Agents for change

the roles of women in Aceh’s peace process

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Women at an Aceh peace rally in Jakarta 2003.
Source: Reuters/Supri Supri

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Scarce attention has been paid to the role that women played in the conflict in Aceh, their survival efforts or their involvement in development and peacebuilding. According to the historical narrative of violence and humanitarian tragedy in Aceh, women are vulnerable, victimized, suffer in submission and bear the consequences of being the wives and relatives of 'the enemy.'

This is not the whole truth: Acehnese women played strategic roles, generated bright ideas and were able to find unique ways to survive. They were able to become agents for change, performing negotiations between the two parties involved in the conflict or engaging in efforts to save their husbands, sons or their community. When insecurity forced men to flee their villages, women became the main breadwinners and decision-makers and took over most of the social roles played by men in their community life. In addition, they worked together to clean and repaint meunasah (Islamic schools), went to the fields or gathered firewood. They took care of the children and financed their education. They hid boys being hunted because of their fathers' and uncles' political choices, and sometimes they had to carry them home and bury their dead bodies. Women also undertook various religious programmes such as rotating Koranic recitation gatherings from one house to another to build continuous communication, and accompany and console those who lost family members to the conflict.

Unified voices

Women have also taken organized action in response to the conflict. Groups of women have undertaken peaceful campaigns, lobbying, information dissemination, human rights education, negotiation and data collection. Some brought human rights violations to the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. Many of these women faced pressure, intimidation, terror, rape or sexual harassment because of their actions.

In October 2000 the United Nations passed Security Council Resolution 1325 on the theme of women, peace and security. It stressed the importance of women's roles in conflict prevention and resolution and highlighted the need for women's equal participation in maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Months before this, Acehnese women had rolled out their own agenda at the first All Acehnese Women's Congress (Duke Pakat Inong Aceh). Nearly 500 women from all possible backgrounds, many of whom had suffered the direct consequences of armed conflict, sat together in dialogue in February 2000. They shared their painful experiences, formed strong bonds and
planned for the future. Sharing the hope that they would be able to make Aceh better – and that peace was an absolute requirement for a better Aceh – they called for the prioritization of dialogue towards resolving the conflict and for greater women’s participation in all political decision-making. They distributed their 22 recommendations to various parties, including to Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid. That summer, a women’s group lobbied various parties to involve women in the process of negotiating and implementing the Humanitarian Pause then being facilitated by the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

**Exclusion from peacemaking**

Unfortunately their voice did not resonate for long, and when the conflict parties engaged in peace talks, women were once again excluded. Despite a record of advocating for peace and fostering reconciliation, women were barely involved in the stop-start dialogue processes spanning over five years that finally culminated in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the government and GAM in August 2005. The kind of gender-aware conflict resolution mandated by Security Council resolution 1325 was not achieved.

This was mirrored in other political processes as well: when Islamic Shari’ah law was introduced to Aceh, women’s representatives were once again not involved. Women were considered only as objects of political processes, not active subjects.

Without underestimating the great importance of the MoU and the hard work, skill and patience of its architects, it ignores the contribution of civil society, including women’s groups, to peacemaking. The peace process was simplified into an issue between the government and GAM, negating other dimensions of conflict that had lasted for nearly 30 years, wherein numerous and complex issues intertwined and impacted upon the life of all Aceh’s people. As a result of women’s exclusion from the peace processes, their interests are poorly covered by the agreements.

Peace is not realized simply at the negotiating table: sustainable peace can only be achieved if it involves women and men equally in processes of reconciliation, rights-based development, the rule of law and the dignified fulfillment of justice for victims. Signing the peace agreement is only the beginning; the next great task for all of Aceh’s people is to undertake reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation. Various institutions have been established to facilitate this, but women’s voices are still not receiving the attention they should. Of the 43 members of the Aceh Reintegration Board (BRA), only three are women. The Aceh Transition Committee (KPA), the organization for ex-GAM members, does not have a single woman in a strategic position in its decision-making and policy group. In the first-stage list of compensation receivers for former GAM combatants, there was not a single woman among the 3000 names listed, despite the fact that since 2000 photos and information about troops from GAM’s women’s wing (Inong Baale) have frequently been used in media campaigns to show women’s role in GAM’s struggle.

**Persistence**

Despite such negations by the policy-makers, Acehnese women have not been sitting idly, but have responded with new determination. The Women’s Policy Network (JPUK) (established 2004) has been monitoring the development and implementation of the Law on the Governing of Aceh (LoGA) and of ganun (local laws) that will detail provisions of the LoGA to promote the equitable inclusion of women’s interests. The Women’s Peace Network (JpuD) (established December 2005) comprises 26 organizations and seeks to socialize the MoU and strengthen women’s participation in peacebuilding strategies. A Gender Working Group (GWG) has been established as the hub for monitoring the policies of all parties involved in the reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation processes to ensure that they take into account the gender perspective in policy making and application and budget development. At the grassroots level, women’s groups perform political education and strengthen individual and organizational capacity through various training, workshops and seminars.

Such efforts are not sufficient in themselves. The big, unanswered question is: when will the policy makers start to open their minds and harness the great potential of women as a force for building a lasting peace in Aceh? It is imperative that the Indonesian government implements UNSC Resolution 1325 in its national policies and builds a monitoring system using clear indicators. Civil society needs to be involved and information on 1325 widely disseminated. The government should engage women in efforts to build peace in conflict areas like Papua. In Aceh, the BRA should consult women’s organizations before carrying out any intervention. Applying women’s experience should be a basis for strategy and ensuring that gender is mainstreamed in all programmes. More than lip service needs to be paid engaging them equally in reintegration and reconciliation processes. There needs to be affirmative action to promote women as leaders and ensure their involvement in decision-making, especially ahead of the 2009 elections.