as a critical voice in society. In doing so, students also strengthen academic freedom, which is an important pillar of democracy. Moreover, student activists strengthen civil society through their engagement and solidarity, and their engagement and activism have effects reaching far beyond the university campus.

By silencing students and their activism, we allow for less critical thinking and limit the forces of people that can hold leaders accountable – both on and off campus.

The need for increased protection
This year, we are celebrating ten years of the Norwegian Students at Risk (StAR) program, which SAIH was instrumental in establishing. While StAR, and other similar programs for at risk university students, offer important protection to ensure their right to higher education, the report also touches upon other forms of repression experienced by student activists which require additional protection measures. When repression is coming from within your community, organizing and cultivating safe, supportive and solidaric communities of activism is key in sustaining student activism.

Building on SAIH's 2023 "Activism Under Attack" report, this report provides a useful analysis for understanding the unique needs of student activists globally. SAIH has a long history of standing in solidarity with student movements around the world. We are committed to continue this work, documenting and researching attacks against student activists, providing data which informs our international advocacy to protect and promote student activists. We do this together with, and complimentary to, many great allies such as Scholars at Risk, Global Student Forum, UNSR on human rights defenders, amongst others. We can't do this work alone and call on other allies to join our work and help contribute to protecting student activists.

States, higher education institutions and civil society organizations globally must not only better understand how student activism is being repressed, but also take concrete action to better protect it! The report highlights several recommendations.

Lastly, I want to thank all the students who have taken the time and effort to share their experiences and contribute to this report. We stand in solidarity with you and all students around the world who continue fighting for an inclusive and rights-based present and future. Students change the world, and they need to be protected!

Mary Lawlor ↗

UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

In every corner of the world, young human rights defenders are at the forefront in the protection and promotion of universally recognized human rights, often at great personal risk. Driven by a desire for justice, youth defenders are some of the leading voices confronting global issues such as authoritarianism, privatization of education, climate change and gender-based violence. University students play a key role in these efforts, and their activism is often met with repression rather than the protection and encouragement it deserves.

It is alarming that these defenders – so vital for human rights – are increasingly under threat, as demonstrated in my report on the protection of children and young human rights defenders presented to the UN Human Rights Council earlier this year. Repressive laws and policies that criminalize non-violent dissent impact young human rights defenders' everyday activism and engagement in their communities. The strong networks and resources that otherwise contribute to building resilience are often unavailable, inadequate or unknown to young defenders. Ageism and political discrediting, sometimes from human rights allies, further impedes young defenders' ability to carry out human rights advocacy. All of this takes a personal toll on their mental health and psychosocial well-being, which demands immediate attention by relevant stakeholders.

Building on my mandate's report, this research is an important contribution to the global discourse on the protection of youth human rights defenders, in particular university students. Significantly, it emphasizes that higher education is transformative in shaping young people as engaged citizens in their societies, which is why it is often targeted by authoritarian and illiberal regimes.

The 291 university students from around the world who have been interviewed and surveyed for this report call to be recognized, promoted and protected as human rights defenders. This report highlights several concrete recommendations for Member states to protect young human rights defenders. Higher education communities should contribute to encouraging rather than punishing student activism. International civil society and donors should stand in solidarity with young human rights defenders, providing them with the support and protection that they have identified.

My mandate remains committed to recognizing the work and advocating for the protection of youth human rights defenders. As I told a gathering of 40+ young defenders I convened last year in Vienna to mark the 25th anniversary of the Human Rights Defenders Declaration, it is they who now must bring the torch of human rights forward for the next 25 years.

Young human rights defenders everywhere are showing us that it is possible to achieve a world built on the principles of human rights, justice and equality – we must not let oppression, fear and violence silence these voices.

I. Introduction

On April 17, 2024, as Columbia University president Nemat (Minouche) Shafik prepared to testify before the U.S. Congress about the university's response to antisemitism, a group of Columbia University students set up tents on the campus' South Lawn, establishing an encampment to demand that the university divest from institutions with business ties to the Israeli military. By the following afternoon, Columbia's administration had suspended all students in the encampment, and over 50 police officers clad in riot gear had arrested 108 students. [1] The overwhelming police response to a peaceful student protest set off a wave of Palestine solidarity demonstrations throughout the United States and across the globe. [2] As in the case of Columbia, a large number of these almost universally peaceful [3] demonstrations were forcibly broken up. [4] In many cases, universities handed down significant disciplinary punishments, suspending students, banning students and faculty from campus, evicting students from campus housing, and threatening the visas of international students.[5]

1. Scholars at Risk, Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, April 18, 2024, https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-04-18-columbia-university/.
2. Suvendrini Kakuchi, "Gaza War Sparks Unprecedented, Sustained Campus Protests," University World News, May 21, 2024, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240521182242886; Ashifa Kassam, "Clashes and Arrests as Pro-Palestinian Protests Spread across European Campuses," The Guardian, May 7, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/08/pro-palestine-student-protests-campuses-europe-arrests-police; Wagdy Sawahel, "MENA Universities Join Global Protests over War in Gaza," University World News, May 3, 2024, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240503162533493; Shuriah Niazi, Ameen Amjad Khan, and Mohiuddin Alamgir, "Asian Students Swell Ranks of 'Global' Anti-War Protesters," University World News, May 9, 2024, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240509171206301.
3. Lois Beckett, "Nearly All Gaza Campus Protests in the US Have Been Peaceful, Study Finds," The Guardian, May 10, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/10/peaceful-pro-palestinian-campus-protests.
4. In the United States, police arrested or detained nearly 3,000 students at nearly 70 colleges and universities between April 18 and May 24, 2024. See New York Times, "Where Protesters on U.S. Campuses Have Been Arrested or Detained," https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/us/pro-palestinian-college-protests-encampments.html; see also, Kassam, "Clashes and Arrests as Pro-Palestinian Protests Spread across European Campuses."
5. Jocelyn Gecker, "College Protesters Want 'Amnesty.' At Stake: Tuition, Legal Charges, Grades and Graduation," Associated Press, April 28, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/student-protest-gaza-war-arrest-amnesty-ae235703d6a9b99114078fca13a530a0; Rachel Treisman, Brian Mann, and Jaclyn Diaz, "As Student Protesters Get Arrested, They Risk Being Banned From Campus Too," NPR, April 29, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/04/29/1247761719/campus-protests-arrests-suspensions; Maham Javaid, "For International Students, Protesting on Campuses Has Higher Stakes," Washington Post, May 3, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/05/03/international-students-campus-protest-visas.

Photo: Kierran Allen

While the current global wave of university student protests is unusually widespread and has resulted in the kind of mass discipline not seen in decades,[6] university student activists have faced similar forms of suppression on an ongoing basis. This is the case across political contexts, from authoritarian societies, where dissent is structurally and consistently suppressed, to democratic societies, where leaders are increasingly using law and policy in illiberal ways. These violations mirror those that students demonstrating against Israel's bombardment of Gaza have faced. They include violence, abuse, and surveillance, as well as unfounded investigations, arrest, imprisonment, and prosecution often legitimized by illiberal or repressive laws and policies or through the use of legal instruments, such as court orders. They also include more subtle or less visible forms of silencing—such as the withholding of grades or financial support, threats of detention, social pressure from friends and family, and delegitimizing rhetoric, to name a few.

This report explores the repression of university student activism and the ways in which authority figures violate the rights of university student activists, including their rights to freedom of expression and assembly and their right to education. It is part of a broader project that seeks to shed light on the important role that university student activists play in promoting social justice and preserving democracy,

the challenges that they face, and the support that they need. It builds on the Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund's (SAIH) March 2023 report Activism Under Attack: Understanding the Repression of Student Activism [7] by drawing on the voices of students themselves to provide a more detailed and nuanced understanding of students' experience of activism and repression.

The key finding of this report is that university students perceive that the most significant barriers to their political engagement come from the people they interact with on a daily basis. This includes actors with authority over them, such as their professors, as well as their friends and family members. As prior scholarship has found, the success of repressive efforts is contingent on the strength and form of social networks. [8] Repression is most effective when it tears apart social ties. Conversely, building community—and cultivating ethics of care and love—is an important mechanism for protecting student activists and sustaining activism. [9]

6. Laura Meckler and Hannah Natanson, "Massive Pro-Palestinian College Protests Bring Rare Surge in Discipline," Washington Post, May 6, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/05/06/college-protests-suspensions-expulsion-arrests/.
7. Amy Kapit, Activism Under Attack: Understanding the Repression of Student Activism, SAIH, March 2023, https://cdn.sanity.io/files/llblvlgl/production/eee2b10027c5e559242c8add458f7dbbba18b634.pdf.
8. David A. Siegel, "When Does Repression Work? Collective Action in Social Networks," The Journal of Politics 73, no. 4: 993–1010.
9. See, for example, Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times," Social Text 38, no. 1 (2020).

Photo: Ahmad Talat/Zuma Press

Goals of the Report

In the pages that follow, this report seeks to put its analysis of the repression of university student activism in a broader context to better understand what university student activism is, how it operates, and how student activists can be better protected. Thus, it has three aims.

First, it seeks to better understand how university students conceptualize their activism. Because the meaning of activism may vary from context to context, we chose not to define it ourselves; rather, we asked student participants to self-select into the study as activists. The report therefore seeks to establish what students believe activism to be, the topics they engage in, and the tactics that they use. Significantly, **the students who participated in this research underscored how civic engagement functioned as an aspect of their activism.** Many did participate in direct action, such as protests, marches, sit-ins, and strikes, [10] but they also frequently pointed to important contributions to civic and social life, such as voluntary and social service activities, in defining what it means to be an activist. This is significant because such forms of activism are often overlooked, and their risks under-analyzed in the existing research on repression. This first section helps situate the remaining sections of the report: conceptualizing activism in this broader sense is important for understanding the full universe of civic engagement that may be damaged when the rights of student activists are violated.

Second, this report aims to paint a picture of university students' experiences of repression and the violations that they face. Drawing on students' descriptions of the ways in which their rights have been violated, we highlight two overarching modes of repression that students emphasize:

1. University lawfare: Students consistently pointed to the way that their universities sought to prevent them from engaging in political action. In particular, they made clear that **they feel most threatened by higher education authorities' threat of using policies to fail, suspend, or expel them** [11] —in other words, when their rights to the freedom of expression and opinion and peaceful assembly and association are suppressed by threatening their right to education.

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10. Other common forms of activism include rallies, chalking, guerilla art, satire, boycotts, production of podcasts, blogs, or strategic litigation.
11. It's important to recognize that higher education authorities do not necessarily threaten student activists for the sake of repressing them, but rather because of external pressures on them; for instance, fear for their reputation, that funding or donations could be withdrawn or withheld, or that their government will take repressive action against the university itself.

2. **Relational repression:** Students emphasized **the significance of social pressure, or "relational repression," in discouraging activism.** [12] Such forms of repression manipulate social networks and social ties to put pressure on activists. Social pressure is often exerted using delegitimizing rhetoric—for example, family members urging activists to focus on "academics" instead of "politics." Relational repression also takes place when authority figures attempt to co-opt activists by incentivizing their acquiescence.

This is the case across contexts that span the spectrum from authoritarian to democratic. While the more violent forms of repression—such as the use of force against protesters, threats of violence, or arrests and imprisonment—may be more common in more repressive contexts, more subtle forms of repression that can be found consistently across contexts set the foundation for such violence.

Finally, the report underscores the consequences of these forms of repression and considers strategies for keeping student activists safe. The student activists interviewed for the project spoke extensively about the personal toll that their activism takes. Lawfare and relational repression are effective because of the impact that they have on students' future and social ties. Students fear that bad grades, suspension, or expulsion will make it harder for them to graduate, to get a future job, or to earn a future income. Meanwhile, relational repression isolates student activists. These two consequences are interrelated: for instance, social networks and ties make it easier to find employment, and strong social ties help mitigate the challenges of unemployment.

Thus, the report concludes by considering the protective factors that keep students engaged as activists, including what resources the students have access to, the ways that they have kept themselves physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe, and what resources they wish were more available.

Most significantly, the responses that we gathered from students underscore the importance of community, care, and love both within their immediate activist network and from others, in the form of solidarity. Students explained how acts of repression were often most effective because of the ways that they disintegrated social ties and community bonds. Along these same lines, among the factors that students consistently highlighted was the important role of community in bolstering their sense of purpose and keeping them engaged. **Community is therefore two sides of the same coin. If repression is most insidious when it breaks up communities, preserving those communities is also one of the most important ways to protect student activists.** As a whole, our findings therefore point to the importance of a "relational understanding of both harm and survival." [13]

These findings are important because students are often leaders in the fight for democracy, justice, and human rights. Yet they are also under-protected and under-resourced, often undermined even by potential allies who call them "immature" and "inexperienced." [14]

Moreover, the university and college years are a transformative period for students, and higher education institutions are foundational for democracies. They are where democracy and democratic values develop and reproduce. **Universities and colleges are where students learn to be activists, gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to become active members of democratic societies.** Universities are also, no less importantly, spaces where scholars and students debate the meaning of democracy, as well as concepts like freedom, or social justice. **Authoritarian and illiberal regimes recognize this. It's one reason that they systematically and strategically target higher education.** Understanding student activists' experiences—particularly by listening to students themselves—is necessary for protecting them. Such protection is a strategy for ensuring a vibrant future civil society that can promote and protect human rights.

12. See Kevin J. O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "Preventing Protest One Person at a Time: Psychological Coercion and Relational Repression in China," China Review 17, no. 2 (2017): 179–201.
13. Roxani Krystalli, and Phillipp Schulz, "Taking Love and Care Seriously: An Emergent Research Agenda for Remaking Worlds in the Wake of Violence," International Studies Review 24, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac003.
14. See Kapit, Activism Under Attack: Understanding the Repression of Student Activism, 18–21.

II. Methodology

This is a descriptive study, aimed at qualitatively understanding who student activists are and their experiences of repression. As such, this report draws on two sources of data: a survey filled out by 263 university student activists and in-depth qualitative interviews with 28 university student activists. Both data sources included questions that sought to understand (1) how university students define what it is to be a student activist, (2) what forms of repression they face, and (3) what forms of protection they have access to and would like to have access to. Data collection for this study was conducted between July and October 2023, with almost all data collected before the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel and Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip prompted a significant upswell in student activism globally.

Outreach

SAIH led the outreach for the research by issuing a call for university students to participate by sharing their experiences of activism through a survey and interviews. The call was directed toward university students, but it specified that the research sought to understand experiences of activism. We decided to issue the call broadly in recognition of the fact that not all students who engage in activism necessarily identify as activists. We did not limit the call to a particular age group or level of higher education.

SAIH issued an open call for participation on their website and social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and X). In addition, SAIH engaged in targeted outreach by circulating the call to relevant partners in Latin America, Southern Africa, and Southeast Asia. SAIH also shared the call for research via trusted human rights networks, academic networks, and other civil society actors working with human rights defenders and activists globally, in case those partners worked with university student populations.

Photo: Colin Lloyd /Unsplash

These networks have been developed through SAIH's protection work and cover an array of thematic focus/geographic locations. Due to the different thematic and geographical focus of these networks, in some countries we see a concentration of respondents around certain themes (e.g., LGBTQIA+) or geographic locations (e.g., specific universities). The Global Student Forum [15] also collaborated with recruitment, sharing the call via their website/social media, their networks, and at regional events in Africa, Europe, and Latin America.

The call for the research, which was distributed in English and Spanish, invited university students both to complete a survey (see Appendix I for a copy of the survey) and to fill out a questionnaire expressing interest and willingness to participate in a 60-minute-long qualitative interview (see Appendix II for a copy of the interview protocol). The survey was made available in both English and Spanish. Students who completed the survey were also invited to complete the questionnaire by expressing a willingness to participate in an English or Spanish-language qualitative interview. The interview team—which included the two lead researchers and three trained undergraduate research assistants—reached out to 50 of the 87 individuals who expressed an interest in participating in qualitative interviews. We chose potential participants with the intention of speaking to a diverse group of students; we therefore included nationality and gender in our selection criteria. During the final month of interviewing, we chose to focus on speaking with additional respondents from four specific countries from which we had higher numbers of survey participants: Bolivia, Myanmar, Russia, and Zimbabwe. This will allow us to delve into the specific conditions for student activists in those countries in future reports. In total, we conducted interviews with 28 students from 19 countries.

We took several steps to reduce the risk to students who participated in the research. First, we used Qualtrics to collect data. Qualtrics is widely considered to be an extremely secure platform. [16] Second, we refrained from collecting the IP addresses and locations of those who completed the surveys. Third, we did not ask participants to share identifying information such as their own names or the names of their institutions or organizations with which they worked. To get in touch with those who expressed interest in participating in qualitative interviews, we asked them to select a means of communication that they preferred and to share that contact information with us. After we reached out to them, we asked the students to let us know what platform they preferred for the interview itself. The interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish over Zoom, WhatsApp, or Signal, and, if the student preferred, we also enabled them to participate in the interview in writing. Finally, for security purposes, in the pages below, when we quote directly from the students who participated in this project, we refer to the region in which they are located rather than their country. In part, this is an important mechanism for protection because, in many cases, we have just one or two participants from a single country.

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15. The Global Student Forum is the global student union of student organizations from 135 countries and territories. See: https://www.globalstudentforum.org/.
16. Qualtrics encrypts all data using Transport Layer Security encryption and is hosted by data centers that are independently audited according to the industry standard SSAE-18 method. See https://www.qualtrics.com/security-statement.

Limitations

This is a descriptive and exploratory study with a number of limitations. First, the fact that we shared the call for survey and interview participants through existing networks and relatively organically is a limitation of the report. For example, in several of the countries where students participated, they were recruited via certain thematic actors (LGBTQIA+ organizations, for example), specific student unions/organizations or specific human rights organizations. One reason for this strategy was that SAIH trusts these networks to mitigate potential risks to respondents. However, sharing the call in this manner resulted in disproportionate numbers of respondents from specific countries and associated with specific organizations, meaning that the picture of activism described in this report may be partially colored by the types of work that those organizations do.

It is also important to note that most students who filled out the intake form and/or the survey were recruited through targeted outreach to SAIH's partners; very few students responded to the open call posted on SAIH's social media accounts. This may relate to the sensitivity of the topic: students at risk of repression are likely less willing to respond to a survey on their activism if they do not know or trust the individuals or organizations conducting the research. Without such trust, they are more likely to be skeptical about the purposes of the research. Even for students who engaged with the survey, the sensitivity of the topic was a concern. Indeed, 4% of respondents dropped out of the survey at Q4.3, which asked about police repression.

Furthermore, the fact that we relied on SAIH's networks to disseminate the call for survey and interview participants resulted in an unbalanced sample. As detailed below, we had more participants from countries located in the Global North.

Second, the fact that the call was framed as being focused on "student activism" is a potential bias of this project. While we targeted the call broadly to "university students," we have received input that the word "activist" can have a negative connotation and meaning that lacks nuance, meaning it may be received differently by students in different contexts. For instance, a human rights advocate from Southern Africa, who we spoke to for the previous phase of this project, told us that they refrain from using the word "activist" in their own work, instead referring to themselves as "advocates." It is possible that some students were deterred from participation because of the thematic focus on activism—for example, because they had a negative association with the concept of an activist and/or because they did not think they had anything to say on the topic.

Along these lines, it is notable that approximately half of the students that engaged with the survey did not complete it. Among the students who did not complete the survey, around 45% answered only one or two questions. Another 38% answered only the first three questions, stopping at the question "Do you consider yourself a student activist?" It is likely that those students who did not consider themselves activists decided after the first three questions that the survey was not for them; although it is also worth noting that 12% of students who answered the question (or 6% of students who engaged with the survey) stated that they were not student activists but completed the survey anyway.

A fourth limitation of the project was language. Our research team only had the capacity to collect data in English or Spanish, meaning that we were only able to reach students with English or Spanish proficiency for this report.

Finally, the fact that we sought to attract a global pool of respondents, rather than focusing on specific contexts, made it difficult to conduct a comparative analysis or to drill down in detail on specific thematic questions. While multiple respondents spoke, for example, to the particulars of being an LGBTQIA+ activist or a woman activist, those samples were very small, making it difficult to draw specific conclusions. Our analysis, therefore, focuses on identifying themes common to all activists' experiences. Further research is necessary to better understand, for instance, how gender shapes activists' experiences.

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Photo: Kierran Allen

DO ONLY THE RICH DESERVE EDUCATION?!
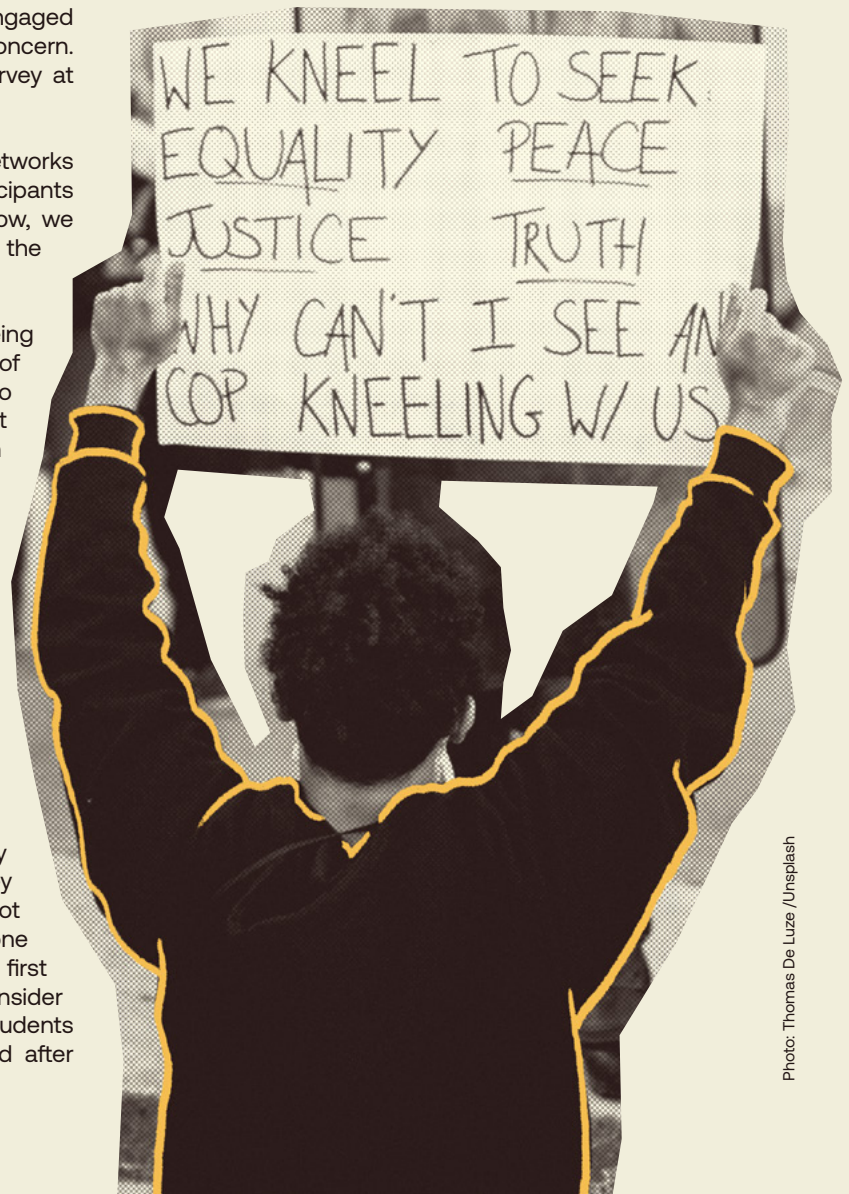
Protocol Design

We used SAIH's previous report, Activism Under Attack, published in 2023, as the starting point to design our survey, interview protocols, and analysis. The 2023 report conceptualized a four-part typology describing four subtle or less visible forms of repression. These included:

1. **Lawfare:** the use of law prohibiting public disturbance or terrorism to constrain student organizing.

2. **Delegitimization:** the use of rhetoric that labels student activists as "terrorists," "hooligans," "criminals," "idiots," "ill-informed," "naive," or "perverts".

3. **Co-option:** the establishing or empowering of government-controlled or aligned student organizations or the incentivizing student support for government policies in ways that neutralize political opposition by students.

4. **Factionalization:** the inflammation of broader political or social tensions within the student population.

We sought to integrate questions addressing each of these forms of repression into both of our protocols, while also allowing for new issues to emerge.

Analytic Approach

In analyzing both the survey and interview data, we chose to focus primarily on drawing out common themes among all participants, rather than comparing across contexts. While we integrate this kind of comparative analysis where possible in our findings below, we do not do so consistently or systematically.

We made this decision for two reasons. First, as mentioned above, the fact that our sample was unbalanced made comparing between contexts difficult. Second, democratic and autocratic regimes alike increasingly engage in illiberal practices, with grim consequences for student activism. [17] Moreover, globalization and the prevalence of international student exchange means that education is increasingly transnational; so too is repression. For example, recent research by Freedom House has found that governments such as China, Egypt, India, Rwanda, and Saudi Arabia are engaging in surveillance, harassment, and threats to silence their own nationals who are studying abroad, including in more open contexts like the United States. [18] Recognizing these trends, one of our goals in this report is to underscore the forms of repression that occur across contexts, regardless of how open they are.

We conducted a descriptive analysis of the survey data. Out of the 343 respondents who started the survey, we analyzed responses from 263 students. We included in our analysis all surveys for which respondents had completed at least the three initial questions. We analyzed the survey data for each question individually, drawing only on those surveys with completed answers for that question. In addition, because different participants answered different questions, our analysis focused on describing general trends among all participants, rather than running a comparative analysis between groups.

To analyze the qualitative data, one of the lead researchers and three trained undergraduate research assistants jointly developed a codebook and thematically coded the interviews, seeking to understand interviewee's definitions of student activism, the forms of repression that they faced, and the types of protection that they had both accessed and sought. Coding was both deductive—taking the four-part typology developed for the 2023 report as a starting point—and inductive, or grounded in the participants' own experiences. See Appendix III for the code book.

Through analyzing the qualitative data, we amended our initial typology of repression, coming to understand delegitimization, co-option, and factionalization as specific forms of relational repression. For example, students described the way that factionalization operated as a form of peer pressure. They describe co-option as a function of factionalization. Few student activists describe specific attempts by authority figures to co-opt their own acquiescence or cooperation (rather, they point to the use of threats as a much more significant pressure). However, the students describe how opposing factions are incentivized to "toe the party line."

17. Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, "The Real Crisis of Global Order: illiberalism on the Rise," Foreign Affairs 101 (2022): 103; "Student Movements Highlight the Illiberal Turn of Western Liberalism," AgendaPublica, May 8, 2024, https://agendapublica.es/noticia/19197/student-movements-highlight-illiberal-turn-of-western-liberalism.
18. Yana Gorokhovskaia and Grady Vaughan, Addressing Transnational Repression on Campuses in the United States, Freedom House, January 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/TNR_UniversityReport_2024F.pdf. See also Amnesty International, "On My Campus, I Am Afraid": China's Targeting Of Overseas Students Stifles Rights, May 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/8006/2024/en/.

Research Participants' Profiles

The university students who participated in this research engaged in activism in countries with varying levels of academic freedom, with a slightly higher proportion of participants associated with countries with little to no academic freedom.

Since we anticipated that not all respondents would be living in their countries of nationality, we asked them to indicate where they had lived during their time of most intensive activism (survey Q3.4) and to answer questions regarding activism in relation to the country they indicated. **In total, participants engaged in activism in 36 countries [19] around the world, including 11 sub-regions on five continents.** Slightly higher numbers of respondents came from a handful of countries, including Bolivia (12), Indonesia (22), Russia, (47), and Zimbabwe (37). While the current report analyzes themes across all activist contexts, it would also be possible and useful to analyze answers pertaining specifically to these countries, and future reports may do this.

Figure 1:

Number of interview participants by level of academic freedom

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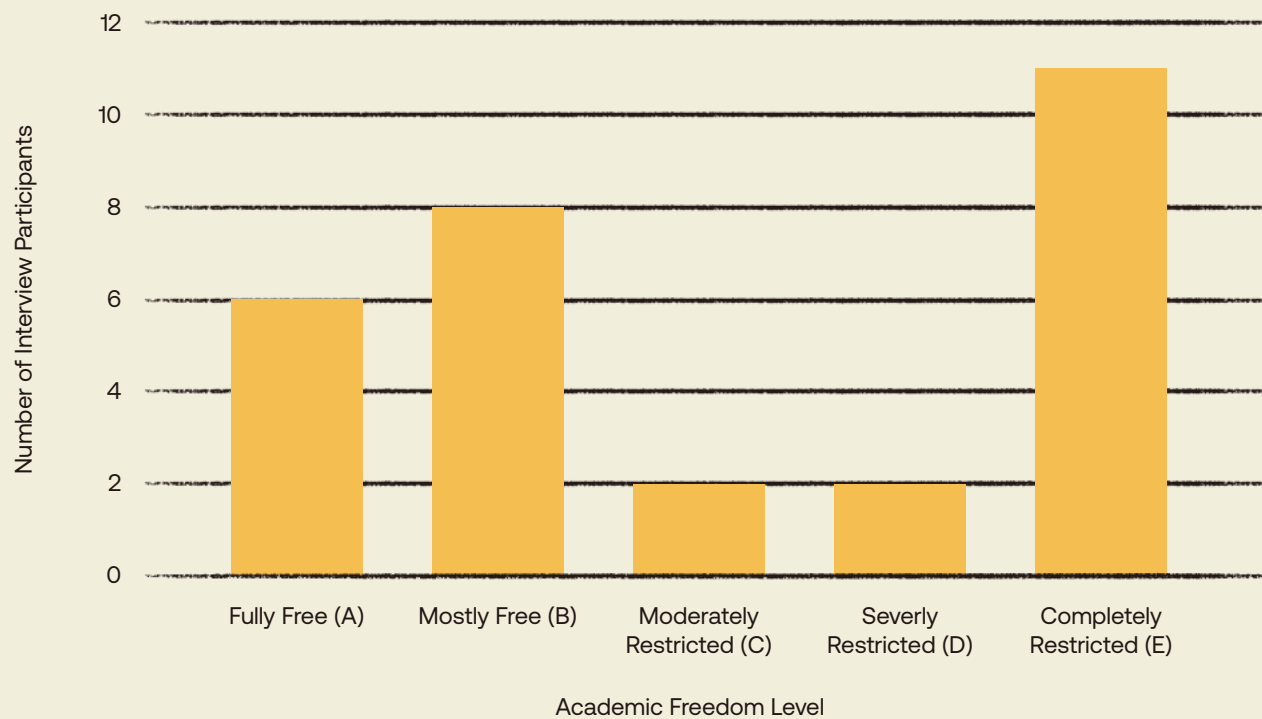
19. Survey participants engaged in activism in Bolivia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, Colombia, East Timor, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Malawi, Myanmar, Namibia, Netherlands, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.

Figure 2:

Survey participants by level of academic freedom

Figures 1 and 2 show the number of research participants associated with countries with varying levels of academic freedom (broken out by interview participants and survey participants, respectively), as measured by the Academic Freedom Index (AFi). [20] The AFi distinguishes countries according to five levels of academic freedom: (A) fully free, (B) mostly free, (C) moderately restricted, (D) severely restricted, and (E) completely restricted. As Figure 2 illustrates, the highest proportion (32.61%) of survey participants were engaged in activism in countries with completely restricted academic freedom, followed by countries with mostly free academic environments (27.72%) and severely restricted levels of academic freedom (23.37%).

In terms of the gender breakdown of respondents, among the 263 respondents, 131 (49.8%) identified themselves as women, 101 (38.4%) identified themselves as men, 25 (9.5%) identified themselves as non-binary, and 6 respondents preferred not to answer the question.

We asked several questions to identify the socioeconomic status of respondents. Among 262 respondents who answered what setting they had grown up in, the majority (74.4%) had grown up in an urban setting, while 20.9% had grown up in a rural area and 4.5% had grown up in another type of setting. We also asked respondents to indicate what level of education they were pursuing. Among 167 respondents who answered this question, most (86.8%) were pursuing a bachelor's degree, 12.6% were pursuing a master's degree, 8.4% were pursuing an associate's degree, and 3.7% were pursuing a doctoral degree.

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20. See the Academic Freedom Index at https://academic-freedom-index.net/.
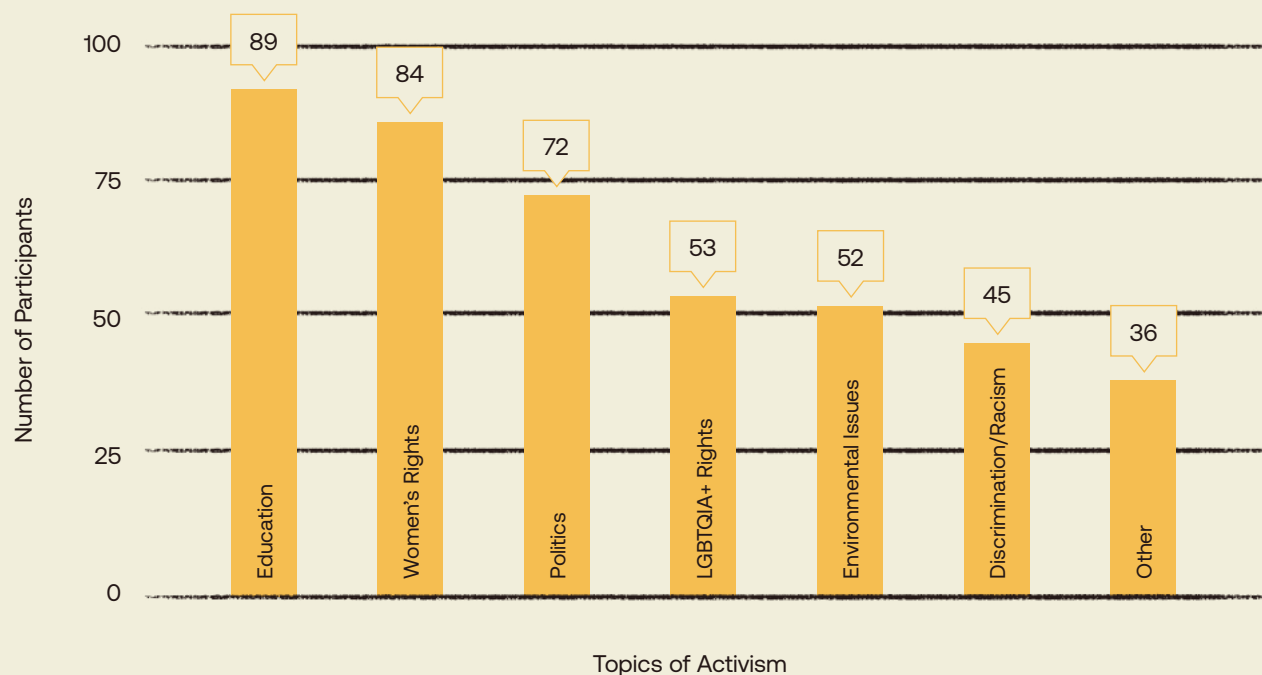
In relation to activism, respondents identified themselves as having been engaged as activists for significantly varying lengths of time. This ranged from half a year to 17 years, including several outliers, who possibly had returned to school later in life and may have been counting activism prior to university. The average length of engagement was 4.5 years, with a mode of 3 years.

In addition, the students who took part in this project were often engaged in multiple, intersectional or complementary causes. For example, among respondents, students involved in activism on women's rights were often also involved in the LGBTQIA+ activism.

Among 187 participants who answered a question asking which topics their activism has focused on, only 34.2% marked one option. In contrast, 64% chose more than one option, with most of those marking either two or three causes. As Figure 3 depicts, the most frequent causes mobilizing the activists who answered the survey question were education issues (20.6%), women's rights (19.5%), and politics (16.7%), followed by gender and sexual rights (12.3%), environmental issues (12.1%), and racism (10.4%). This finding echoes other recent research on university student activism. For instance, Conner found that, in the United States, a new generation of student activists hold an intersectional perspective, seeking to build diverse, broad, and inclusive coalitions. [21]

Figure 3:

During your experience doing activism in the country selected above, which of the following topics have you focused on?

Topic	Number of Participants
Education	89
Women's Rights	84
Politics	72
LGBTQIA+ Rights	53
Environmental Issues	52
Discrimination/Racism	45
Other	36

Topics of Activism

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21. Jerusha Conner, The New Student Activists: The Rise of Neoactivism on College Campuses (Johns Hopkins Press, 2020).

III. What is Student Activism?

This section describes how students conceptualized their own activism: how they define it and the forms of action that are most common among student activists. We asked both interview and survey participants to open-endedly define student activism; this section draws on both sets of responses. Importantly, we draw on definitions both by students who self-identified as activists, as well as by students who stated that they did not identify as activists but did engage in activism. **In general, participants conceptualized student activism broadly, often referring to it as an attitude and set of daily practices oriented toward particular goals.** In addition, while some students understood activism to be a particular set of actions—such as protest, marches, or other forms of collective action—other forms of activism, such as digital activism, were more common among survey and interview participants.

The Ethos of Activism

Students tended to view activism as something that (1) involves doing, (2) works toward social change, (3) requires persistence and courage, and (4) seeks to amplify marginalized perspectives. Significantly, these findings, based on the perspectives of activists across the world, closely match recent work by Conner, [22] who found that student activists based in the United States viewed activism as taking action, effecting (positive change), and the targeting of injustice or oppression. This indicates that there may be a common ethos of present-day student activism that extends beyond national borders.

A number of students defined activism in quotidian terms that emphasized the ways in which they engaged in activism as part of their daily lives, with the goal of creating broader social change. This definition is akin to prior scholarship defining activism as a set of everyday actions that act as "a precursor to political action" and emphasizes how "small acts transform social relations in ways that have the potential to foster social change." [23] Along these lines, activism involves identifying needs and taking action to address them. For example, a survey respondent from Southern Africa described how their activism involved identifying problems in their community and trying to solve them. They explained, "I can say I am a student activist because of the role I play in addressing social issues in local communities and schools. By identifying root causes, advocating for change, and engaging in educational initiatives, I strive to create positive and lasting changes." A second activist similarly emphasized their participation in specific local organizations, stating that they consider themself to be a student activist because they "participate in various organizational spaces in order to change the reality in which we live."

Importantly, when talking about the future—the social change that they wish to create—the activists who participated in this study emphasized the creation of social alternatives. Along these lines, a survey respondent from Southeast Asia stated,

> " I consider myself as a student activist because I want to transform my society into a better place. Activists always stand for the right and rights. I want to transform my society from unequal to equal, injustice to justice, violence and conflict to peace and prosperity, underdeveloped to developed, and subjugation to freedom. "

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22. Conner, The New Student Activists: The Rise of Neoactivism on College Campuses.
23. Deborah G. Martin, Susan Hanson, and Danielle Fontaine, "What Counts as Activism? The Role of Individuals in Creating Change," Women's Studies Quarterly 35, no. 3/4: 79.

In this sense, then, students saw activism as not merely reacting against injustice, but as seeking to create something positive. In the words of an activist from Eastern Europe, "It's not only about the problems, it might be just about creating something."

A significant number of both survey and interview respondents underscored that they define their activism as acts of speaking up and speaking truth to power: as one student from a Southern African country stated, "I prefer to speak reason to power where students' affairs are concerned." Indeed, as social media has become a more prominent tool for activism, social movements, and organizing, communication and storytelling have perhaps become even more important components of activism. [24] Speaking about the ways in which activism enabled them to have a voice, one student from Western Europe explained, "I'm passionate about advocating for social, political, and environmental change, and I believe in using my voice and actions to make a difference. Student activism provides a platform for expressing my beliefs and contributing to causes I care about while still being a student."

More specifically, a significant focus of many of the student activists with whom we spoke was giving voice to marginalized perspectives. Along these lines, a Southern African student shared, "I want to amplify students' voices such that they will not be left out when decisions are being made that will affect students." Likewise, a student from an unidentified country noted, "I consider myself an activist because I speak out for the rights of people who are victims of the cruel system of capitalism, colonialism and militarism."

Students further recognized that engaging in activism and speaking truth to power requires courage. Therefore, they defined activists as people who are dedicated, determined, and brave. Indeed, activism is typically defined as "oppositional and contentious—claim-making outside of formal decision structures" that seeks to push those structures to change. [25] It is a form of "dissent citizenship"—something that takes courage, or "a commitment to resolution and persistence in the face of risk, uncertainty, or fear." [26] As an activist from Central America put it, "I believe that a student activist is basically a person who is very brave, who goes against unjust rules."

Moreover, student activists emphasized that they may put themselves at risk of abuse. A handful of students contended that student activists are "often victims of violence" and must be willing to face the possibility of being jailed or arrested. When asked to define who is a student activist, a student from Southeast Asia said, "I consider myself a student activist because since I joined [a student alliance], I have been terrorized, chased, and monitored by the [state] military. Even the boarding house where I live has been visited by soldiers... wherever I go, they are always following." A student from Eastern Africa explained,

> "So being a student activist is not an easy route to take. Sometimes you find yourself being arrested, and sometimes you find yourself being expelled from the university. Sometimes you get threats from your own lecturers."

Students therefore underscored the passion and commitment necessary to be a student activist—the willingness to shoulder a significant burden.

The extent to which students viewed activism as something that was optional—a choice that they made to be involved—as opposed to something that they could not avoid was mediated by their social identity and degree of privilege. **Some students, particularly those identifying as queer, saw their very attempt to live their own truth as a form of activism.** For these students, activism was something inextricably linked to their identity; for them, following on the work of Audre Lorde and other black feminist scholars, "to exist was to resist." [27] One student from the Middle East said, "I always feel like I make people aware of the existence of queer people, everywhere I have a chance to be; because I'm a queer-feminist woman who's not in the closet—or at least trying to not be. So, I see that as my liability. If we want to change the mentality, then we have to do something. We can't expect the change to come out of nowhere. We must take the hit." A student from South America noted, "I am the only person who openly expresses my sexual orientation and several classmates, upon knowing this, seek me out and there are teachers who make me reveal myself [as queer] so that my classmates have knowledge of the subject."

As the quotations above show, students tended to view activism as an attitude or ethos oriented toward social transformation, peace, and justice. They viewed it as something that required significant bravery and commitment, regardless of whether their engagement as an activist was a choice or not.

24. See, for example, Thomas Swerts, "Gaining a Voice: Storytelling and Undocumented Youth Activism in Chicago," Mobilization: An International Quarterly 20, no. 3 (2015): 345–360; Elisabeth Eide and Risto Kunelius, "Voices of a Generation: The Communicative Power of Youth Activism," Climatic Change 169, no. 6 (2021).
25. Manja Klemenčič and Bo Yun Park, "Student Politics: Between Representation and Activism," in Handbook of Politics in Higher Education, ed. Brendan Cantwell, Hamish Coates, Roger A. King (Edward Eigar Publishing, 2018), 468.
26. Holloway Sparks, "Dissident Citizenship: Democratic Theory, Political Courage, and Activist Women," Hypatia 12, no. 4 (1997): 74–110.
27. Audre Lorde, A Burst of Light and Other Essays, (AK Press, 1988).

Photo: Rafli Firmansyah / Unsplash

What Do Activists Do?

Scholars often organize the forms of action that characterize activism into several categories. For instance, Pattie and colleagues identify three forms of activism: individualistic activism, such as donations or individual decisions to boycott particular goods; contact activism, such as advocating to someone in a position of power; and collective activism, such as participation in marches, demonstrations or strikes. [28] Other scholars, particularly those who study activism from a social movement perspective, highlight the relational nature of activism—the fact that much of activism involves coalition building and networking. [29]

28. Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd, and Paul Whiteley, "Civic Attitudes and Engagement in Modern Britain, Parliamentary Affairs 56, no. 4 (October 2003): 616–633, as cited in Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine, "What Counts as Activism? The Role of Individuals in Creating Change," 81.

29. See, for example, Alexander Hensby, "Campaigning for a Movement: Collective Identity and Student Solidarity in the 2010/11 UK Protests Against Fees and Cuts." in Student Politics and Protest. International Perspectives, ed. Rachel Brooks (Routledge, 2017), 13–29.

Among the forms of activism that scholars, the media, and activists themselves commonly emphasize are collective forms of direct action. For instance, a student that we interviewed from Eastern Europe displayed this perspective: "I see a student activist as a person who is marching in the streets with some banners, protesting." This conception is perhaps unsurprising given that marches represent a historical expression of student politics. [30] However, both the qualitative and quantitative data collected made clear that, for most students, activism was more varied than this.

Indeed, the students who participated in the research most commonly indicated that they participated in individual forms of activism and in collective activism. Moreover, student surveys underscored the central role that online actions play in student activism and how the balance between online and offline tactics have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic intensified the degree to which activism relied on online tactics and organization, a pattern that remained dominant even after the end of curfews and restrictions. [31]

Figure 4:

Which of the following forms of activism/advocacy/and/or resistance, if any,
have you participated in or employed as a response to political or social action?
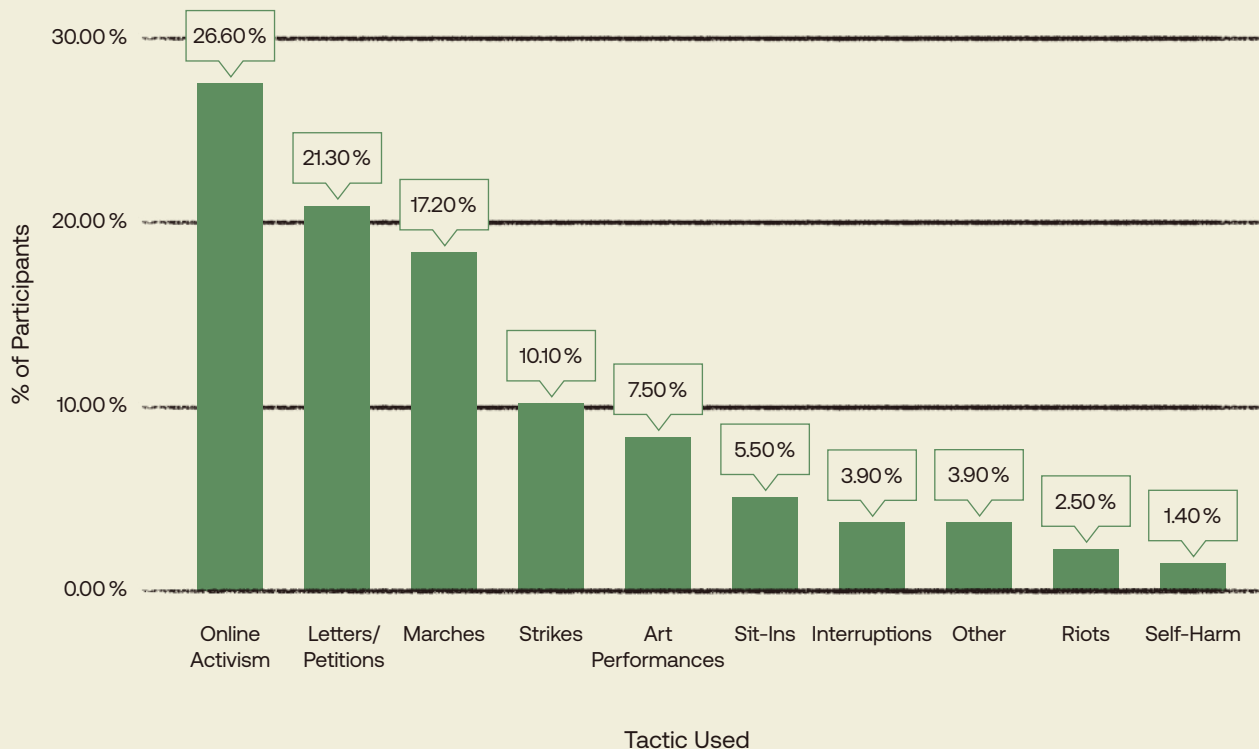
30. See, for example, Brooks, Student Politics and Protest. International Perspectives.
31. Julio Rodríguez-Suárez, Lorena Morán-Neches, and Juan-Bautista Herrero-Olaizola, "Online Research, New Languages and Symbolism of Digital Activism: A Systematic Review," Comunicar 29, no. 68 (2021): 47–58.

We analyzed the answers of 184 participants who responded to the survey question "Which of the following forms of activism/advocacy/and/or resistance, if any, have you participated in or employed as a response to political or social action?" A greater number of students stated that they had engaged in online activism than answered that they had participated in a march or protest (see Figure 4). Indeed, 26% of those who responded to Q3.7 stated that they engage in online activism, which was defined as sharing information, creating online content, and interacting with online content produced by student campaigns. A slightly smaller proportion of respondents (21.3%) answered that they engage as an activist by signing letters and petitions. Direct action tactics, including marches (17.2%) and strikes (10.1%) were the third and fourth most common answers.

Students' qualitative responses describing the forms of activism that they participate in matched the survey responses. During interviews, students shared that their activism primarily involved awareness raising and, secondarily, different forms of direct action, such as protest, marches, rallies, or sit-ins. A student from Eastern Europe wrote in a qualitative response to a survey question, "I did participate in spreading the word about the way state propaganda is integrated into the education system (which is indeed a very serious problem where I am from), so I think this qualifies me as a student activist." Students saw awareness raising as critical for transforming society: in the words of a student from Eastern Africa, "I raised awareness to help empower our communities, open new ways of thinking and enable students and others to confront and solve problems."

A number of students understood awareness raising and direct actions as a way to be engaged without necessarily being a member of a particular organization or movement. For example, one respondent from the Middle East noted, "Although I am not currently organized, I still participate in protests for freedom of speech, LGBTI+ rights, and women's rights." In this sense, while students often understood activism as something requiring significant commitment and bravery, in practice, the majority of students engaged in lower-commitment forms of activism such as attending events or posting on social media, and their engagement in activism ebbed and flowed.

In qualitative responses, students also mentioned several forms of activism that went beyond those answers included in the survey (see Figure 4). Dozens of students noted that they understood themselves as activists because of their work volunteering with NGOs, civil society organizations, or grassroots organizations. While these responses may be somewhat biased by our methodology of reaching out to participants through SAIH's partners, the number of students who described volunteerism was notable and resonates with prior research that highlights the local groundedness and geographic embeddedness of activism and underscores the ways in which volunteer work often serves as a precursor to political action. [32]

Along these lines some students noted that, even where they were unable to achieve their political goals, they found that their activism was successful to the extent to which they were able to develop networks and mobilize a community of activists. Discussing their involvement in building a student movement to push for political change by engaging in marches, demonstrations, and other forms of direct action, a student from Eastern Europe noted:

> "If we consider that we wanted to change something in the country, then we failed. We completely failed, and we didn't achieve anything. So, in this way, it was ineffective. But if we consider the unification and mobilization of some members of the student community, then it was effective. Because some of them continued to be active afterwards. So, in that way, it was nice. It gave birth to a lot of really nice activists who continue to get an education, to get professional skills in advocacy, and so on. And I think that was a very effective part of it."

A number of students also described a strong link between activism and the academic activities of research, writing, and learning. A student from Eastern Africa explained,

> **"I consider myself as an activist through research and writing. Collaboration at every step of the research process means embracing change within people and the university at large. Interacting with people through the research methodology may influence the change in policies."**

As this student understands it, research can be understood as serving a similar function to advocacy.

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32. Conner calls these people "unconventional activists"; see Conner, The New Student Activists: The Rise of Neoactivism on College Campuses, 30–49; see also Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine, "What Counts as Activism? The Role of Individuals in Creating Change."

Moreover, comments from several students illustrated how research can be understood as parallel to the information sharing and awareness raising actions that activists often take. A South Asian student noted, "As a doctoral fellow who is doing research on censorship in India, I believe that I am at the beginning stage of being an activist." Several students argued that learning is the first step in activism: as one student from Southeast Asia put it, "I consider myself a student activist… because I believe that if you are intellectually involved in that, you will become blind no more, and after that you take some actions."

In this sense, students viewed activism as integrally interlinked with education. This sentiment confirms previous research showing some of the most transformative educational moments in university occur outside of the classroom. [33] **Learning, therefore, is both a form of activism, and activism is a vehicle for learning.** [34]

Figure 5:

In which of the following forms of organizing have you participated as an activist?
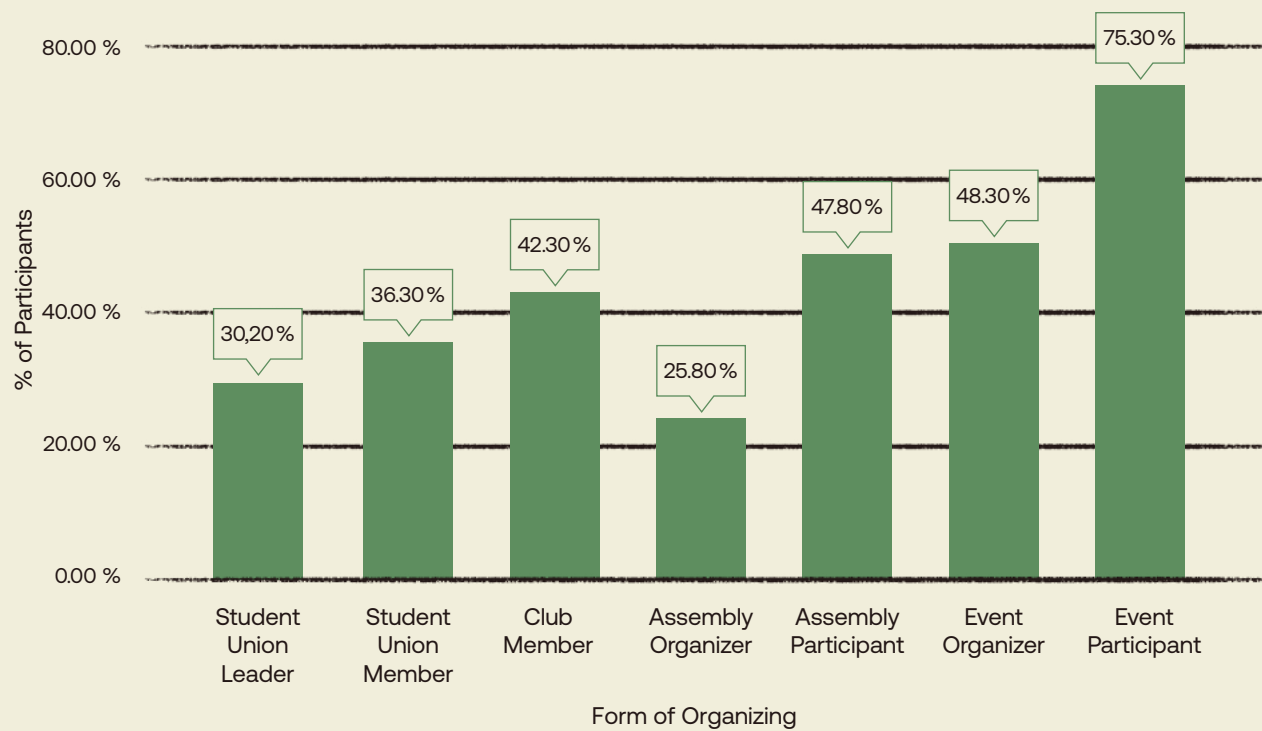
Finally, survey data suggested, perhaps unsurprisingly, that it is more common for participants to engage in occasional organizing as participants than for them to take leadership roles. Among survey respondents, 182 participants answered the question "In which of the following forms of organizing have you participated as an activist?" As Figure 5 shows, 75.3% of the participants stated that they participate in events; 48.3% organize events; 47.8% participate in assemblies; and 42.3% are members of a student club. The majority of participants selected more than one form of participation: 24.7% picked only one option, while 46.7% selected between two or three forms of organizing. Only a minority of activists deploy a more diverse repertoire of activism: 34.6% selected between four and seven forms of activism.

33. Kapit, Activism Under Attack: Understanding the Repression of Student Activism; Manja Klemenčič, "What Is Student Agency? An Ontological Exploration in the Context of Research on Student Engagement," in Student Engagement in Europe: Society, Higher Education and Student Governance, ed. Manja Klemenčič, Sjur Bergan, and Rok Primožič, Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 20, 19.

33. Jerusha O. Conner, Applying Experiential Learning Theory to Student Activism," Journal of Further and Higher Education 46, no. 9 (2022), 1229–1242

The Relationship Between Activism and Student Politics

Survey and interview data illustrated the complex and varied forms of student activism that exist. Existing literature often distinguishes between student activism and student representation. While both forms of student engagement are vehicles through which students can influence policy and decision-making, student activism is often conceived as being external to existing power structures, while student representation is conceived as an institutionalized form of influence, such as participation in student governance structures. [35] However, according to the students who participated in this project, the line between activism and student politics was often much more blurred.

Dozens of students described their engagement in student politics as an important component of their activism. A student from Eastern Europe explained, "In my country, in terms of student activism, there is a high share of student positions in the faculty and university bodies." The same student further defined student activism as "a position with responsibility because you're elected to speak in the name of a bigger group."

Similarly, a number of students answered a survey question that asked them to briefly explain why they do or do not consider themselves student activists by pointing to their involvement in student politics. As one answered, "I don't think activist is the right word [to describe what I do], but I have been actively involved in student politics for a while."

More specifically, **for many students, student unions and student groups beyond student governance structures were an important vehicle for their activism.** Among survey respondents, 30.2% identified themselves as student union leaders, and 36.3% identified themselves as members of a student union (see Figure 5). Student unions and groups function at the intersection of representation and activism and can play either a more representative function or activist function depending on the context. [36] The role that student unions play is further shaped by the neoliberal context. Indeed, prior research has shown that in more marketized higher education environments, such as the United Kingdom, for example, student unions may be co-opted, becoming more oriented toward providing student services. In these contexts, more emergent and independent student groups become better representatives of student political interests. [37] The strength and nature of student unions may be affected by various combinations of these factors.

Respondents from countries with strong union cultures described how their activism operated through their involvement in student unions. A student from Southeast Asia stated, "I founded the student union and led [anti-government] protests in my university." Still another, from Eastern Africa, emphasized, "I consider myself a student activist because throughout my university period, I have been engaging in activities to fight for our rights and well-being as students. I have served as a student union member representing the student body at management meetings where I could present pressing issues affecting our studies and negotiate for a quicker response."

In sum, students varyingly characterized their activism as an attitude and ethic by which they approached their lives, as a particular set of actions that they engaged in, or by the student associations and groups in which they participated. They tended to emphasize involvement in awareness-raising activities and participation in volunteerism and student associations as important actions that they took in relation to their activism.

35. Manja Klemenčič and Park, B.Y. (2018). Student Politics: Between Representation and Activism," in Handbook of Politics in Higher Education, ed. Brendan Cantwell, Hamish Coates, Roger A. King (Edward Eigar Publishing, 2018), 468.

36. Klemenčič describes how student representation varies between corporatist and neo-corporatist (where just one or a few student associations have a degree of state-controlled decision-making authority), pluralist (where multiple unofficial student associations compete for authority and funding), and statist environments (where student associations operate clandestinely and under threat). See Manja Klemenčič, "The Key Concepts in the Study of Student Politics and Representation in Higher Education," in The Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Politics and Representation in Higher Education (Bloomsbury Academic), 7–40.

37. Lorenzo Cini, The Contentious Politics of Higher Education: Struggles and Power Relations within English and Italian Universities (Routledge, 2018).

Photo: Marco Longari/AFP

IV. Repression

In addition to describing traditional forms of human rights violations, such as arrests, detentions, and the use of force, as forms of repression, **students highlighted the significance of lawfare and relational repression.** This section expands on these different forms of repression. Below, we describe students' experiences of lawfare; relational repression in the form of delegitimization, general social pressure, factionalization, and co-option; and classical forms of repression, including force and imprisonment.

While scholarship and advocacy relating to repression and human rights violations tend to focus on conventional forms of state-sponsored repression, such as the use of force or arrest, [38] some scholars have acknowledged the significance of "soft repression," or "the mobilization of nonviolent means [such as ridicule or stigma] to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas." [39] The students that we interviewed emphasized the prevalence of these forms of soft repression.

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38. See Kapit, Activism Under Attack: Understanding the Repression of Student Activism; Jennifer Earl, "Political Repression: Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control," Annual Review of Sociology 37 (2011): 261–284; Jules Boykoff, "Limiting Dissent: The Mechanisms of State Repression in the USA," Social Movement Studies 6, no. 3 (2007): 281–310.
39. M. Ferree, "Soft Repression: Ridicule, Stigma, and Silencing in Gender-Based Movements," in Repression and Mobilization (Vol. 21), ed. Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston, and Carol Mueller (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 141. See also Jan Jämte and Rune Ellefsen, "The Consequences of Soft Repression," Mobilization 25, no. 3 (2020), 383–404.

Figure 6:

Factors that discourage participants from engaging in activism

● Not at all   ● Slightly   ● Moderately   ● Significantly

Discouraging Factors	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Significantly
Peer Violence	58.20 %	20.00 %	16.50%	5.00 %
Intergroup Competition	45.30 %	32.40 %	15.30 %	7.00 %
Fear of Peer Retribution	39.40 %	20.60 %	20.60 %	19.40 %
Negative Social Perceptions	21.20 %	20.60 %	31.80 %	26.50 %
Delegitimization	20.60 %	26.50 %	21.20 %	31.80 %
National Legislation	25.30 %	11.20 %	11.80 %	51.80 %

% of Participants

In general, students indicated that repression often came from those with whom they interacted on a daily basis, both from university authority figures and from their peers, friends, and family members. Indeed, 31.8% and 26.5% of participants, respectively, described fears of negative social repercussions or delegitimization as factors that affected their political expression and engagement in student activism (see Figure 6). In addition, university authorities sought to deter them from their activism by using lawfare in the form of educational penalties, such as failure, suspension, or expulsion, or through delegitimizing rhetoric labeling them as immature or troublemakers. These forms of repression were compounded by the social pressure that activists found themselves subjected to—from their peers, teachers, and family members.

Student participants also indicated that they experienced repression by government-affiliated authorities. Particularly prevalent, students pointed to national legislation as repressing activism. **In total, 51.8% of participants responded that national legislation significantly restricted activists' ability to take action**. Less commonly, student respondents faced violence, and arrests or detentions. It is worth noting that, among survey respondents, fewer participants engaged in confrontational forms of activism, such as public demonstrations or strikes. In part, this may be because those at greater risk of violence, arrests, or detentions were less likely to participate in the research.

Students interviewed and surveyed only occasionally mentioned factionalization as a form of repression. In surveys, students referred to peer pressure as a deterrent to activism. While the factionalization of the student body in and of itself may have a chilling effect on student expression—as described in SAIH's first report Activism Under Attack—during interviews, students primarily spoke about the ways in which authority figures manipulated different student groups against each other. Interview participants thus mentioned co-option as a function of factionalization, insofar as authority figures gave favors to those factions in alignment with their policies. This section delves into each of these forms of repression in greater detail, describing students' experiences of each form of repression.

University Lawfare: Failure, Expulsion, and other Educational Consequences

Thakker defines university lawfare as actions including "selectively enforcing policies, or changing policies, with a particular political motivation to quash speech and quash political action, or to embroil students in frivolous and unrounded internal administrative complaints." [40] The students who participated in this research consistently pointed to their universities' use of lawfare as one of their most significant concerns when engaging in activism.

Figure 7:

Are you aware of university laws or policies limiting student activism? [41]
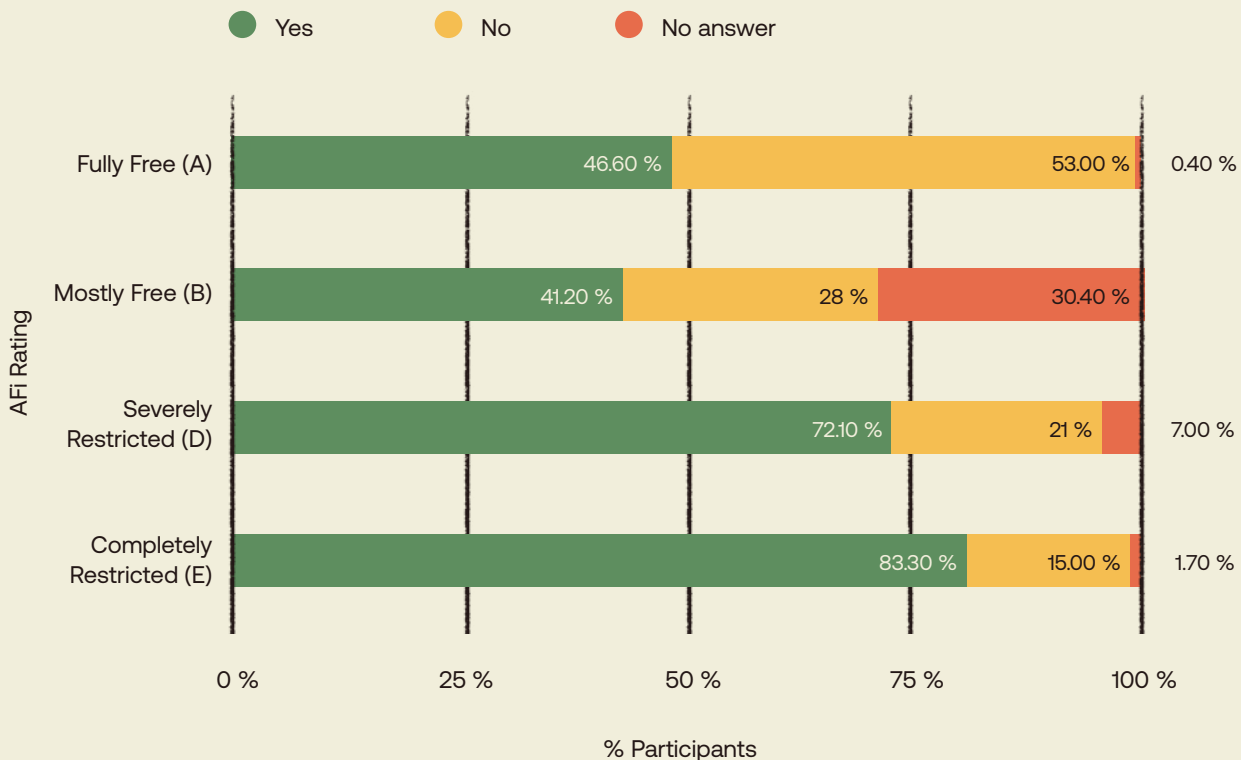
40. Prem Thakker, "Amid Gaza Protests, Universities are Cracking Down on a Celebrate Protest Tactic: Sit-Ins," The Intercept, January 21, 2024, https://theintercept.com/2024/01/21/university-student-sit-ins-palestine/.
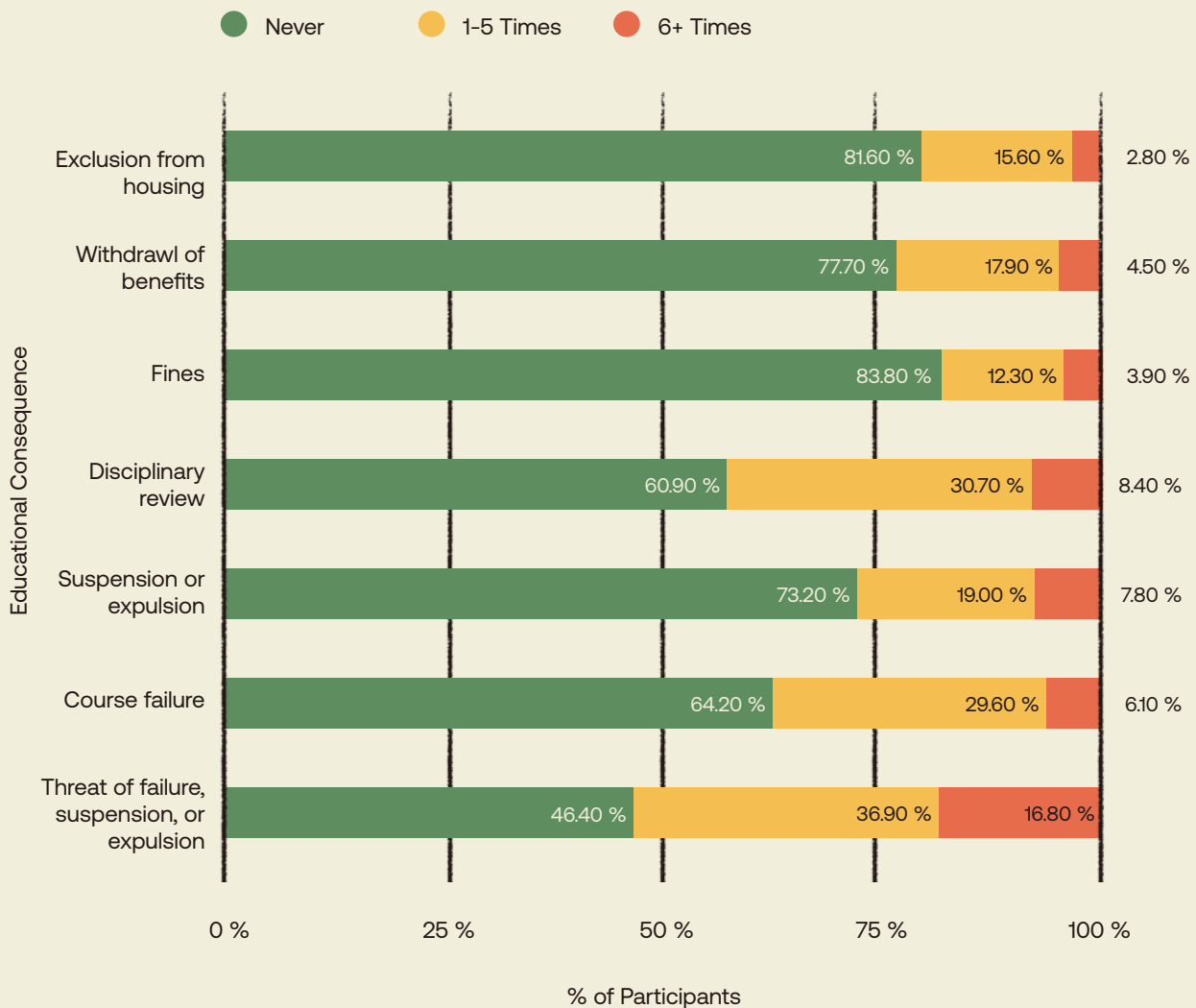**41.** We have excluded category C from this chart since only two survey respondents were associated with those countries.

Indeed, the majority (70.5%) of survey respondents indicated that the university at which they study has "laws or policies... that limit [their] activism" (Survey Q4.1). Perhaps unsurprisingly, 83% (50) of the participants associated with countries with completely restricted (E) levels of academic freedom stated that they were aware of university policies that limited their political engagement (see Figure 7). However, even activists engaged in countries considered fully free (A) and mostly free (B) stated that they were aware of policies that limited their political expression. For example, 46.6% (14) of participants active in A countries (Norway, United Kingdom, Chile, Portugal, Canada, among others) stated that university policies impeded their activism. **The data suggest that even in countries with higher levels of academic freedom, activists perceive the university as impinging on their right to free expression and association.**

Figure 8:

During the time when you were most engaged in student activism, how many times have you experienced the following responses to your activism from a faculty member or other member of the university?

- Never
- 1-5 Times
- 6+ Times

Educational Consequence	Never	1-5 Times	6+ Times
Exclusion from housing	81.60 %	15.60 %	2.80 %
Withdrawl of benefits	77.70 %	17.90 %	4.50 %
Fines	83.80 %	12.30 %	3.90 %
Disciplinary review	60.90 %	30.70 %	8.40 %
Suspension or expulsion	73.20 %	19.00 %	7.80 %
Course failure	64.20 %	29.60 %	6.10 %
Threat of failure, suspension, or expulsion	46.40 %	36.90 %	16.80 %

% of Participants

Significantly, lawfare often has a chilling effect; in other words, the use of policies to discipline students—such as, for example, a university that suspends a student protester for "trespassing" on campus—quells activism for more than just a single student or small group of students. [42] Rather, it instills a sense of fear among other students that the university may take similar action against them for engaging in activism. **The results from our survey support the idea that this chilling effect exists.** Figure 8 shows the frequency of the seven forms that the university used to repress activism. Most common was the threat of failure, suspension, or expulsion: 36.9% of activists experienced such threats 1–5 times, and 16.8% experienced such threats six or more times. In addition, 30.7% of respondents noted that university authorities had subjected them to a disciplinary review between 1 and 5 times, while 29.6% of respondents declared to suffer academic failure as consequence of their activism.

Qualitative interviews depict in more detail how educational consequences occurred, with interview participants often referring to the threat of disciplinary action rather than to personal experiences of disciplinary action. Around two-thirds of interview participants described how university authorities threatened them with failure, suspension, or other forms of educational penalties. Most commonly, those interviewed described such threats as vague: university administrators or faculty members would tell them that they would fail their classes if they continued to engage in their activism.

Students consistently described how university authorities threatened them with bad grades, failure, or suspension. A pro-democracy student activist from Eastern Europe who had participated in demonstrations on campus described his experience of being threatened with bad grades, noting that educational authorities were more likely to use threats than incentives:

"At some point, they just started to flatter me. They said, "You know, you're a good guy, you have good grades, you're the class representative, and so on. Come on, you should just stop. You're a clever guy." That's what they say: "You're a clever guy, then act as a clever guy." ... But they didn't say, "You will have good grades." On the contrary, they said, "Okay, you might have bad grades because of the protests" …. I think it's a very interesting thing in our country, they didn't try to bribe us. They just used threats. They couldn't even try to collaborate with us, to cooperate, to have a dialogue. They just said, "No, you're wrong and you will have problems."

A student activist from Central America described how threats from the university limit the repertoires of activism that they and their fellow activists use, discouraging, for example, the use of educational strikes outside of the university. They noted how the perception that "the university has the power to say 'because of your conduct, you do not have the right to get your degree'" made some students hesitant to become involved in public protests. A second student from a different country in Central America described similar experiences: "If [university authorities] know someone is organizing… what they do is erase their academic record, delay their diploma, or simply make their academic life difficult. They push them till they leave, or until they go somewhere else." Another student activist—a nursing student from East Asia—explained in a similar vein that they believe that education authorities would tell them that, if they continue their activism, "we cannot guarantee you will pass the exam."

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Photo: Silvia Izquierdo/AP Photo

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42. A chilling effect is a form of self-censorship that occurs when individuals decide not to speak up or take action because they are afraid of transgressing a law. Overly broad or vague laws or policies are often responsible for chilling effects because individuals are uncertain what actions will violate a particular rule.

See, for example, David L. Hudson, Jr., "Chilling Effect Overview," The FIRE, https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/chilling-effect-overview.

In addition to failure, university authorities threatened students with disciplinary action. A student activist from North America described how the administration of his university tacitly discouraged student involvement in protest: "They emailed all of the faculty...to say, you know, just a reminder, you must enforce [our] attendance policy if students miss class... And then there was an email from our dean, which said...'if the students are disruptive or if you have concerns about students, please report their names to [campus] police.'" A pro-democracy student activist from East Asia likewise explained, "They use other ways to force me to stay silent. Like investigate me or make me attend student court [disciplinary proceedings]. That's what they do."

Moreover, students interviewed also described how university authorities might use the threat of withdrawing access to housing or scholarships to silence them, thereby indirectly threatening their access to education. The same student from Eastern Europe who spoke about being threatened with bad grades noted that university authorities would threaten student activists: "You might have problems with the dormitory. You might be expelled from the dormitory...because our students, they're not really rich, and dormitories are quite cheap. If they lose this cheap option, then they won't know what to do."

For some students, national laws compounded the threats made by university authorities. In such cases, disciplinary penalties like suspension or expulsion made them vulnerable to other threats, such as conscription. A student activist from Eastern Europe explained: "In [my country], all men are obligated to serve in the army... you don't have to do this while you're studying. But after your studies, you still have to go to the army. So, if you're expelled from the university, you have to go to the army."

A final form of educational consequence that interviewees described was being barred from student representation for their activism. A student from East Asia explained that after they were elected to the student union, someone outside of their university reported their activism to the administration. The university then "said we were guilty without any formal investigation," and disqualified them from the elections. He explained, "Even though we were officially elected, they disqualified us from joining [the student union], or not only the student union, but also they banned us from participating in all university committees or student bodies for like 16 months." It wasn't apparent that the student was given any opportunity to appeal the decision.

Students further described how they understood such threats as hazardous to their futures. A student from Central America explained,

> **"They could refuse to give us our diplomas for the actions we're taking. So that gives us a bit of fear because at the end, we're talking about part of our future, right? And that makes us wonder whether the activism that we're doing is really worth it or not for the future."**

Lawfare by university authorities therefore served to discourage students from engaging as activists not only by impinging on their right to education but also by putting their livelihoods and futures at risk. Threatened with bad grades, suspension, and being denied graduation, students found themselves in danger of losing housing, being conscripted, or having their future employability compromised.

Relational Repression

Equally as significant as lawfare, students pointed to a variety of relational forms of repression as significant deterrents to their engagement as activists. O'Brien and Deng define "relational repression" as that which "turns repression into a highly charged conversation with family members, neighbors, or old friends, and uses people who have a hold over the [activist] to deliver the state's message to desist." It is "a control technique that exploits social and family ties to demobilize or prevent resistance" and depends on "relatives, friends, and neighbors to defuse popular action." [43] **Relational repression is particularly effective because it isolates individuals from each other, undermining potential bonds of solidarity and community.** [44] In the section that follows, we describe how delegitimization, social pressure, factionalization, and co-option operate as forms of relational repression.

Delegitimization

Students described delegitimization as a frequent experience and an impediment to their activism. Delegitimizing rhetoric operates as a form of relational repression in two main ways. First, when it comes from those close to students—such as professors or parents—it directly discourages them from being engaged. Along these lines, students pointed to the ways in which their family members or professors called them immature and labeled their activism as naive. Second, when delegitimizing rhetoric comes from the media, politicians, or other high-profile sources, it operates as a form of relational repression by discouraging support for student activists and riling up negative sentiments against them. Along these lines, students described the ways that such authority figures labeled them as criminal or dangerous.

"Immature"

Among 170 survey respondents who answered the relevant questions, nearly one-third (31.8%) stated that their activism was significantly restricted because society perceived them as immature or naive. In qualitative interviewees, students described how being called immature discouraged them from being involved as activists. A student from Central America, for example, told us:

> "Teachers say, "Look, there are [negative] consequences for you all [if you engage in activism]. In our country, it isn't worth it. No one is going to listen to you." After hearing this, this demotivates us, and makes us submissive. We begin to think we're better off doing nothing and staying submissive, if, in the end, no one is going to give us the attention we deserve"

Students likewise described the ways that others labeled their activism as misguided. For example, a student from East Asia explained:

> "Much more senior people would say, "Oh, what you're doing is meaningless. It will only harm yourself. One day, you will regret that." So, why am I participating in this stuff? ... I remember a quote from a former senior. He said, "One day, you will graduate, but the school will always be there." Like, the times you stay in school are just a [short] period, and after many years, nobody will remember you. So things I'm doing may just harm myself."

In other words, the senior described in the quotation leveraged his few years of additional experience to tell the activist that, with hindsight, activism is useless—a particularly demotivating sentiment. A Southern African student activist likewise described being told, "You don't know what you're talking about. Wait until your time comes."

In another case, an interviewee from Central Europe who sought to change university policies through their activism highlighted how university authorities undermined student activists by arguing that, not only do student activists "know nothing," but, they also do not have a significant stake in the university itself. The interviewee explained:

> "Usually, it's used as an argument towards a student representative that they cannot be experienced because they do not have enough knowledge. And they are not responsible because they are staying [in university] only a short period of their life compared to the faculty and employees who are there usually for a longer period of time. [Students] are only there for a short period of time, and then they leave. And then they won't be there to see and won't feel the consequences of their decisions."

Significantly, some students noted that even potential allies outside of the university—for example, members of advocacy groups or NGOs working on related issues— sometimes undermined student activism by dismissing them as young. Students described delegitimizing rhetoric, phrases such as "You're so naïve," "You're still a kid," "You don't know what you're getting into." It is, according to one student, "something that you hear from others that are in positions of power, or [even] defenders of human rights." Such rhetoric from those who are supposed to be coalition partners is particularly demotivating and undermining for student activists.

43. O'Brien and Deng, "Preventing Protest One Person at a Time: Psychological Coercion and Relational Repression in China."
44. See, for example, Marie E. Berry and Millie Lake, "Imagining a Distanced Future: Centering a Politics of Love in Resistance and Mobilization," LSE Women, Peace and Security Blog, May 1, 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2020/05/01/imagining-a-distanced-future-centering-a-politics-of-love-in-resistance-and-mobilisation/.

"Criminal" or "Dangerous"

On the other hand, students also described the ways in which those in authority, such as university or government officials, or public figures, such as members of the media, engaged in relational repression by mobilizing negative sentiments against student activists. Around one-quarter (26.5%) of those surveyed declared that their activism was significantly restricted because others in the society perceived activists as "criminal," "dangerous," or "naughty rebels," in the words of one interviewee.

Students described authority figures depicting them in a wide range of negative ways. One student from East Asia said, "They called us protesters 'cockroaches' and 'rioters.'" Such rhetoric echoes the kinds of dehumanizing rhetoric that often fuels grave violence—including genocide. For instance, the use of the word "cockroach" to fuel genocidal violence against Rwanda's Tutsi population is well documented. [45] The use of such dehumanizing rhetoric can be read as an intentional effort to undermine support for student activists—possibly even to desensitize the public to any force that the state might use against students engaged in public acts of protest.

In another case, a student from Central America described how government authorities framed them as "delinquents," saying that "we were really just destroying the universities." Such rhetoric was then echoed by family members. For example, another student from the same Central American country described how their friends' parents had rejected them for their activism:

> "Their father or mother has told them, "Forget I'm your mom. Forget I'm your dad. You are a delinquent and what is happening to you is justified." So of course there is an effect in those cases that a lot of youth are left unprotected because they are taken out of their homes because of their participation in student activism, because they went out to protest, because they shared a piece of art on social media."

Moreover, students described the ways that authority figures sought to isolate students. A student from North America described how their university administration tried to frame the student movement that they were a part of as "an isolated group of radical, rabble-rousing students" who are "not respectable." Scholarship on repression indicates that repression is less effective when activists have dense ties to one another: in other words, involvement motivates additional involvement. [46] Portraying a movement as something only a few extreme or "rabble-rousing" students are part of is an attempt to discourage additional involvement.

Such rhetoric from government authorities, public figures, educational authorities, families, peers, and friends is a threat to student activists not just because of the way it undermines their engagement but also because it breaks down social bonds and social ties. In this sense then, it is closely linked to another form of relational repression: the social pressure that student activists describe as a barrier to their activism.

Social Pressure

O'Brien and Deng note that relational repression "relies on emotional blackmail and pressure from people who are hard to ignore" and therefore "can be effective in breaking a person's will to resist." [47] It is perhaps no surprise then that the social pressure student activists described overwhelmingly came from their family members, particularly their parents and grandparents.

Students noted that their family members often objected to their activism on the grounds that a zero-sum relationship existed between activism and education—that engaging in activism was detrimental to learning. For example, an activist from Southern Africa noted, "Parents many times don't want you to go in that direction. They will tell you, 'No, we sent you to school because we want you to learn. Don't engage in this.' Because every time they see a student activist, parents have the perception that now our son or our daughter has joined politics. Which is not true. So, there are these misconceptions with parents. They don't want to see you become an activist."

In addition, family members often expressed fear about students' activism. An activist from the Middle East described how her mother warned her against activism: "You are going to hurt yourself. Do not do that. Everyone is going to save their asses, but who is going to save yours?"

45. For example, see, Human Rights Watch, Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda, March 1999, https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/Geno1-3-10.htm.
46. Siegel, "When Does Repression Work? Collective Action in Social Networks."
47. O'Brien and Deng, "Preventing Protest One Person at a Time: Psychological Coercion and Relational Repression in China," 181.

Photo: Asociación Nacional de
Estudiantes de Secundaria – ANDES

Students interviewed also described how effectively threats targeting family members operated as a form of repression, transferring the burden of discouraging activism from the state to the family. Indeed, in their study of relational repression in China, O'Brien and Deng found that the government often sought to engage those close to activists as accomplices in repression, threatening them with personal consequences if their loved one did not desist. [48] Likewise, recent research examining the states' strategies of transnational repression have shown that the tactic of enlisting family members to put pressure on student activists is commonplace, particularly among the more authoritarian actors. [49]

Along these lines, interviewees noted that authority figures would threaten family members to exert pressure on the student activists. For example, an activist from the Middle East explained, "Sometimes [a police officer] will call your family and say things like, 'Your child is hanging out with terrorists'… And when they do this, if the family is not supportive—or even if the family is supportive of their activism—the family gets scared. You know? Because you get a call from a police officer, right?" Likewise, a student from Central America described in detail how authority figures exerted pressure on their family:

"With my other oldest brothers, they dismissed them from their jobs, the majority of them, because they worked in public institutions. And since they were my brothers, they could not be working there because they were the siblings of a "terrorist." They were siblings of someone who was plotting a coup. They were the siblings of a "delinquent." Those were the words. In the case of my mother, it has always been, they break into the house. They come to look, to destroy, to rob her things. That has already happened two times. So, above all, they look to instill that fear that your family does not support you. That they turn their backs on you. So they create the image that what you are doing is bad."

Social pressure, thus, is a particularly effective form of relational repression because it threatens the important familial, friendship, and social bonds that sustain any individual. Such caring relationships are often a matter of survival, particularly under conditions of violence, conflict, and repression. [50] A poignant anecdote from a student forced to flee abroad because of the threats she faced illustrates this point. Once abroad, she befriended another student from her country who was the recipient of a scholarship from their home country. However, once that student found out about her activist past, the other student started to ignore the activist, fearful that she could lose her government scholarship because of her association with an activist.

48. O'Brien and Deng, "When Does Repression Work? Collective Action in Social Networks."
49. Amnesty International, "On My Campus, I Am Afraid": China's Targeting of Overseas Students Stifles Rights; Gorokhovskaia and Vaughan, Addressing Transnational Repression on Campuses in the United States; Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer (2021). Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope Of Transnational Repression, Freedom House, February 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Complete_FH_TransnationalRepressionReport2021_rev020221.pdf.
50. Hobart and Kneese, "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times."

Factionalization and Co-option

Authority figures engage in factionalization and co-option as forms of relational repression by attempting to manipulate social ties. Factionalization between student groups reduces the strength of the student body as a whole. Moreover, the co-option of particular student groups intensifies factionalization.

According to participants in both the survey and qualitative interviews, factionalization among student groups and co-option of student activists or student leaders were less common deterrents to activism. Indeed, a minority of survey respondents mentioned that they viewed peer violence, peer competition, or fear of peer retribution as a significant concern. In fact, so few students discussed factionalization or co-option that it is difficult to draw any conclusions about it from the data we collected. Rather, a few anecdotal examples illustrate the role of these mechanisms of repression.

In two cases, students described co-option and factionalization as functions of each other. A student from Southern Africa similarly described that there was a state-run group that "is more like a zygote of the state. They take instruction from the state. So, at times when the state says it cannot stop us from doing anything, they use this circuit of theirs. What they do then is they use this small voice to say [that the state actions are] in the interest of the students: 'no, can you try and see the good side of it.'" Likewise, a student from East Asia noted that "some 'student organizations' that are guided and monitored by university officials always try to stop, harass, or threaten us." In other words, certain groups aligned with a pro-government faction harassed activists. However, the student from East Asia went on to say that such groups "are not that big of an issue. They never gain students' support and trust. They are seen more as bootlickers of the government."
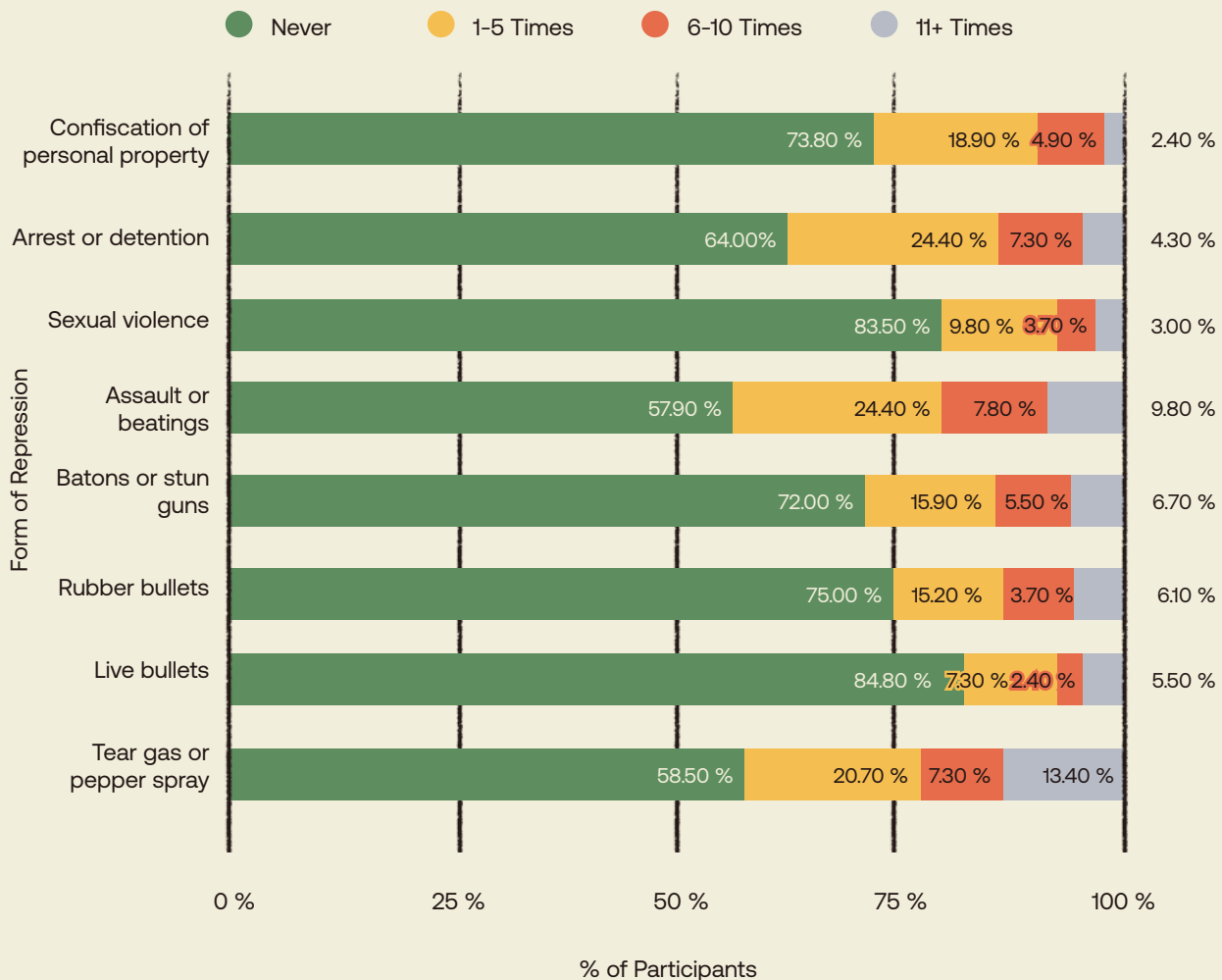

Photo: Kierran Allen

The "Classical" Repertoire of Repression

A significant number of student activists also described facing what might be considered the "classical" forms of repression—those that have typically received the most attention from scholars, human rights advocates, and others—such as arrests, detentions, and the use of force. [51]

Figure 9:

During the time when you were most engaged in student activism, how many times have you experienced the following responses to your activism from police or other security personnel?

● Never   ● 1-5 Times   ● 6-10 Times   ● 11+ Times

Form of Repression	Never	1-5 Times	6-10 Times	11+ Times
Confiscation of personal property	73.80 %	18.90 %	4.90 %	2.40 %
Arrest or detention	64.00%	24.40 %	7.30 %	4.30 %
Sexual violence	83.50 %	9.80 %	3.70 %	3.00 %
Assault or beatings	57.90 %	24.40 %	7.80 %	9.80 %
Batons or stun guns	72.00 %	15.90 %	5.50 %	6.70 %
Rubber bullets	75.00 %	15.20 %	3.70 %	6.10 %
Live bullets	84.80 %	7.30 %	2.40 %	5.50 %
Tear gas or pepper spray	58.50 %	20.70 %	7.30 %	13.40 %

% of Participants

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51. See Kapit, Activism Under Attack: Understanding the Repression of Student Activism.

Among 164 survey respondents, a substantial number of students reported experiencing various forms of classical repression at the hands of state security forces (see Figure 9). The most common of such forms of repression that student activists faced was assault or beating, with 42.1% of those who responded to the question answering that they had been beaten at least once by security forces. In addition, 20.7% of respondents stated that they had experienced tear gas or pepper spray between one and five times, while 13.4% of respondents stated that they had experienced tear gas or pepper spray more than 11 times. Other forms of violent repression that participants reported experiencing were batons or stun guns (28%), the confiscation of their property (26.8%), rubber bullets (25%), sexual violence (16.5%), and live bullets (15%). Moreover, just over a third of respondents (36%) reported being arrested or detained at least one time. See Figure 9 for more detail.

Just under half of the students who participated in qualitative interviews described experiencing violent repression in the context of protests. For example, a Southern African student activist explained: "We know that, whenever we are going for a protest, they're going to roll out tear gas, they're going to roll out riot police. Police will come out and beat people, or maybe dogs will come in and try to bite student leaders. And the students aren't even that violent. I mean, we don't have any weapons. We just answer with noise. A student from East Asia stated more plainly,

" We are literally shot on site if we protest."

And a student from Central America described seeing a friend shot during a protest: "We faced constant attacks in the university, with firearms, from the national police. It was the first time I saw them kill someone with my own eyes. It was not a movie. It was not something I was told. I watched a friend with a bullet in their neck."

Other students described security forces threatening them with violence, often through phone calls and text messages. A student from East Asia, who had participated in anti-government protests, explained how another member of their student union was told, "No matter where you are, we're going to find you and we're going to put you in an interrogation camp and get everything out of you. So wish yourself lucky this time." A woman student activist from Central America, who had participated in anti-government protests, described threats that she had received: "I received messages and calls that said: 'When we find you, we're going to rape and kill you.'" A second student from Central America noted that, if state security forces could not find the student activist in question, they would also threaten family members: "[If you are] outside of your country, there are threats to your family members. Your nuclear family faces harassment...the state has the strategy of following your family that remains [in the country]. If they cannot catch you, then they go and catch your family, and that also has an impact on your participation." Such threats were reported in other contexts as well.

Just under half of students interviewed also noted that state security forces commonly arrest student activists in their country. A student from Central America explained, "there was a saying that the police used to say, 'That one looks like a student.' And then they kidnapped them, or they took them to jail, or they made them disappear, or they killed them." Likewise, a student from East Asia noted, "Those things were kind of common—being arrested for protesting or something," elaborating that in making arrests, police "are not very progressive at all. They don't tell you about your dignities or your human rights. They don't care at all."

A pro-democracy student activist from Eastern Europe described in detail their experience of arrest:

"[The police] started another interrogation with me. It was harsh. It was very scary. Because they kind of played this role of good cop and bad cop, where one guy was more or less fine and the other one was very pushy, very aggressive. They didn't beat me. There was just the conversation. But it was a very harsh and humiliating conversation. And yeah, in fact, they knew everything about me. They knew everything about my colleagues from our organization in the university. They just wanted to check me for loyalty, saying that I could tell on other students in the future; to be kind of, we call it a rat, like the one who just leaks information. And yeah, because I was sitting in the office, I didn't have any other options. I signed the paper that I would be that person. But then they said, "Okay, this night, you're going to spend in prison, in the detention center. But tomorrow you will be free, and you can't say anything to anyone about this conversation. You should come up with another story." And, yeah, that night, I spent in the detention center. But the next day, I wasn't released as they promised. I was put in another cell...And it was very harsh conditions there. There were no beds, and we—I wasn't alone, there was another political prisoner there, an ex–policeman. And we slept on the floor. It was very cold because it was winter. There was no water inside. It was very harsh conditions. On the third day, I had the trial. And the trial was via Skype, in prison. It was so absurd. And yeah, I received 15 days."

Several students from a variety of countries described how the threat of arrest loomed because of police presence at their universities. The same East European student activist quote above described such threats:

"Police were inside the buildings, and it was terrible. Because it was not even just ordinary police, it was riot police. They had balaclavas. They look scary. And they just make you feel much more nervous. And in one university, they came, they baited some boys, and they arrested them in front of other students. I think it's a very terrifying experience. It was very traumatic. And some other people might think twice before going into another demonstration, because, "okay, I saw what they might do."

Several students talked about the consequences of being arrested. In addition to the harsh conditions that the student from Eastern Europe described above, a student from East Asia noted that arrests often come with the likelihood of torture:

"If one of our colleagues is arrested, we just hope that he will be transferred to jail as fast as possible. Because the longer that you spend in the interrogation camp, the more dangerous the situation that the person is in becomes...a lot of crazy things are happening in interrogation camps. People are dying there overnight."

Another student from East Africa described the damaging educational consequences of being arrested: "I mean, just imagine a student leader we are supposed to write our exams, you are arrested for four months, you're not allowed to write your exams, you are not allowed to be visited in those prison cells. I mean, that's just a hindrance from these tests."

Fewer interview participants described experiences of classical repression than of university lawfare or relational repression, and just under half of survey participants responded that they had experienced classical forms of repression other than university lawfare in the form of educational penalties or relational repression. This may be the case for a few reasons. First, as described above, more participants had participated in less confrontation forms of activism less likely to be subject to classical repression. Second, student activists who had faced classical forms of repression may have been less likely to participate in the research. Nevertheless, both interviews and surveys made clear that classical repression is a very real threat that student activists face. Moreover, it is a more severe form of repression that carries serious consequences for student activists' welfare and on their ability to continue their studies.

Photo: Asociación Nacional de Estudiantes de Secundaria – ANDES

Photo: Andrew Leyden

V. Protecting Student Activists: Fostering a Community of Support

University students are often at the forefront of movements for human rights, democratization, and social justice. They often gain their footing as social and political leaders in university. [52] Supporting student activists and ensuring their protection is essential for maintaining this important role. Yet engaging in student activism has significant physical, psychological, emotional, and social costs, often discouraging students from engaging in activist efforts. **In interviews, student activists spoke about the significant personal toll of staying engaged, something that echoes previous research on student activism.** [53] They spoke of general discouragement, self-questioning, and more significant mental health challenges. They also spoke about the difficulty of maintaining social ties—particularly in the face of repression significant enough to cause them to flee their home countries. In the face of these challenges, students described the importance of the strong social ties that they were able to maintain—and how those social ties helped to sustain them. This section first describes the heavy toll that student activists pay before turning to the ways in which fostering a caring community can support them.

52. See, for example, Kapit, Activism Under Attack: Understanding the Repression of Student Activism; Donatella della Porta, Lorenzo Cini, and César Guzmán-Conch, Contesting Higher Education (Bristol University Press, 2020).
53. Jerusha O. Conner, Emily Crawford, and Megan Galioto, "The Mental Health Effects of Student Activism: Persisting Despite Psychological Costs," Journal of Adolescent Research 38, no. 1 (2023): 80–109; Jerusha O. Conner, Emily Greytak, Carly D Evich, and Laura Wray-Lake, "Burnout and Belonging: How the Costs and Benefits of Youth Activism Affect Youth Health and Wellbeing," Youth 3, no. 1 (2023): 127–145.

The Toll of Activism

The students that we interviewed spoke extensively about the ways in which they second-guessed their actions, and about the mental health challenges that they faced because of their activism.

For some students, such pressures were significant enough that they disengaged. A student from South America described how her sense of discouragement was so great that she gave up her activism: "I stopped. I was like 'Okay, I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to think.'... I stopped fighting for things I believed in."

A student from East Asia described the way that he second-guessed his activism:

> **"I would also question myself whether what I was doing was meaningful or meaningless. Did I bring good to the people? How about my family? Did I bring extra pressure for them? Maybe if I were a good kid, my only focus would be academic."**

Other students shared their mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety. Those challenges often had a significant impact on their lives. "It really took a toll on me," offered a student from the Middle East. "I started to have the symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. I could not sleep. I could not eat. I was crying, but I didn't know why I was crying because everything looks okay, because life was going on. So, I was blaming myself all the time." The student went on to say that being an activist was:

> "[Being an activist is] a blessing and a curse at the same time, because I know I cannot live without being an activist. I mean, it's the way that I survive in my environment. But it is also the thing that harms me. So it's like a double edged sword. And sometimes I feel like I'm in this post-truth bubble—that I'm the mad one. I am the insane one. And everyone else is normal. I have to check myself all the time. I have to remind myself that I am the right one. I am not going crazy."

A student from Central America likewise talked about overwhelming fear and anxiety: "You don't know if you're going to end up in jail, or even if they're going to kill someone in your family. And that frequent negative stimulus results in anxiety and fear that there are going to be greater repercussions in your social and emotional life."

Students acknowledged that social ties could counteract some of the mental health challenges that they faced, but also explained the way that repression operated to challenge social ties. Indeed, as described above, tactics of repression like delegitimization and manipulating social pressure rely on weakening ties among family and community members. [54] A student from Central America noted along these lines that such repression causes "a rupture in your social circle and your support system because it is very difficult to know who to trust."

Moreover, student activists who ended up displaced spoke about the challenges of not having valuable social networks in the places where they were forced to flee. Another student from Central America noted, "When you go outside of your country, it becomes complicated to have stability over your quality of life. When you are in your own country, you can count on the support of your family, your mom, dad. But when you emigrate, you no longer have that support network."

In other words, repression is particularly insidious when it destroys the social relationships that student activists need to sustain themselves. As described next, bolstering and strengthening community and solidarity, therefore, counteracts some of the most damaging effects of repression.

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54. For a similar discussion of the dual role that family members can play in either supporting or discouraging activism, see Human Rights Defenders Hub, Families and Loved Ones in the Security and Protection of Defenders at Risk, Policy Brief 4, April 2018, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57ab08756a49635fe426003e/t/5ad8688caa4a996c2d5fa586/1524131982989/HRD+Hub+Policy+Brief-4_HR+WEB.pdf.

Fostering Love, Care, Community, and Solidarity

A significant body of research, largely grounded in feminist theory, underscores the importance of love, care, community, and solidarity in sustaining activism. Scholars writing about the ethics of care note that people are interdependent and that "care is universally required for all human beings to survive." [55] In relation to activism, Berry and Lake note that social ties, and, particularly, "Physical closeness is valuable for more than just movement success—it is powerful for healing, and for fostering a politics of trust, empathy, love and care." [56] They go on to contend that, to live and engage in activism without care and without community is to "willingly embrace an evolving new apparatus of authoritarian control." Along these same lines, Stites and colleagues write that "survival is inherently relational" (2721). [57]

Figure 10:

Please use the slider below to indicate to what extent each of the following has supported your activism, with 0=Not at all and 5=Significantly.

55. Krystalli and Schulz, "Taking Love and Care Seriously: An Emergent Research Agenda for Remaking Worlds in the Wake of Violence," 8.
56. Berry and Lake, "Imagining a Distanced Future: Centering a Politics of Love in Resistance and Mobilization."
57. Elizabeth Stites, Alex Humphrey, and Roxani Krystalli, "Social Connections and Displacement from South Sudan to Uganda: Toward a Relational Understanding of Survival during Conflict," Journal of Refugee Studies 34, no. 3 (2021): 2720–2739.

Many scholars writing about the importance of practices of care note that, as modernity in the shape of individualization and neoliberalism spreads across the world, care often comes more from communities than from the state, from bonds of solidarity more than from social welfare services. [58] It is therefore, perhaps unsurprising, students' answers to our questions about **the forms of support they wished for most indicated the importance of building community, underscoring the role of social, academic, and professional ties as protective mechanisms, as well as the significance of practices of self-care. Secondarily, students pointed to a desire for support from national and international NGOs, the importance of ensuring that they secure their online communications (e.g. digital protection), and of strong practices of self-care and collective care.** [59]

As Figure 10 shows, among 163 students who answered the question, the main source of support came from other students and national NGOs, which are perceived as the most significant sources of help for activists. Professors appeared as a secondary source of support. It is also notable that the majority of students perceive support from university administration, international NGOs, and universities policies to be irrelevant. This is despite the fact that universities have the potential to be (and should be) important spaces for supporting activism: as spaces where students can experiment with protest tactics; as places where ideas can be incubated and developed; as resources for services like legal aid (where law schools are present); and as protectors of varied forms of knowledge. [60]

Students interviewed pointed to support from their own communities as the most important factor keeping them engaged as activists. Several students described how important it was to develop strong social ties outside of activist circles, explaining, for example, as did a student from Eastern Europe:

"You can, for example, organize other non-formal activities so that you are—I don't know, once per semester, you go to make some sport or some other activity that is not connected to the work of being a student representative. So you can get people together in a non-formal way simply to get to know everyone better. And to also, for example, it is important to integrate new members."

Other students described how those ties could help keep themselves safe and secure. For example, a student from Central America explained, "We help one another to create connections, to be able to survive, and to be able to continue the work that we have been doing for so many years." Similarly, a student from the Middle East noted the value of having close friendships with other activists:

> "**Like, if you go to a protest or anything, I always know that they (the people they organize with) have my back, and they know that I will have their back.**"

A student from North America explained how community support could prevent students from burning out:

"[We] were clear that part of this is also community building and showing up for one another. So that's one of our core principles—sustainability—both to ensure people don't burn out...so the work keeps going, but also so that we, as individuals, are sustained in the work. Another one of our principles is 'flow in, flow out.' So students are encouraged, when we feel overwhelmed, to take a step back. And it's like no questions asked. You just post in Slack... and others come in to take on more responsibility as they're able."

As illustrated in the above quotation, having a strong activist community is particularly important for enabling activists to take care of themselves. Such self-care practices appeared commonly during interviews as important for sustaining activism. For example, a student from East Asia said, "I have learned taekwondo. And I would like to learn more martial arts about how to protect myself." Likewise, another student from Southern Africa explained, "Maybe what could have helped is my involvement with sports. I am a student athlete, and I play professional volleyball for my university. Because of that, I always train like five times a week, and I think that has helped me emotionally."

Additionally, other students spoke about the role of community in helping them celebrate small wins—an important act in sustaining activism. A student from Eastern Europe described how positive feedback following a successful event had boosted their morale: "We organized an event, and I was in charge, and it was a lot of work. And I think it was a huge success...it was a big thing for me, kind of a positive input. And after this, I felt good."

58. See, for example, Manuel Tironi and Israel Rodriguez-Giralt, "Healing, Knowing, Enduring: Care and Politics in Damaged Worlds," The Sociological Review Monographs 65, no. 2 (2017): 89–109.

59. Significantly, Conner finds that practices of self-care and community-care are one of the defining aspects of what she calls the new student activist; see Conner, The New Student Activists: The Rise of Neoactivism on College Campuses.

60. See Paul Gready and Emma Jackson, Universities as Sites of Activism and Protection, UNESCO Chair, Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, Working Paper 1, University of York, Centre for Applied Human Rights, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6540fbb77df51973568ecb34/t/654a27540a523435a2fea43b/1699358549613/Unesco+working+paper+No.1.pdf

Photo: Gender DynamiX

Students therefore pointed to support in building networks of solidarity as one of the most important forms of protection that external actors could provide. A student from Southern Africa, for instance, described how international solidarity may be helpful:

"What I believe best helps my activism is support groups. I think a support group would be very helpful and would be supportive to my activism. Also, international engagement with other activists in other regions might support my activism. What do I mean? It's quite easy to learn from other people who are in the same shoes but are not in the same geographical location. I'm talking about where activists can still engage each other on that global level and just basically see how they can move forward in championing their agenda."

Secondarily, students noted that, while they did not have access to significant support from external organizations, such protection efforts would be helpful. A student from Central America noted that, in the past, they had received some support from organizations that focused on human rights defenders, including accompaniment (e.g., when external groups physically accompany human rights defenders to help keep them safe), but such access had become much more limited, and that access to resources from international NGOs was often constrained by factors such as the income status of their country: "[My country] is seen as a country that is middle income, and that makes it so that participating is difficult."

When describing the kinds of support from external organizations that they wanted, students most commonly mentioned legal support, protection advice, and training. Along these lines, a student from Central America explained

that "if legal support existed for the youth...the students would feel safer to push or fight for rights against injustices that they face because of a teacher or student authorities." Another student referred to organizations that gave advice to students at immediate risk, noting that such efforts were particularly helpful: "There were times when some of the youths or activists were on the run and [the organization] tried to engage them, talk to them, and find a better way of handling that particular issue."

A student from Southern Africa described how training in digital protection would be beneficial. Several students mentioned that they already engaged in digital protection practices to keep themselves safe. A student from Southern Africa noted that they keep the location data on their phone always off. A student from Central America explained how they use a separate phone for being in touch with their family: "We have a safe channel, let's say. I bought them a telephone and gave them a SIM card, a telephone card that has a number that is not [from my country] and allows us to communicate through this number.... It has been through this that I am able to take care of myself. Knowing who to talk to and where to talk to them." However, others noted that they would benefit from additional training.

Community, networks, and solidarity, therefore, came through clearly as some of the most important forms of protection for student activists. Students mentioned them on a number of different levels—in terms of their immediate community, in terms of networks with external organizations, and in terms of international solidarity. Moreover, they clearly described how these networks sustained their activism: by boosting their morale, by facilitating their self-care practices, and by supporting them with training and advice.

VI. Conclusion

The data collected indicate that most of the student activists who participated in this research project experienced pressure from higher education authorities (often in the form of threats of failure, suspension, or expulsion) and from their own community members (their family members, friends, and teachers). Such lawfare in the form of educational consequences and relational repression were among the biggest deterrents to being involved in advocating for social causes. In other words, repression was often deployed at the lowest possible level, rather than by state security forces or government authorities—though such forms of classical repression did take place as well. The data therefore show that some of the most effective forms of repression are soft and relational, aimed at damaging their futures and disrupting their social times. Along these same lines, student activists point to social ties—particularly their relationships with their fellow activists—as the most important forms of support that help them maintain their activist engagement.

Photo: Sumaya Hisham REUTERS

As SAIH's 2023 report underscored, university student activists are essential members of civil society. They are often at the forefront of movements for human rights, social justice, and political change—often acting as a new generational vanguard that seeks to transform society. A diverse and engaged student population also supports a critical and engaged academic community, underpinning the academic freedom that is essential for social, political, and economic development and, ideally, a more equitable and just future.

In addition to the previous report, the current one is a step in a broader project that seeks to highlight the important role that student activists play as members of civil society, the challenges that they face, and the resources that they need.

The research carried out through this project aims to bridge the knowledge gaps about the types or extent of repression student activists face and contribute to broader human rights and democracy research. The research therefore has two aims. First, to better understand the mechanisms of

repression of student activism. Just as this report highlights, student movements and activists are diverse, and the long-term goal of this research is to portray this complexity, diving deeper into different facets of student activism. Second, to continue to use this new knowledge as a foundation for advocacy and practical solutions to protect and promote student activism, both as an important component of academic freedom and broader civil society/human rights work. SAIH will further develop the project with the aim to ensure that research efforts are more inclusive, diverse, and participatory.

Paying attention to students' own experiences, as this report has done, is essential for better understanding where to invest resources to protect student activists. Protecting student activists and their right to engage in human rights activism is a collective responsibility that requires concrete responses at the local, national, regional, and international level, while making sure to do no harm. To that end, we conclude with the following recommendations for key stakeholders:

Recommendations

National governments and diplomatic missions

- Recognize, promote, and protect the rights of human rights defenders, including students in line with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.
- Endorse the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom and promote their adoption within the UN system.
- Implement and support efforts to document human rights obligations, including the right to academic freedom in monitoring exercises at all levels, such as in the UN Universal Periodic Review.
- Fund necessary protection mechanisms such as scholarships, grants, rapid response and legal protection for at-risk student activists, such as the Student at Risk program in Norway.
- Engage with student collectives (formal and informal) at all levels, such as by participating in their events and activities, and including them in official state delegations to relevant political meetings and forums.
- Train civil servants, security forces and members of the judiciary on international human rights standards, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, specifically highlighting that students often act as human rights defenders.

National, regional and international NGOs, the UN, regional and national human rights agencies, and donors

- Increase efforts to document rights violations against students. Monitoring mechanisms such as the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Academic Freedom Index should include an indicator(s) to monitor students' right to expression and opinion and peaceful assembly and association, as part of their right to academic freedom.
- Integrate appropriate protection mechanisms for at-risk student activists within the scope of your human rights work and/or refer cases of persecuted students to relevant organizations.
- Produce a UN thematic report on the protection of students' right to expression and opinion and peaceful assembly and association, both on and off university campuses, for example by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion.
- Recognize, promote, and protect student activists, for example through participating in their events and activities, attending court hearings, making visits to detained students, and writing statements on their behalf.
- Create non-patronizing and inclusive environments for young people within the human rights community, such as by establishing paid or credit-based internships and volunteering, nurturing youth-driven initiatives and leadership, practicing intersectionality, anticolonial thinking and take actions to tackle racism, ageism, sexism, casteism and other forms of discrimination.
- Provide funding for, and include students in, capacity-building initiatives. Measures to ensure this could for example include engaging with students on campus to offer guidance on fostering communities of self-care and resilience.
- Submit cases of human rights violations and abuse experienced by human rights defenders, including students, to relevant human rights institutions at all levels, for example at the various human rights bodies at the UN.

Photo: Sam Ladley / Unsplash

Higher education institutions and academic communities

- Endorse and implement the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom at your institution. Review existing internal guidelines and policies to ensure that the right to academic freedom for all, including students, is respected and protected.
- Produce quantitative and qualitative academic research on the nature and patterns of threats experienced by student activists and their right to academic freedom, for example by encouraging and funding student-led research on such topics.
- Establish and publicize safe mechanisms for students to report incidents of repression anonymously and create a protocol for handling these cases in a fair and transparent manner.
- Establish and implement practices that reduce the possibility of bias within your institution such as by implementing anonymous grading practices and ensuring that staff evaluate students' work fairly and consistently using a standard set of objective criteria.
- Make your institution a 'site for activism and protection' by establishing scholarships, study placements and grants for at-risk student activists, as well as providing other forms of support like on-campus counselling, mental health and psychosocial services, legal aid clinics, issuing public solidarity statements and academic mentorship.
- Ensure exchange programs, overseas campuses, international research collaborations and any other cooperation, exchanges or agreements with foreign governments, state-owned enterprises or universities are based on policies affirming the principles of academic freedom and human rights.
- Institutionalize Student Advocacy Seminars as well as encourage and establish volunteering and credit-based internships with civil society actors, grassroots' movements and organizations for students to get practical experience of human rights work.

Students

- Organize and seek solidarity with other student activists and relevant civil society actors, grassroots' movements and organizations in your community.
- Monitor, document, and publicly highlight the repression you experience through traditional and social media and share this information with relevant civil society actors and grassroots' movements and organizations, whenever possible.
- Share challenging experiences with fellow students who are part of your community to foster and nurture care and solidarity in collective struggles.
- Seek capacity-building initiatives that can contribute to your activism, well-being, and help to mitigate risk.
- Ally and strengthen existing regional and global student representation bodies such as the Global Student Forum.

Photo: Latrach Med Jamil / Unsplash

Resources and Best Practices
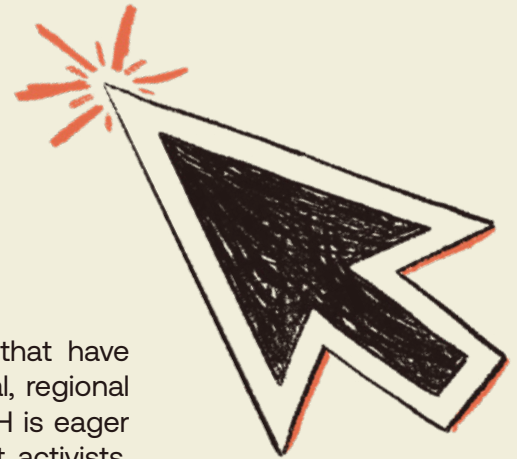
Below are a few examples of resources and best practices that have contributed to the protection of student activists at the national, regional and international levels. These are only some initiatives, and SAIH is eager to connect with other relevant protection measures for student activists. Together we are stronger, contact us at **star@saih.no**

Protection programs and emergency support:
- Students at Risk program, Norway – A protection program that supports at-risk student activists with the opportunity to complete their higher education in Norway.
- Students at Risk - Hilde Domin program, Germany – A scholarship program that supports students who are at risk of being formally or de facto denied educational or other rights in their country of origin to complete their study at a German higher education institution.
- Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) – A national network of lawyers protecting and promoting human rights defenders, including student activists in Zimbabwe. There are several countries with similar initiatives.
- Lifeline Embattlement CSO Assistance Fund – A fund that provides emergency financial assistance to civil society organizations under threat or attack and rapid response. advocacy and resiliency grants to support in responding to broader threats against civic space.

Documentation and monitoring:
- Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, Scholars at Risk – aims to identify, assess and tracks incidents that constitute violations of academic freedom and/or human rights of members of the higher education community, which is also summarized in their annual Free to Think report.
- Academic Freedom Index by Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) – assess de facto levels of academic freedom across the world based on five indicators.
- UN Special Procedures – independent experts with mandates to monitor, report and advise on human rights from a thematic or country-specific perspective.
- Asociación Colombiana de Estudiantes Universitarios (ACEU) – A student-led union in Colombia who monitors and reports cases of human rights violations experienced by their members.
- DOXA – A student-led media outlet that covers the pressure universities and the state are putting on students in Russia.

Networks and initiatives:
- Scholars at Risk – A global network of higher education institutions and individuals that protect threatened scholars and promotes academic freedom worldwide.
- Global Student Forum – A global umbrella organization of student unions for educational justice, social equality and rights of students.
- UNESCO Chair in the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and the Expansion of Political Space – a UNESCO initiative working on universities as sites of activism and protection through research, knowledge exchange and network-building.
- Latin America Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE) – A network of civil society organizations promoting the human right to transformative, public, secular and free education for all.
- Southern African Human Rights Defenders Network – A regional network that promotes, protects and enhances the resilience of human rights defenders and social justice initiatives in the effort to resist the closure of civic space.

SAIH