



Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER)

Annual Report 2015

EMPOWER's Vision

A society where there is equality and a thriving democracy that respects diversity.

EMPOWER's Mission**Empowering Communities for Change**

To promote and support actions that advance justice and democracy, based on feminist and human rights principles, to enable women and youth to realise their own potential.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Empower's work deeply embedded in the reality of women's lives, especially the marginalized and contentious of the corrupt and abusive of power. Our feminist framework unpacks power relations that subjugate and disempower minds. We are vested in developing and propogating critical analysis which unshackle the lives that we touch through our work.

Evolving into a maturity that takes into account multiple perspectives is vital in envisioning a common future. Our outreach has centred women's human rights and widening democratic spaces through our various programs and campaigns.

Despite being faced with a turbulent political, social and economic climate, we sow ideas of justice, equality and empowerment among our constituents. Our work of promoting women leaders among community based organizations and grassroots women leaders in political parties since 2010 has convinced us that we need a new breed of leaders who are accountable, just and inclusive. We have been strengthening our partnerships with indigenous women from various villages in Peninsular Malaysia, uncovering their historic and present marginalization which needs to be addressed immediately.

At the same time, we have trained our eyes on the impunity of the state which is increasing its stranglehold on democratic spaces, pushing back against repressive laws which rob us of the freedom of expression which is a vital human right. We have developed and promoted tools for pushing back against the excesses of the state by developing a cadre of activists to take on the hardhitting issues on Internet Rights and Human Rights.

Ever vigilant that the state must be made answerable to citizenery, we have engaged in the UPR processes and continue to engage with relevant stakeholders to provide input in a consistent manner. We acknowledge networking and partnering with progressive organizations at the national and regional also bolsters our strength and voice as an important player in the arena.

The people who make this possible are not only the staff but also EMPOWER members who have a symbiotic relationship at the core of thenorganization. True to feminist practice, we try to achieve all of this by constantly reflecting on our actions and motivations lest we lose sight of the primary goal of establishing an empowering, safe and nurturing environment to reach our highest potential.

We are glad to say we are in this struggle for the long haul and see the relevance of our work today, especially when traditional structures are struggling to hold on to power through impunity and violence.

Janarthani Arumugam

HIGHLIGHTS IN 2015

February 6-8: Capacity-building workshop for Orang Asli women leaders	March 14: Oh My Gender Forum: “Mana Pompuan Lain?”	March 15-16: High-Level Consultation on Orang Asli Women	March 23-27: RightsCon Southeast Asia 2015	April 20: National Consultation on the Malaysia Country Report for APC IMPACT
April 21-25: ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples’ Forum	May 26: Consultation Session on the Preparation of a Plan of Action to Address Violence against Women, Ministry of Women	May 29-2 June: APC IMPACT Regional Training of Trainers	June 3-5: Regional Consultation on “Expression, Opinion, and Religious Freedoms in Asia”	June 13-14: Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) Evaluation and Planning
June 15-18: Human Rights Council 29 th regular session	August 29-30: Bersih 4 rally	October 10-12, 16-17: “Defending Human Rights Online” Workshop	October 23-24: EMPOWER Evaluation and Planning	October 31: Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process Consultation on UPR Monitoring
November 5-16: Internet Governance Forum, Brazil	November 9: Roundtable Discussion with the Permanent Committee on Women’s and Family Affairs, Selangor	December 5-10: #InternetKita campaign on internet rights and freedoms	December 9: SUHAKAM Consultation on Malaysia’s 2 nd UPR Cycle	December 18-20: Women’s Political Participation Workshop, Level 1
December 21-22: Training on the UPR Monitoring Framework for Orang Asli Communities				

MEDIA STATEMENTS IN 2015

- [Sexism and Bigotry in Parliament Must Be Censured \(5 November\)](#)
- [Call to Malaysian government: End threats to press freedom and freedom of expression online \(19 August\)](#)
- [Oral Statement Delivered at the 29th UN Human Rights Council \(18 June\)](#)
- [Joint Action Group for Gender Equality \(JAG\) Statement on Marital Rape \(12 June\)](#)
- [Written Statement for the 29th Human Rights Council: Online Spaces for Freedom of Expression Under Threat in Malaysia \(25 May\)](#)
- [Joint Statement: Police Must Take Rape Threats Seriously \(21 May\)](#)
- [Stop Harassing Activists and Human Rights Defenders \(29 April\)](#)
- [Sedition Act Amendments a Betrayal of Democratic Process \(10 April\)](#)
- [International Women's Day 2015: Stepping Up Equality \(8 March\)](#)
- [Kenyataan Media Bersama: Hentikan Salah Guna Kuasa, Hormati Kebebasan Bersuara \(24 February\)](#)
- [JAIS Sermon Perpetuates Rape Myths \(9 February\)](#)

All statements are available at <http://empowermalaysia.org/work/public-advocacy/>

2015 OVERVIEW: CHANGES AND TRANSITIONS

EMPOWER consolidated its work with new constituents for women's political participation, and internet rights in 2015. The programme that began in 2014 with Orang Asli women culminated in a high-level consultation with State agencies and other stakeholders, where the women presented the barriers to and violations of the human rights of Orang Asli women. The organisation continued its work throughout the year, capping it off with a workshop in December – the first of EMPOWER's women's political participation workshops that brought together different groups of constituents, from Orang Asli women activists to women who are part of political party machinery.

APC IMPACT worked kicked up a gear in pace and volume, with a full slate of activities throughout the year. The pre-event and workshops on internet rights at the ASEAN Peoples' Forum were a major highlight, as was the first workshop based on APC's "Internet Rights are Human Rights" curriculum and the publication of the country research into freedom of expression later in the year. The workshop led to the #InternetKita Twitter teach-in and campaign on internet rights, held in conjunction with 16 Days of Activism and Human Rights Day.

EMPOWER also took on a new project under its Civil Liberties programme, to collaboratively monitor the Malaysian government's implementation of Universal Periodic Review recommendations. In October, the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process decided on a common monitoring framework. The first of a series of trainings on the monitoring framework was held in December with Orang Asli communities who would otherwise find it difficult to travel to the Klang Valley to attend workshops with urban-based CSOs.

Finally, in 2015, EMPOWER said goodbye to its long-standing Executive Director and founding member, Maria Chin Abdullah, who stepped down to focus her substantial energies on Bersih. The secretariat of Bersih, which has been part of EMPOWER since 2010 under the Electoral Reform Programme (ERP), also registered as a separate organisation.

Being a founder member and the first Executive Director of EMPOWER, Maria has contributed immensely to the organisation and worked very closely with its members, allies and executive committee to shape the organisation to what it is today. Her strategic vision of the organisation is one of the many legacies she leaves behind.

1. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

EMPOWER's political participation programme is aimed at creating a critical mass of women decision-makers who will promote and implement gender-sensitive policies and laws aligned with the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Ultimately, this will ensure that women – especially women from marginalised communities – participate fully in democratic and decision-making processes at the local and national level.

EMPOWER's work on **women's political participation** focused on Orang Asli (indigenous) communities for much of 2015. A capacity-building workshop was held in February as part of a project to strengthen the capacity of Orang Asli women leaders' participation in key policy and decision making positions and to provide an opportunity for women to articulate their issues and concerns to policy makers and human right institutions. The workshop had sessions on basic human rights, effective advocacy, documentation and monitoring methods, skills on leadership, lobbying, campaign and hands-on drafting skills. At the same time, a policy paper on empowering Orang Asli women was prepared in consultation with the communities.

Subsequent to the workshop and the finalisation of the policy paper, a High-Level Consultation took place in March 2015 for the leaders to engage with representatives from government agencies, departments and ministries, as well as other bodies. Parties to the consultation included the Parliamentary Gender Caucus; Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA) or the Department of Orang Asli Development; the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM); the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development; Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS) and Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (JKOASM), two indigenous rights coalitions; the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC); Pusat KOMAS; the Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights (MCCHR); and academicians from Universiti Malaya.

The consultation opened up opportunities for EMPOWER, NGOs and the Orang Asli groups to engage further with diverse stakeholders. The positive responses included:

- The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development offered small grants for specific purpose projects to the Orang Asli women and NGOs working on Orang Asli rights, subjected to proposal and tender. The representative from the Ministry heads the Women Development Department in the Ministry has also expressed commitment in conducting a Gender-Segregation Data as proposed by the Orang Asli women. The ministry has also confirmed that a focal point person tasked to look into the issues of Orang Asli women will be appointed at the Ministry.
- JAKOA provided a focal person's contact and assured the Orang Asli women on their commitment to address issues raised by the Orang Asli women, provided full details and information are given.
- The Parliamentary Gender Caucus committed to a meeting to be held between the Orang Asli women and the Caucus to develop a platform for change particularly on the laws and policies governing Orang Asli. She has pointed out several sections in the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (Act 134) were indeed discriminatory to women Orang Asli and a review of the law

is needed. The Caucus now intends to look at suggestions and recommendations to amend the said act and is expecting the Orang Asli women to prepare the amendments and present the same to the Caucus for further actions.

- SUHAKAM expressed commitment to work together with the Orang Asli women in particular on the issues of basic and higher education.

The Women's Political Participation programme capped off 2015 with a first-level training to build women leaders who may over time become leaders in their own organisation and possibly to take up the challenge to contest in the general elections as Members of Parliament (MPs) or State assembly (ADUNs) representatives, held in December. Participants were a diverse group comprising of Orang Asli women, grassroots leaders, and political party members – but all agreed overwhelmingly that here was a need for more women politicians to be elected.

EMPOWER plans to conduct a second-level training on political campaigning in 2016.

Reflection by Rusni Tajari, coordinator of Women Political participation:

Honestly, looking for this position at the first place makes me wonder with this question: "What exactly women wants?". It gives me more motivation to answer this question brilliantly and patiently. Not everyone could understand why women are asking for equality and non-discrimination. No doubt women in Malaysia now have more economic, political as well social opportunities, but to what extent are these opportunities empowering women especially in politics?

As WPP is aiming at creating a critical mass of women decision-makers who will promote and implement gender-sensitive policies and laws aligned with the principles of equality and non-discrimination, I found it is not an easy task for me as the officer who needs to handle this, yet it makes me feel very excited to take this challenge. Malaysia has ratified CEDAW (the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) since 1995. More popularly known as the Women's Convention, it is the international women's rights treaty that spells out women's rights and obliges governments to respect these rights. CEDAW provides the framework for advocating for women's human rights. With that, women participation in politics reflect what has been recognised at the international level, asking for a minimum 30% women's participation as Member of Parliament, State Assembly or policymaker to ensure that gender-issue policies and laws become part of the discourse.

Going through the first WPP workshop makes me realize that we need to sharpen leadership skills among the women's wing of political parties as they also tell us that they are facing difficulties to be decision-makers in the party because of the culture itself. Not only that, they also couldn't understand many gender issues happening in Malaysia very well. We need to help them to develop themselves more precisely because they are the key leaders in the communities.

I am looking forward to give more ideas, energy and learn many things in order to achieve what WPP aimed for in the upcoming year.

2. CIVIL LIBERTIES

EMPOWER focuses on three aspects of civil liberties: freedom of expression, freedom of information, and freedom of association. Programmes and activities under this area of work are aimed at opening spaces for diverse voices in Malaysia and strengthening the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Internet Rights

2015 was a busy and productive year for the **APC IMPACT** project as it completed the first of a series of research publications and engaged with regional and international processes. EMPOWER held a National Consultation on “Internet Governance, Human Rights and Democracy in Malaysia” in April to present a draft of the country report on freedom of expression (FOE) online in Malaysia, obtain feedback from the participants, and discuss recommendations on improving the situation of FOE in Malaysia. Participants included a range of civil society organisations and representatives of the state agencies and government institutions: the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development; the Prime Minister’s Office; and the Communications and Multimedia Content Forum (CMCF).

The report itself, titled “Status of Freedom of Expression Online”, was published later in the year.

Malaysia held the chair for ASEAN in 2015, and April saw the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People’s Forum 2015 (APF) being held in Kuala Lumpur. EMPOWER collaborated with several organisations to organise sessions around the theme of freedom of expression online and internet governance.

An APF pre-event on “Internet, Human Rights & Governance in ASEAN” was co-organised by the Centre for Independent Journalism Malaysia (CIJ Malaysia), Women’s Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB) Philippines, EMPOWER, South East Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA) and Association for Progressive Communications (APC). EMPOWER, WLB, ASEAN Youth Forum (Thailand) and APC also collaborated on a “Privacy, Gender and the Internet” workshop. EMPOWER was part of the Malaysian National Organising Committee on FOE for APF 2015, which held an exhibition on FOE throughout the APF and, prior to APF, a Twitter chat on FOE issues in ASEAN (#FOEasean).

EMPOWER attended the 29th Human Rights Council session in June, together with APC IMPACT project partners APC, Bytes4All and Digital Empowerment Foundation. EMPOWER was part of two CSO-led side events and held informal meetings with individuals within the UN human rights system. EMPOWER also submitted a written statement to the Human Rights Council for the session jointly with APC, and delivered an oral statement during the session on threats to online freedom of expression and opinion in Malaysia on behalf of EMPOWER and APC. The organisation’s presence contributed to the visibility of issues around freedom of expression online in Malaysia at the session.

EMPOWER held a Workshop on Defending Human Rights Online in October, which was attended by human rights defenders, lawyers, students, and media practitioners. The workshop, through series of interactive exercises, mapped out the interrelation between internet and human rights and the impact of these issues on civil society’s work in different areas. Participants were also trained in digital security practices to secure their work.

Finally, in conjunction with Human Rights Day and the 16 Days of Activism, EMPOWER initiated a Twitter campaign on internet rights in December. The campaign, #InternetKita, aimed to increase

understanding and create conversations on our rights online; focusing on issues related to freedom of expression, information, assembly and association, rights to privacy and technology-related violence against women. The campaign was carried out in collaboration with SUARAM, Amnesty International Malaysia, UndiMsia!, and Women's Aid Organisation.

Reflection by Serene Lim, coordinator of APC IMPACT project:

The first message spoken between two computers was 'LO'. The infant internet APRANET crashed after just two letters 'LO' were received before the engineer could transmit the remainder of the word 'GIN'. 46 years after, ARPANET grew into a medium that is irrefutably a world-changing invention, it is what we know today as the internet.

Never in human history has a medium been so intimate and pervasive as the internet. It has become an intrinsic part of world and being. What we do online is as real as our identity, status and behaviour in the physical world. The internet has become a powerful mechanism for information dissemination, a world-wide broadcasting platform and a medium for interaction and association between individuals regardless of geographical distances.

The internet has significantly augmented the human rights environment, and it has become a profoundly democratic and rights-fostering platform. Most notably it has enhanced freedom of expression and information by obliterating government's constant effort to monopolise news and information in the country.

Nonetheless, as the internet has empowered more and more people, many are still excluded from the space. The internet by and large, is an extension of our physical world, and it often exacerbates existing social discrimination and economic inequalities. Not only are those without money, literacy and development are excluded from the resources of the internet, these inequalities fall along race and gender lines too. Gender-based abuse online has disproportionately affect many in their online interactions and issues on religion and LGBTs remain a taboo even in the digital public space. More frighteningly, we observe an increased effort by government in limiting this free space by imposing draconian laws and policy on internet access and expression online.

I am what they called a 'digital native'. I grew up using computers and I can't recall a world without being connected online. The internet as I remember were open and full of opportunities. I was able to log in with a pseudonym and expressed my view on a forum without fear of being ridiculed as a woman or criminalised by the authorities. The internet I know today has proven to be a powerful tool in social mobilization and a vital platform to the realization of human rights that we all so firmly believe in. Internet will continue to be an integral part of our life in years to come. It is imperative that we stand for our rights online, for internet rights are human rights.

Universal Periodic Review (UPR)

In mid-2015, EMPOWER successfully obtained funding for the **Monitoring UPR Recommendations for Malaysia** project. The project seeks to monitor State implementation of key UPR recommendations received in Malaysia's second review cycle in 2013, with the participation of civil society organisations.

A consultation with the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process was held in October, during which a common monitoring framework was finalised and a plan of action agreed on. The first of a series of trainings on the monitoring framework was held in December with a number of Orang Asli communities.

As part of this project EMPOWER participated in a multi-stakeholder consultation convened by SUHAKAM, also in December.

Reflection by Rizal Rozhan, coordinator of the Monitoring UPR Recommendations for Malaysia project:

Fairly speaking (writing), as the UPR/COMANGO project officer for the last quarter of 2015, the following reflections will be subject to changes in the future. COMANGO as we know it has been through a lot of challenges, hurdles and struggle throughout its campaign of human rights promotion in Malaysia. When I first knew that my job will include coordinating this large network of civil society actors in Malaysia, I admit the magnitude of workload, strategy and constant communication did not hit me. As the first ever COMANGO Consultation for the year 2015 approached, I realised the labour of keeping this coalition together takes up travail and persistence.

The First COMANGO Consultation was organized on the 31st October 2015. This consultation was carried out to adopt a local template of a UPR monitoring framework, to prepare the coalition for the mid-term UPR report which is due April 2016, and to delegate the monitoring obligations according to their respective human rights cluster. The consultation saw 18 representatives from 12 organizations attended the meeting. Understandably, the response from coalition members to attend the consultation was slightly underwhelming because of the long break since the last COMANGO meeting and 2015 was in the middle of the implementation period of UPR recommendations for Malaysia. Thus, there was no sense of urgency. However, as the mid-term report is around the corner, it is a personal hope that more and more organizations are going to voluntarily “roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty” in terms of monitoring the UPR recommendations.

As the officer in charge of the UPR project and co-secretariatship of the COMANGO, the opportunity to network within various stakeholders involved in the UPR processes was crucial. Thus, I have taken the opportunity to attend numerous programmes which houses the relevant parties within the review process. Among these were the ASEAN People’s Forum (APF), SUHAKAM’s UPR Consultation and Human Rights Day event by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). While the APF offered a chance to network with the representatives from Civil Society Organizations from both national and international spheres, the UPR Consultation by SUHAKAM presented an opportunity for me to identify the national agencies and civil society members involved in Malaysia. Understanding the key persons with respect to the relevant stakeholders they represent certainly helped me in understanding the issues prevalent in the UPR processes in depth conveniently.

I am looking forward for the year 2016 as more groundwork on the UPR will reconvene. Malaysia is in the middle of its 2018 UPR report, more engagement between CSOs and state agencies are needed in terms of implementing the UPR recommendations Malaysia has accepted. For a fair and equal Malaysia!

3. ENGAGING WITH NETWORKS

The ASEAN Peoples' Forum, held in April, challenged EMPOWER's human resource capacity to the maximum: it was all hands on deck as April swung around. APF 2015 was the first time that internet rights and governance were prominently discussed in the ASEAN Peoples' Forum. From the number and enthusiasm of the participants at the thematic sessions, it was clear that despite the perceived barrier of digital literacy and uneven levels of knowledge, there was interest among civil society organisations (CSOs).

This recognition is an opportunity to place internet rights and governance as a consistent agenda in future APFs, and enhance CSO capacity to substantively engage with the issues at a regional level. For EMPOWER as an organisation, APF 2015 was also an opportunity to be introduced to and work with organisations in ASEAN who are doing much the same work.

In June, EMPOWER participated in a Regional Consultation on "Expression, Opinion, and Religious Freedoms in Asia", held in Jakarta. The consultation was organised by Bytes4All, FORUM-Asia, Global Partners Digital, APC, Internet Democracy Project, KontraS, ICT Watch, and Open Society Foundations. Representatives from EMPOWER were speakers on two panels: "Virtual Expression", which discussed how religious expression on the internet has been restricted in Asia and what can be done to make it a safe space for religious discussion; and "Gendered Expression", discussing the challenges faced by women in the region from the minority and majority sections in their exercise of freedom of expression and obstacles driven in the name of religion.

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) remains an important ally and network throughout 2015. EMPOWER initiated a press conference and statement in support of a woman activist detained during the 2015 May Day rally who was threatened with rape, and participated in other joint initiatives around the issue of violence against women.

4. GOVERNANCE AND OPERATIONS

The **executive committee** members for 2015 were:

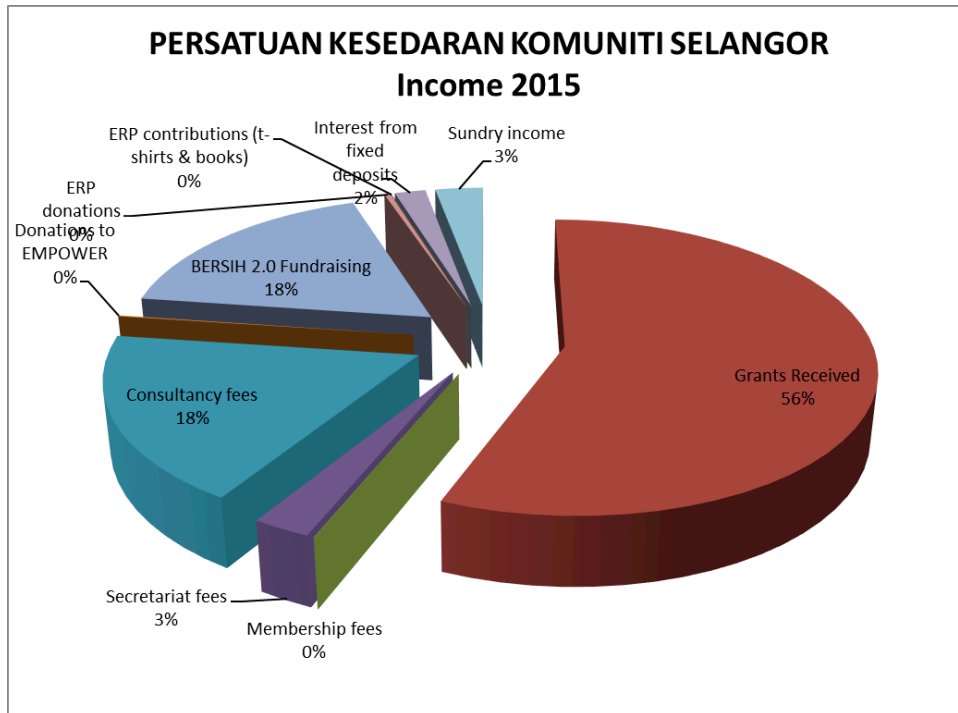
President: Janarthani Arumugam
Vice-President: Lau Shu Shi
Treasurer: Normawati Ghazali
Secretary: Pook Li Yoon
Committee Members: Arutselvi d/o Amalanathan
Mohani Niza
Melanie Yong

The **staff** members for 2015 were:

Executive Director: Maria Chin Abdullah (until December 2015)
Programme Manager: Yasmin Masidi
Programme Officers: Rusni Tajari (Women's Political Participation)
Serene Lim (APC IMPACT)
Rizal Rozhan (UPR Monitoring)
Wong Kar Fai (Women's Political Participation, until July 2015)
Adrian Lim (APC IMPACT, until October 2015)
Admin and Finance: Leong Mee Nan @ Mei Yun (Finance)
Siti Nor bt Yatim Mustafa (Admin)
Intern: Kan Wai Min

5. FINANCIAL REPORT

EMPOWER received a total income of MYR 916,691 in 2015, largely from grants (MYR 515,406). The total expenditure was MYR 1,041,313, with MYR 474,030 going to project expenses and MYR 470,572 going to personnel costs.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our funders and project partners in 2015: Association for Progressive Communications, Bytes for All Pakistan, the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives, Commonwealth Foundation, Digital Empowerment Foundation India, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.

We would also like to especially thank the Centre for Independent Journalism, Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia, Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia, the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality, and SUARAM; as well as the CSOs from around Southeast Asia who came together for APF 2015. We are particularly grateful to the Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau of the Philippines, the Foundation for Media Alternatives, and the South East Asian Press Alliance.

Finally, we acknowledge and thank our intern in 2015, Kan Wai Min, and students from Methodist College, Kuala Lumpur, for their work in supporting our programmes.

Without your presence and support, none of our work would be possible.