

Philippines: women and inclusivity in the Mindanao peace process

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The armed conflict in Mindanao in the Philippines has both vertical and horizontal dimensions: a secessionist conflict against the Philippine state that has lasted nearly 40 years, and a conflict among the “Tri-people” of Mindanao: the Moros (indigenous tribes who profess the Islamic faith), the Lumads (indigenous tribes who continue to practice their ancestral beliefs), and the settlers (essentially Christians originating from the islands of Luzon and Visayas). The complex peace process correspondingly entails both a formal peace process with the government and an informal one involving the Tri-people.

The Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB – see *Key texts*) uses “Bangsamoro” to refer both to the people and the political entity. In this article, I use “Moro” and “Bangsamoro” to refer to the collective identity that the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and its splinter group the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) employ in their peace agreements when they refer to the indigenous tribes in Mindanao who profess the Islamic faith.

Women in the peace process

Women have played prominent and meaningful roles in both the formal and informal tracks of the peace process. In the formal track, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) is headed for the second time by Secretary Teresita Quintos-Deles. This is a cabinet rank directly under the Office of the President and is tasked with the “coordination and implementation of all the components of the comprehensive peace process”.

Secretary Quintos-Deles oversees five peace “tables”: three involving the Communist Party of the Philippines–National Democratic Front (CPP-NDF) and its splinter groups; and two involving the MNLF and MILF. The processes with the MNLF and the two Communist splinter groups are essentially implementation processes, since peace agreements have already been signed. The processes with the MILF and the CPP-NDF are still at the talks stage.

The government peace tables for the MILF and CPP-NDF each include two women who are respected civil society leaders. On the CPP-NDF table are Jurgette Honculada, veteran labour and women’s rights advocate, and Maria Lourdes Tison, civil society peace and environment advocate. Professor Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, a well-known

expert on the Mindanao conflict, is current chair of the negotiating panel on the MILF table, which also includes the author of this article, a Muslim women’s rights leader. The OPAPP technical and legal support staff of all five peace tables are also headed by women.

In 2010, the Philippines became the first state in Southeast Asia and the eighteenth in the world to develop its National Action Plan for UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security. This transpired through collaboration between OPAPP and Women Engaged in Action on 1325 (WEACT 1325), a national umbrella group of women’s peace organisations in the Philippines. Other Southeast Asian countries’ women’s peace organisations have subsequently invited WEACT 1325 members to act as resource persons in the crafting of their own national action plans.

Women’s evolving role

During seventeen years of peace talks with the government, the MILF peace panels and support staff were all-male delegations. It was only in 2012 that they for the first time included two women in their technical staff; one of these women, Attorney Raissa Jajurie, now sometimes sits at the negotiating table as an alternate panel member whenever one of the male members is not around.

Women’s expanding role in peace processes in the Philippines has accompanied the increasing emphasis on inclusiveness and civil society engagement more broadly. During the post-Martial Law transition to democracy by the Philippine government in 1986, a strong sense of national unity, reconciliation and the desire to have peace emerged among various sectors of the Philippine society, particularly among the Tri-people of Mindanao.

Various civil society stakeholders from both inside and outside conflict affected-areas have established peacebuilding initiatives. Some examples include: academia (Notre Dame University and Mindanao State University), religious groups (the Bishops-Ulama Conference), non-governmental organisations (Mindanao Peace Weavers, the Mindanao Peace Caucus, and the Mindanao Solidarity Network), and indigenous peoples' organisations (the Tiduray-Lambangian group). Women play decision-making roles in many of these, either as the head of the organisation like Attorney Mary Ann Arnado of Peace Caucus, or as founding members who sit as advisory board members.

The Secretary of OPAPP and the members of the peace panels have developed regular consultations with the Peace Committees of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Some of the members of these committees have participated in formal peace talks in Kuala Lumpur as observers, as have the current Regional Governor of Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and the five Provincial Governors of ARMM. This is in addition to the peace panel members' consultations with the different local government units and academic institutions in ARMM. Some of the members of the Peace Committee of the House of Representatives are women, and women are also represented in local government units and academia. Rounds of talks in late 2013 included local civil society organisations invited as observers, most of whom were women.

Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro: institutionalising inclusivity

Heeding President Benigno Aquino's instruction that the peace process with the MILF be inclusive and transparent, the 2012 FAB recognises women's basic right to "meaningful political participation, and protection from all forms of violence", and requires that the rights of indigenous and non-Bangsamoro peoples be respected.

In order to try to establish inclusivity, transparency and ultimately accountability in the substance, process and implementation of the FAB, the agreement provided for transitional mechanisms such as the Transition Commission (TC), tasked with drafting the Basic Law for the Bangsamoro, and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, which will serve as the interim government in the Bangsamoro until national elections in 2016.

These transitional mechanisms could serve as strong platforms for greater inclusivity among the stakeholders in the Bangsamoro peace process. For example, the TC is a very good venue for intra-Bangsamoro dialogue where all the splinter groups of the MILF, MNLF and their communities can participate and converge their agendas.



Moro women attending the Bangsamoro Leaders Assembly in Western Mindanao, July 2012. © Emma Leslie

The TC also provides a useful platform for broader Tri-people dialogue. The 15 members of the TC represent the various stakeholders: the MILF; recognised allies of the MNLF; indigenous people; settlers; and nominees of provincial governors of ARMM. Of the fifteen members, four are women, including the representative of the indigenous people.

The international community has always played a significant role in the Bangsamoro peace process, starting with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in its role as facilitator with the MNLF. Malaysia facilitates the MILF peace process, and there are other support structures such as the International Contact Group, the International Monitoring Team, and the recently convened Third Party Monitoring Team to assist implementation of the FAB. The Independent Commission on Policing has also been established as part of the transitional mechanisms of the FAB, with an international expert as head; its government representative is a woman Police Director, Lina Sarmiento. The International Contact Group, established in 2009, was the first formal hybrid mediation support initiative. It comprises four states (Japan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Kingdom) and four international NGOs (Conciliation Resources, Muhammadiyah, The Asia Foundation, and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue).

The Basic Law, which it is hoped the TC will submit to Congress by the end of 2014, could serve as a platform for a national dialogue that would address the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Bangsamoro armed struggle. Ultimately, this is where the issue of inclusivity and legitimacy of the Bangsamoro peace process lies – as well as the prospect for a lasting peace in Mindanao.

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