

Demanding a voice

By Rufa Cagoco-Guiam

In peace as in war, women bear the heavy burden of social maintenance, and yet are also the least heard, seen only on the fringes of many community activities. Bangsamoro women, like other women in the Philippines, are expected to ensure that the needs of family members are met, as well as earning an income. But women have little decision-making power within their families and communities. In traditional Bangsamoro communities (e.g. the Maranaw) parents or older family members arrange marriages for their daughters, although Islamic precept is that no woman can be married against her will.

Women have a limited presence in local politics and governance, whether elected or appointed. In 1996 the Mayors and Vice-Mayors in all 18 municipalities of Maguindanao Province were men; there was one woman on the 12-member provincial board, and only 15 women among the 144 local councillors. Where women do gain political office, it is usually by stepping into the shoes of a male family member who can no longer run for office.

In war as in peace, Bangsamoro women work in social welfare: they were the MNLF's medical support group: nurses, doctors and paramedics, caretakers of the old and the young left by fathers and brothers who were fighting.

The Agreement provided opportunities for Bangsamoro communities, especially MNLF members, to participate in Philippine mainstream society. But it remains unclear what this means for Bangsamoro women and whether they will be accorded the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

After the Peace Agreement, MNLF women are vocal about their exclusion from the process. They now welcome the chance to express their needs and hopes in community focus group discussions, but they feel they should be allowed to decide which projects to carry out, as the men do.

The Bangsa Moro Women's Foundation (BMWF), founded by Eleonora 'Rohayda' Tan Misuari, wife of the MNLF Chairman, collaborates with various agencies to empower and equip Moro women with the skills to participate in mainstream Philippine society. To date, 159 registered women's co-operatives and mutual benefit associations have been organised

and federated with the BMWF. The Foundation provides training, education and soft loans for members' livelihood and income generating projects. Fatmawati Salapuddin, Executive Director of the BMWF, says that while the Peace Agreement has opened doors to funding agencies' support, it has failed to address landlessness — the major root of Moro discontent.

Bangsamoro women's organisations outside the MNLF also believe the 1996 Peace Agreement has fallen short. The Khadija organisation, with chapters in Davao and Cotabato cities, sees the Peace Agreement as a 'betrayal' and the SPCPD as 'an inutile mechanism meant to stifle (the) justified dissent and resistance of the Moro people'. Women in the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) believe they need to persist in the armed struggle. ■



Source: Sean Sprague