

Muslim women in peace processes

Reflections for dialogue in Mindanao

Discussion paper

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Footnotes:

¹ Bell, Christine and Catherine O'Rourke. *Peace Agreements or Pieces of Paper? The Impact of UNSC Resolution 1325 on peace processes and their agreements.* International and Comparative Law Quarterly (2010), 59: 941-980.

² UN Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) and 1889 (2009) reinforced the call for women's leadership as agents of peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding.

³ This is the approach of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

⁴ For more information about this conflict context please visit www.c-r.org/philippines

Women are rarely part of formal decision-making in a peace process.¹ This situation is increasingly considered a handicap for successful conflict transformation, with the need for substantive inclusion of women affirmed in a series of UN Security Council resolutions over the past decade.²

However, many people – men as well as women – argue that women's exclusion or under-representation is “normal,” sometimes referring to traditional values and roles. Others – women and men – instead highlight that tradition or even religion does not hinder anybody's participation. If a peace process is framed by the value of *parity of esteem*³, half of the population cannot be excluded.

This brief document aims at informing the debate on the current and the potential roles Muslim women play in the Mindanao peace process.⁴

By providing references from other Muslim contexts, this paper encourages Muslim women with different and even diverging perspectives and priorities to identify a core of common agenda points. It is also an appeal to men to learn from good practices and not shy from innovative approaches. Non-Moro readers may equally challenge some of their own assumptions about Muslim peacemaking.

From paradox to opportunity

Challenges during peace talks are often framed as irreconcilable contradictions: peace *or* justice; confidentiality *or* transparency of talks; women at the peace table *or* playing roles behind the scenes.

In a peace process no one has the absolute truth. Therefore all views need to be considered and valued. The goal in conflict transformation is to identify a common ground between opposing views and visions; to re-frame *either/or* questions to more creative and inclusive approaches. We can learn from practice how to forge peace without neglecting justice; how peace negotiators can reach out and listen to people without breaking confidentiality rules. There are good examples of Muslim women playing key roles in peace processes, both in *and* out of the forefront of the talks.

Breaking stereotypes

One of the core challenges in a peace process is to break stereotypes, to address misperceptions. Anti-Moro sentiments, for instance, are based on prejudices and ignorance.

Stereotypes are present in all cultures. Therefore it is important to seek a principled approach to peace. Muslim women engaged in peace turn to the Holy Qur'an, to *hadiths* (saying), and to the *sunnah* (custom) to seek guidance on what roles to play.⁵ Some concepts in Islam such as the importance of *Shura* (consultation) and *Sulh* (peace) also offer relevant frameworks. Inspired, among others, by archetypes such as Khadijah, Fatimah and Aisha, and re-discovering many overlooked historical Muslim women and activists, Muslim women are actively engaged in a number of conflict transformation roles throughout the world.

What follows is a short list of examples of Muslim women's agency during peace talks.⁶ Some have been more successful than others. All of them have been innovative and therefore very relevant.

Kenya⁷

In 1992-1993 inter-clan tensions escalated in the Wajir district, in the northwestern part of Kenya, leading to some 2,000 killings and 300,000 evacuees. In a context where women have traditionally have limited participation in public decision making, Mrs Dekha Ibrahim and other engaged with elders, youth, business and other sectors and promoted the Wajir Peace and Development Committees.

"Participation in a peace process is not about the mathematics of numbers and percentages in relation to who is in majority or minority. It is about plurality, diversity, participation and ownership of all affected by the conflict ..."

These are Dekha Ibrahim's words, when she was awarded the 'Right Livelihood Award' in 2007⁸. Dekha's religious and spiritual identity as a Muslim formed a strong foundation for her peace work. Her religious beliefs informed her vision of how peace is to be achieved. Ibrahim referred to and explored the Qu'an's teaching on understanding the soul in the context of what is necessary for bringing about a sincere and durable peace. Indeed, Dekha encouraged individuals and communities affected by conflict to critically analyse themselves using verses from the Qu'an, which she stated would enable them to build their conflict transformation on a religious and spiritual base.

⁵ Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana and Meena Sharify-Funk, 'Muslim Women Peacemakers as Agents of Change', in *Crescent and Dove. Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam*. USIP, Washington DC, 2010.

⁶ There is a whole range of additional peacebuilding activities beyond negotiations, which are not extensively covered in this document.

⁷ Information drawn from <http://rightlivelihood.org/abdi.html>, accessed June 8, 2011.

⁸ Also known as the 'alternative Nobel Prize'. Dekha passed away in a car accident in August 2011.

Aceh (Indonesia)

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 called for dialogue as priority in resolving the conflict and for greater women's participation in all political decision-making. They distributed their 22 recommendations to various parties, including to the Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid. Unfortunately their voice did not resonate for long, and when the conflict parties engaged in peace talks, women were once again excluded.⁹

Shadia Marhaban has been one of the few Muslim women in the world (so far) to sit at a formal negotiating table. She joined the nine-member negotiating team of the rebel group (GAM) that was party to the 2005 peace agreement.¹⁰ But she felt herself isolated and unable to be effective,¹¹ and that neither the GAM nor the Government showed any real interest in advancing women's rights. Sadly enough, not a single article in the Peace Agreement (2005) touches on gender.

⁹ Suraiya Kamaruzzaman, 'Reconfiguring politics: the Indonesia-Aceh peace process' in *Agents for change: the roles of women in Aceh's peace process*. Accord 20, Conciliation Resources (2008). www.c-r.org/accord20

¹⁰ Marhaban Sharia. Aceh: *The maintenance and dividends of peace*. Peace Talks Series. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2010).

¹¹ Potter, Antonia. *G is for Gendered: taking the mystery out of gendering peace agreements*. Women at the Peace Table: Asia Pacific Opinion Series – no5. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2011).

¹² Based on Sultan Masuda, *From Rhetoric to Reality: Afghan Women on the Agenda for Peace*. Women Waging Peace, Hunt Alternatives Fund (2005); Najia Haneefi, UNSCR 1325, Islam and Traditions in Afghanistan" in *Islam and the UNSCR 1325 in Afghanistan: meeting report*. Peacebuild, the Canadian Peacebuilding Network, August 2008; and David Cortright and Sarah Smiles Persinger, *Afghan Women Speak. Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan*. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame. October 2010.

Afghanistan¹²

Afghan advocates for justice have a specially challenging task in a context where certain groups consider women as second class citizens; under the Taliban women did not even have the right to go to school. The transition to a less discriminatory situation has been based on establishing quotas for women's participation: they were granted 12 per cent of participation in the Emergency Loya Jirga (Assembly) of 2002, and they had 20 per cent of the delegates to the Constitutional Drafting Commission. The Constitution now guarantees Afghan women 25 per cent of the seats in the lower house of Parliament and 17 per cent in the House of Elders (upper house). Women have subsequently been appointed to key positions in government such as Head of the Human Rights Commission and as Health Minister. The Government has established a Ministry of Women's Affairs. All these measures have a strong symbolic value, reminding people of women's rights; however it will take time for any visible practical impact to emerge.

Bangladesh

As numbers of women uniformed and civilian peacekeepers is increasing, Bangladesh has been among the first countries deploying all-female UN police units to peacekeeping operations. A first contingent of 160 women police officers was sent to Haiti in 2010.

Shortly after, Bangladesh became the top contributor country of women peacekeepers and the second largest contributor of women police in UN peacekeeping missions. The Bangladesh Permanent Representative to the UN, Dr Abdul Momen, was quoted as describing women in his country as having leadership of top political posts. Apart from the Prime Minister, women are in charge of the ministries of agriculture, home affairs, foreign affairs, women and children affairs, and labour and employment.¹³

Somalia¹⁴

In Somali society it is men, specifically the elders, who traditionally broker peace, through dialogue and mediation. But although women are typically excluded from decision-making forums where peace accords are negotiated, their position within the clan system gives them the ability to bridge clan divisions and to act as a first channel for dialogue between parties in conflict.

Women have also been effective in influencing elders and others to intervene in conflict and have mobilized resources to finance and run peace meetings and support demobilization. While men typically focus on achieving a political settlement, with the assumption that peace will ensue, women's vision of peace exceeds this and includes sustainable livelihoods, education, truth and reconciliation.

Women have successfully lobbied for places in decision-making forums and for seats in parliament¹⁵. They have made some gains in formal politics, holding seats in the different Somali parliaments and some cabinet posts.

Sudan

The peace negotiations on Darfur (2004-2005) brought together three rebel groups and the Government in one joint negotiation. Women were represented in the formal peace panels and advisory groups of all panels. In addition, the chief mediator, his Excellency Salim Ahmed Salim¹⁶, publicly appealed for the increased participation of women in the delegations.¹⁷ With international support, a group of 15 Darfurian women of different social and professional background established a Gender Expert Support Team (GEST) which was accepted as a semi-official body to assist the parties at the negotiations. "The GEST interacted directly with all official women delegates to develop a common position paper that reflected the needs and concerns of women"¹⁸. This document included provisions such as wealth-sharing and land rights,

¹³ <http://theindependentbd.com/paper-edition/metropolitan/dhaka/2920-bangladesh-top-contributor-of-women-peacekeepers.html>, accessed June 8, 2011.

¹⁴ Faiza Jama. 'Somali women and peacebuilding' in *Whose peace is it anyway? Connecting Somali and international peacemaking*, Accord 22, Conciliation Resources (2010). www.c-r.org/accord22

¹⁵ Although not all women will share the same perspective and goals or support each other to further women's rights (see Judith Gardner & Judy El-Bushra, *Somalia. The untold story*, Pluto Press (2004).

¹⁶ Former Prime Minister of Tanzania & President of the UN Security Council.

¹⁷ The Institute for Inclusive Security. *Bringing Women Into Peace Negotiations. Strategies for Policymakers* no.2, p.10. (October 2009). The Hunt Alternatives Fund.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.12.

¹⁹ Nevertheless the agreement was never implemented and conflict continued.

affirmative action, physical security, women's participation in the DDR process, and a gender-responsive reconciliation commission. Some of these priorities were integrated into the final Darfur Peace Agreement in Abuja, which is considered to be one of the most gender-sensitive peace agreements.

The National Elections Act of 2008 stipulated that women have a greater role in the political process, ensuring that a minimum of 25 per cent of seats in parliament would be allocated to women²⁰, even though many individual Sudanese men resisted the idea. The South's Interim Constitution has a 25 per cent quota for women's representation in the legislative and executive, making it unconstitutional for any government institution not to have women in decision-making positions.²¹

Sri Lanka

After strong demands by Sri Lanka civil society (both men and women), the peace talks in 2002 established a Sub Committee for Gender Issues to report directly to the peace panels.²² Their mandate was to "explore the effective inclusion of gender concerns in the peace process." Each panel appointed five representatives. Muslims are a minority in the North-East predominantly Tamil area of the country. Two Muslim women were nevertheless appointed to the government delegation.

The Sub Committee was appointed in the third round of plenary talks. The women in the different panels had radically different life experiences. Tamil women were cadres of the Tamil rebel group (LTTE). The women on the government panel, to the contrary, were NGO and academic activists, with a high degree of autonomy from the Government. The Sub Committee as a whole, had the freedom to formulate its own terms of reference and decided to work on resettlement; personal security and safety; infrastructure and services; livelihood and employment; political representation and decision-making; and reconciliation. A balance between a formally appointed body but with the freedom to work autonomously was a big innovation. This approach was nevertheless short lived: the Sub Committee could only meet twice before the overall peace talks collapsed in 2003, though informal contact continued a little longer.

The need for acknowledgement

Moro women are already active in a number of fields directly or indirectly related to the peace negotiations. These activities are often not well-known beyond their direct circles of impact. At the same time they are essential to keep the peace talks going and to nurture a favorable environment for the implementation

²⁰ Liv Tønnessen and Granås Kjøstvedt, *The Politics of Women's Representation in Sudan: Debating Women's Rights in Islam for the Elites to the Grassroots*. CMI Report R 2010:2.

²¹ Anne Itto. 'Guests at the table The role of women in peace processes' in *Peace by piece: addressing Sudan's conflicts*. Accord 18, Conciliation Resources (2006). www.c-r.org/accord18

²² Samuel, Kumudini. *The importance of autonomy: Women and the Sri Lankan Peace Negotiations*. *Women at the Peace Table: Asia Pacific Opinion Series – no 2*. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2011).

phase²³. They also encourage family harmony through the awareness of women's roles:

- *Mediation*. Numerous women play leading roles in settling family and clan feuds and in preventing new episodes of violence (Magungaya Center, Midsayap).
- *Study groups on Islam* to seek strength and guidance in the Holy Book (Nisa Ul Haq).
- *Supporting victims* of violence (Ittihadun Nisa Foundation, INFo)
- *Livelihood* projects (Federation of Muslim Women's Cooperatives).
- Enrolling *youth* (UNYPAD, Young Moro Professional Network, Bangsamoro Youth).
- Raising [international] *awareness* (Saligan).
- *Peacekeeping* (MPC's all-women contingent of the International Monitoring Team).
- Documenting *human rights* abuses (MinHRAC, Saligan).
- Participating in *peace talks* (in GPH, MILF and MNLF peace panels and support structures).
- *Training* and capacity-building (Moro Women Development and Cultural Center)
- *Protection* against violence (Unyphil-Women; Lupah Sug Bangsamoro Women)
- Preventing *discrimination* (Bangsamoro Women Solidarity Forum).
- Engagement with *religious* leaders (Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy; Al Mujadillah Development Foundation).
- *Research*. For example: Rufa Guiam (Research and Development Center, Mindanao State University-General Santos); Ayesah Abubakar (Research and Education for Peace, University of Sains Malaysia); Carmen Abubakar (Institute of Islamic Studies, UP), amongst others.

Bridging gaps: Options for increased participation and impact

Because most women experience armed conflict different than most men, they also develop unique skills and expertise for resisting, addressing and preventing conflict. A peace process cannot afford to neglect constructive contributions. There is therefore a need to design options to further bridge the gap between the formal peace talks and the parallel informal peacemaking activities.

The international examples suggest a broad range of *possible areas of engagement*, which are not mutually exclusive.

- Convene women with different backgrounds and perspectives to identify common ground (like in Kenya and Sudan). Develop a *Bangsamoro*

²³ This is not intended as a comprehensive list of activities and actors.

Action Plan on Women Peace and Security, and a platform for sustained action throughout the implementation of the peace agreement.

- Discuss *women's role in the emerging governance structures* to grant the right of participation (like they did in Afghanistan and Somalia) and prevent discrimination.
- Identify topics in the peace agreement that are especially relevant for women: security; livelihood; support to victims; justice; policing; property rights. *Present specific proposals for implementation* (as in Kenya) and engage actively in monitoring.
- *Secure seats* at the peace panels and in advisory bodies (as in Sudan). Develop a support network to avoid possible token appointment of women (learn from Aceh).
- Convene autonomous but formally recognised *parallel fora* to bring together Moro, settler and IP women and discuss the full peace agenda (like in Sri Lanka).
- Engage with the IMT to make sure *violence against women* is monitored and prevented (like Bangladeshi peacekeepers do).

Summary

The need for increased women's participation has been acknowledged universally for, at least, three reasons: it is a matter of *justice*; it is important for ensuring *quality* of an agreement; and for strengthening its *implementation*. It is not only a women's issue; it is strategically necessary for the benefit of all.

There is a need for peace processes to adjust to developing international norms and universal standards. The big question is not so much *what* needs to be done, but *how* to do it. One important element is to find ways for international norms to adjust to different social and cultural contexts²⁴, like Mindanao.

Women have played a range of essential roles in the history of the Bangsamoro. They keep doing so today. The peace process in Mindanao can only benefit from these women's skills and expertise. From all women, no matter clan, tribe, wealth, social status, political ideas or religious focus.

The art of peacemaking is still a work-in-progress. There are no recipes. Each peace process nurtures this developing field of knowledge. Mindanao is learning from the world and the world is learning from Mindanao.

Peace advocates, revolutionaries and women in general share a common goal: to challenge unjust power structures. Let them join forces.

²⁴ Anderlini, Sanam. 'Translating Global Agreement into National and Local Commitments' in *Women and War*, USIP (2011).