



# Women's voices in the Bangsamoro

Experiences and expectations  
in conflict and peace

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# Contents

<b>Our story</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Of being on the frontline of armed conflict</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Of armed conflict and being family of the frontliner</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Of being caught in-between and escaping from conflict</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Of choosing peace and challenging your own biases</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Of daily realities and challenges beyond conflict</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Key insights</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Background developments</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Ethnic groups in the Bangsamoro</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Project background</b>	<b>63</b>



**WE ARE THE WOMEN OF BANGSAMORO  
AND THESE ARE OUR STORIES TO SHARE**



# Our story

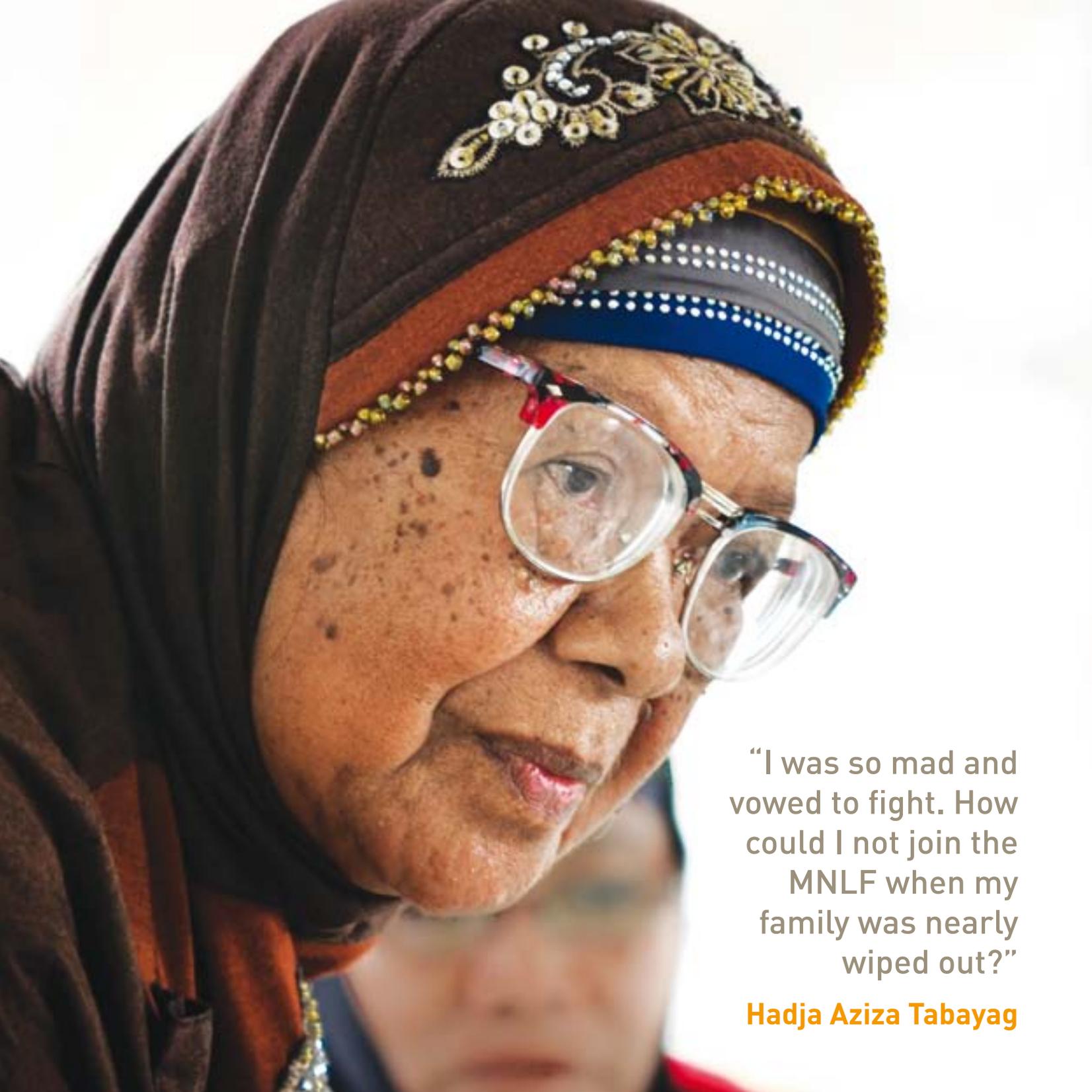
We are history's witness to the Bangsamoro people's struggle for self-determination and quest for peace. We experienced the political awakening of the Bangsamoro people, which gave birth to the Moro National Liberation Front [MNLF] and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. We celebrated significant milestones of peace processes such as the Final Peace Agreement with the MNLF in 1996 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014. We suffered the emotional and physical burdens inflicted by the atrocities of the Martial Law in 1970s, All-Out War in 2000, the breakdown of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain in 2008 and the most recent infamous Mamasapano tragedy in 2014, among others.

We are peacebuilders. We live each day to maintain peace and normalcy in our families and respective communities. We take leadership to overcome the challenges posed by our emerging realities. We inspire action and hope for the possibilities of a peaceful future.

**We are the women of the Bangsamoro – Lumad, Moro, Settlers – and these are our stories to share.**

**Of being on  
the frontline  
of armed  
conflict**





“I was so mad and vowed to fight. How could I not join the MNLF when my family was nearly wiped out?”

**Hadja Aziza Tabayag**

**HADJA AZIZA TABAYAG** is a 72-year-old widow and former combatant from the village of Tapudok, Labangan, Zamboanga Sibugay. She is popularly known in her community as *Omi* – an Arabic term for mother.

I remember that day in 1973 when the town mayor gathered us all together at an evacuation site near the municipal hall because of the critical situation brought about by Martial Law. At around five o'clock in the afternoon, we noticed the non-Muslims leaving the site, leaving behind even their cooked meals. At seven in the evening, the military indiscriminately started dropping bombs. One of the *istok* or mortar bombs hit us. My husband and four sons died on the spot. I couldn't save them. We ran for our lives and I was only able to carry my two daughters with me. During that time, there were no Moro rebels in our community so I believe the mortars were intentionally dropped to kill us civilians.

We evacuated to Kurmatan, Sultan Naga Dimaporo. It was a difficult situation for me being widowed. It was like passing through a needle's eye but I had to stay strong in order to provide for my daughters.

Aggrieved by my husband and sons' deaths, I took up arms and joined the rebels for eight years. I became one of the women commanders of the Moro National Liberation Front [MNLF] and fought on the frontline with Chairman Nur Misuari and Muslimin Sema. Taking up arms was my way of coping with my loss. At the height of the conflict, I remember joining other women combatants with the men to fight back every time we were being attacked. I was on the military watch list and will never forget spending three months hiding in the mountains of Zamboanga with an escort who soon lost his sanity. Despite the hardship, I vowed not to surrender.

When the Tripoli agreement was signed and the MNLF forces surrendered, I went to Taguig in Metro Manila. I stayed there for seven years and then came back here to serve my community. I was even elected as barangay chairperson.

I still grieve for my loss. It is never easy to leave behind the past and whenever I think about it, the only way I can be at peace is to see my comrades and orphaned children reap the fruits of our struggle. We, the widows have been waiting a long time for the government to fulfil its promise and I can only hope that we will be treated justly and equally in spite of not having educational degrees.

**ELSIE BENITO TRAVILLA**, 57, is a Teduray from Sitio Bahar, Barangay Pandan, South Upi, Maguindanao. She is popularly known as 'Commander Ligaya'. Elsie's family migrated to Sitio Bahar in the 1980s after being displaced from their area in Nangi, North Upi due to the conflict.

Moro businessmen started migrating here to Bahar in 1986. We initially had a good relationship with them until some civilian armed men started extorting from us. We didn't know if they were MNLF [Moro National Liberation Front] or MILF [Moro Islamic Liberation Front] but they fluently spoke Maguinadanaon. They would usually knock on our doors at midnight with their guns and ask for money or some produce.

At one point there were five different commanders extorting from us. Their demands got bigger and bigger over time, to the point it was almost like we were working for them. That was the time when I decided to refuse them.

As a consequence, we were ambushed. The most painful part of this was seeing my son, who had just graduated in elementary, being slaughtered in front of me. He was screaming for my name and I was helpless. I can't forget what they said, "*Kagina mategas ka ged, niya I sample sa leka*" ["This is a sample for you because you are so hard-headed"]. We knew that our neighbours had conspired with the perpetrators. They left Bahar right after that incident. Another painful incident took place three months after we were ambushed. A group of armed men along with some of our Moro neighbours came back and burnt down almost all the houses except those owned by the Maguindanaons. I believe all of this was purposely done to displace us so they could illegally own our land. We reported what happened to the local government, police and town mayor but nothing happened.

Pain and hate got the best of me. I almost went crazy for a year because of what happened. What kept me brave and strong was the fact that this is our ancestral land and that we have to fight for it even if it will cost our lives. I convinced people in the community to stay. We had nowhere to go so we chose to fight for what is ours.

Years went by and the killings of our people continued until the Philippine marines were finally posted here in 2014. This is the only time after several years that we felt secure and at peace.

We are not a notorious people. All we want is to be able to cultivate our lands peacefully so that we can provide for our families. The land conflict that we currently face with our neighbouring village continues to challenge us. We've already made concessions and all we ask for as natives in this area is to live peacefully and be given what is due to us.

“We are not notorious people. All we want is to be able to cultivate our lands peacefully so we can provide for our family.”

**Elsie Benito Travilla**



**Of armed  
conflict  
and being  
family of the  
frontliner**



PAGADIAN

SOUTH UPI,  
MAGUINDANAO



TAWI TAWI





“I hope the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro will be implemented otherwise history might repeat itself. Not all the children are like us who opted to finish our education. If the agreement will not be implemented, I fear that some children will also follow the path that their fathers took.”

**Amina Aban**

**AMINA ABAN** is a 27-year-old volunteer at the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), Zamboanga Peninsula. She is a member of the Kalibugan tribe.

I am the daughter of Commander Agila of the MILF [Moro Islamic Liberation Front]. My mother said father joined the movement because he saw how our grandfather was butchered by the military. My father died as a martyr in Camp Salman during the All-Out War in the year 2000.

We grew up without him by our side. In fact, I only met him three times in my life. He was cutting down bamboos when I first met him and he was joking about how bamboo cutting brought good money. I was very shy and felt awkward but mother kept on pushing me to approach him.

Despite his physical absence, he has always been there for us. He constantly wrote us letters, which my siblings and I took turns to read to our mother. As the years went by, we learned to skip the bad news so as to keep mother smiling and happy.

One thing that father never failed to remind us in his letters was for us to always study hard and earn a degree so we could make him proud. We would send him copies of our excellent grade cards and he would send us back grilled prawns or native chickens as prizes. He certainly had his ways of making it up to us.

Being the children of a known MILF commander was difficult. We had to endure a lot of hardships. We were not spared from the abuses of men in uniform. I remember being cornered at school and collared by the military as they interrogated us to ask where my father was. In the year 2000, the military cut down all of the coconut trees on our small farm. We reported it to the local government but it was never acted upon. In 2012, my brother was abducted by the military and ended up in prison and is still now facing charges he never committed. The worst part is that we felt helpless and had no one on our side.

We were robbed of our childhood as we took on mature responsibilities. We learned the hard way to stand on our own. It would have been easier for us to take up arms; however, we choose to honour our father by keeping our promise to live a peaceful and normal life.

Alhamdulillah, we all finished our education except for my brother who is still in jail. As difficult as it may seem, we need to move forward. Forgiveness and acceptance is never easy when you have been through a lot. For example, my work with BDA requires me to deal with the military. It was difficult but I had to learn to set aside my personal angst.

I still keep letters from my father. I still remember him every time I see bamboos. I still cry buckets of tears everytime I think about all the things my family and I have been through. I can only wish my father lived to see the people we have become. I hope we made him proud.

**LANGKA ARADAIS** is a 62-year-old Tausug from Bongao, Tawi-Tawi. She is a teacher at Mindanao State University Preparatory High School and a member of Nurussalam Womens' Organization.

My husband left home to join the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1987. I was about to give birth to our sixth child but I accepted his decision for the sake of Allah even though I did not know what to do and how to raise our children without him.

He was with the religious faction of MNLF in Jolo, Sulu. Some of his comrades would go home from time to time to see their families but my husband never did. I used to like to think that he was very determined for their cause and that's why he could trade us off. Later on I found out that he had married another woman. I just said *sab'r* [patience] to all of this.

During those times, my faith in Allah kept me going. There were countless times when I was confronted by difficult situations and all I could do was pray, be patient and face the problems alone because he wasn't there for us. I was so frightened whenever my children got sick. One time my youngest daughter almost died of measles because I did not have any money to take her to hospital. Alhamdulillah, my siblings were there for us in our most difficult times.

Years went by and I learned to live without him. To divert my attention, I applied for a study grant to take my Master's degree at Mindanao State University. Alhamdulillah, I got the grant and finished my MA.

As my children grew up they would ask where their father was. One day I decided to bring them to see him. It was during this meeting that he told me he is never coming back. I could not do anything about it so I accepted the harsh reality. I focused all of my attention on my children. I did all I could to raise them well. My youngest son finished his Bachelor's degree on Sharia.

It was the MNLF movement that took away my husband. His loyalty to his comrades ate away his time and the distance between us seemed to have jaded his feelings towards our children and me. He actually expected me to support his movement. Decades came between us. At present, I want to divorce him, but we are older now and he needs help from me and our children so I have decided to just go with the flow.

“My husband joined the MNLF religious group and went to Jolo, Sulu. He didn’t come back. I have six children to support so I have to be strong.”

**Langka Aradais**





“As a woman, it is very important for us to be empowered. In my experience, the first step towards empowerment is knowing that you have your dignity and inherent rights as a person.”

**Helen Padua**

**HELEN PADUA** is a 42-year-old volunteer at the Teduray Lambangian Women's Organization. She is a Teduray from Bahar, South Upi, Maguindanao.

I had just finished high school in 1991 when my mother along with my brother and some of our neighbours were ambushed. My brother died in that untoward incident. The ambush was succeeded by many violent encounters in our area perpetuated by Moro armed men. They started calling my mother 'Commander Ligaya' and accused us of being paramilitaries and so every time there was a conflict in our area it was easier for the police to dismiss it and blame it all on my mother. The truth is, my mother is a trained civic volunteer officer and the arms from the government are our only way to protect ourselves from the outsiders.

Justice was never on our side. We would report all incidents to the police and our local government but they never paid attention to us because we are just a minority living in the mountains. During that time, I could not even go to school because of the security threat and so the only option for me was to get married and to live far away from our area.

I grew up with Muslim friends and neighbours who I treated as family, so what happened in our community was very painful for me – seeing the animosity building between us. I can't believe how they could have done that to us. Because of that incident, my good relationship with my Muslim friends was replaced by mistrust and hate.

Violent incidence has been happening here for years. Mediation interventions from civil society, local government and the military only started last year after my stepfather was gunned down.

In 2015, I met the Teduray Lambangian Women's Organization [TLWOI] and I started volunteering for them. Through TLWOI, I was able to voice our concerns and the injustices committed against us. My volunteer work became a transformative and healing process. I realised that there are people who genuinely listen and are willing to help us. Slowly, I was able to overcome my biases against the Moros. I realised that indeed not all of them are my enemies. TLWOI's engagement with my mother was also transformational for her. I am happy that she became open towards healing from the past.

I don't want my children to experience what we've been through. So I hope our voice and concerns will be given equal importance in this peace process with the MILF [Moro Islamic Liberation Front]. I really hope that discrimination against our tribe stops.

**KUMAH SANSAM** is an 84-year-old Tausug from Mandulan, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi.

We were living comfortably in Batu-Batu, mainland Tawi-Tawi, at the height of the fighting between the military and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) combatants in the 1970s. Since most of the fighting was in the Sulu area, our haven in mainland Tawi-Tawi was relatively undisturbed. This was why we were able to plant crops and live relatively comfortably. Our relative safety, however, ended when the *Lipunan* [rebel returnees] headed the military operations against the remaining MNLF combatants. Way back then, I remember that the fighting was more intense because MNLF hideouts were known by their former comrades. The family members of MNLF combatants had to run for safety. In our case, we were forced to go deeper into the mainland Tawi-Tawi forest, leaving behind our homes and properties as well as farms. Our houses were destroyed. Our properties were taken. Due to the lack of basic necessities for survival, our displacements were continued until we found our way back to inhabited communities.

I remember wondering why my children's comrades were engaging them in gun fights? All my 13 children were MNLF members. They joined the movement against my will, but I eventually supported them. In fact, one of my daughters married her co-MNLF member. This happened twice. When she became widowed, she married another MNLF member.

I have supported my children from their childhood to their MNLF days. Being a part of the movement has had its price; I lost two of my children as they actively engaged the military. My daughter who was an MNLF medic died on a mission. My other child was killed by a land mine planted by a member of a powerful family to protect them against their enemies. Yet another child was killed while in Sabah, Malaysia.

I supported them all. And when some of them died, I supported their children. Now, I am very old and living by myself. At times I ask myself, why did all these events happen? What did my children fight for? When is the government going to address the reason for the fighting?



**Of being caught  
in-between  
and escaping  
from conflict**



ZAMBOANGA CITY

DATU SAUDI, MAGUINDANAO

PAGALUNGAN, MAGUINDANAO

LAMITAN, BASILAN

TAWI TAWI



“My husband was abducted by the military because they said he was an MILF supporter. He was freed by local officials but he had been heavily tortured. He was paralysed and eventually died. I planted rice and corn so that I could provide for my children. In 2011 they had to stop their schooling because I could no longer support them.”

**Norma Elyan**

**NORMA ELYAN** is a 53-year-old widow with 10 children from Maguindanao.

My family and relatives have experienced many challenging situations together including displacement during conflict situations in our community. My husband was a barangay captain during the administration of then President Estrada when we had to evacuate again. We would move during the nighttime to avoid government forces.

It was in 1972 when we first evacuated during the Martial Law. Together we fled from the government forces. From Barangay Kitango, we walked all the way to Dulawan (now Datu Piang municipality). We feared for our lives so much that we couldn't even cook food because we were afraid that smoke from the cooking would be seen by planes and government forces. For sure they would have bombed us. When we got to Dulawan, a helicopter dropped letters instead of food. We did not receive any assistance from the government.

The second time we were displaced was when the government forces attacked Camp Omar in 1977. We can never forget how we used to look for anything to sell just so we could eat. There were times when we would take our chances and go back to our homes to look for food. At that time only the women could risk going back because the men were automatically tagged as 'Black Shirt' and would be instantly killed if government forces spotted them.

We also evacuated during the All-Out War in the year 2000 against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front [MILF]. Again, our men could not work or else they would be tagged as the MILF. Getting food to eat was once again a challenge.

Now, as I speak, all our bags are packed as we anticipate another possible encounter between the military and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters.

i. Moro paramilitaries during the Martial Law in 1970s.

**MESRIA MAMASALAGAT** is from Barangay Buliok, Pagalungan, Maguindanao. She is 63 years old and a member of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front [MILF] Social Welfare Committee and *Suara Kalilintad*, an organisation set up by *bakwits*.

My family is from Talitay, Pikit, North Cotabato. I was 19 years old in 1979 when my family had to leave our home because of Martial Law. I remember truckloads of military arrived in our community as we fled to the Liguasan Marsh. It was difficult to run in the marsh with waist-deep mud and water. Some of us had to leave our elders behind because we couldn't carry them anymore and that was the most painful part of that experience. We had to run for our lives because we knew that if the military caught us, we would be dead. There was no distinguishing between rebels and civilians.

Martial Law was a great injustice committed to us by the Marcos regime and justice was never served. What happened to us was like a movie. I can still recall the gunshots and loud bazookas being fired at us from the helicopter. During that time, food was difficult to find. There was no humanitarian assistance from the government and NGOs. We would sell bananas and food to other *bakwits* [evacuees] just to get by.

When All-Out War was declared in 2000, we had to flee from our place again. There was humanitarian assistance from NGOs this time. They gave us food, tents and medicines. I volunteered to be a leader in our evacuation centre to assist with the distribution of relief goods. As a leader, I had to make sure that everyone received goods. I am still volunteering for organisations like UnYPhil-Women, Nonviolent Peaceforce, UNHCR and MinHRAC [Mindanao Human Rights Action Center].

We survived Martial Law and other wars. That is why I am not afraid of fleeing anymore. I am used to the gunshots. I am used to fleeing. We always flee with nothing but clothes on our backs. And maybe what kept me alive was my faith and hope that everything will change. I am old now and peace is still elusive. The only solution to this conflict is for the government and the MILF to continue the peace process.

“My message to the MILF, continue the jihad ...  
Our jihad now is the peace negotiations. Continue the  
talks and do not violate the agreements. That goes to the  
government as well. The BBL [Bangsamoro Basic Law]  
should be signed. That is the solution to the Bangsamoro  
problem. The next president should heed the call of the  
people. Many people are suffering because of war.”

**Mesria Mamasalagat**





“We need everyone to unite if we really want peace. Every person should also strengthen his or her faith. If we have strong faith, we become better persons. If we become good persons then maybe our situation will change.”

**Mariam Kasiat**

**MARIAM KASIAT** is a 42-year-old sari-sari storeowner from Barangay Poblacion, Pagalungan, Maguindanao. She is a member of *Umahat* – an organisation of women receiving informal Islamic education.

We fled our home in Barangay Kudal when All-Out War was declared in 2000. People told us we had to flee because the military was coming to our barangay. We did not know where to go. We wanted to go to Poblacion but instead we were pushed deeper into the marshland. We were not able to bring anything with us, just the clothes on our backs.

I can remember the bombings when we ran with no definite direction. We found refuge in another community. The people there offered us temporary shelter and gave us extra clothes. We fled from one community to the other until finally we reached Poblacion. We never went back to Barangay Kudal after the war. We lost our home and source of livelihood there.

Our lives have now radically changed compared to before we were displaced. Getting food on the table is an everyday challenge. Our children have had to move from one school to another every time we flee. And now we struggle sending them to school because of poverty.

With all that has happened, even with the dire situation in evacuation centres, we have survived. My husband cannot look for a job because he was involved in a motorcycle accident and is having trouble walking. As a woman, I am proud that I was able to support and provide for my family.

We are hoping that the government will help us with our situation, especially with the education of our children. We hope they can provide us with a livelihood, a stable one, so that food on the table will not be a problem anymore. If justice is to be served to us IDPs [internally displaced persons], our home and properties should be given back to us.

**RAQUEL NAIGAR OLIVIO** is a *Balik-Islam*<sup>i</sup> from Labuan, Zamboanga City. She is 52 years old and the president of Las Mujeres del West Coast F01. She is also the city president for Maravilla's urban poor.

I was six years old in 1972 when my family first experienced fleeing from our home in Titay, Poblacion, Zamboanga del Sur because of the conflict between the *Ilaga* [Filipino Christian militia], *Barracuda* [paramilitary group led by Muslims] and the military. It is painful to remember how for three days we didn't have anything to eat due to restricted mobility. We just relied on water. We never received any kind of assistance from the government. Back in Titay, we lost our house, properties and land because of the conflict.

We found refuge in a Muslim community in Dalangin after several days of evacuation. We were adopted by a Moro family and were shielded from conflict even though we were Protestants. Experiencing the compassion of our Moro brethren and witnessing how they watched each other's back in the community convinced me to convert to Islam.

The adverse effect of the conflict forced our family to migrate to Zamboanga City, where I met and got married to my Yakan husband.

As a woman, living in a conflict situation brought me multiple burdens. I was a wife and a mother taking care of our children. I also helped my husband economically to provide for our family. I became a victim of domestic violence. During those times, I felt I had no voice and rights as a woman. I was just clinging to my faith in the Almighty.

I attended different seminars on women's rights and then became active as *purok* [subdivision of a barangay] president. Through my various engagements and trainings, I learned about Violence Against Women and Children [VAWC Act of 2004]. This gave me the courage to finally confront my husband's abusive behaviour. I reported him to the police and had him arrested. When my husband saw how the community respects me and how I became empowered to protect my rights, his attitude towards me changed for the better.

Reflecting on my experience, I think empowerment comes in many forms. One thing for sure is that it starts with knowing your rights and then having the courage to fight for them. Domestic violence can occur in any family. What more can be done for those women who live in conflict affected areas and who feel like they can't do anything about it? That remains our challenge – how to reach and empower those who are most vulnerable.

i. Filipino converts to Islam are known popularly as *Balik Islam* (return or returnees to Islam) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam\\_in\\_the\\_Philippines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_the_Philippines)

“I support the Bangsamoro Basic Law [BBL] as it aims for unity and prosperity of the people in the Bangsamoro. More importantly, it recognises the role of women in decision-making. I hope our non-Muslim Filipino brethren realise that the BBL has no bad intentions.”

**Raquel Naigar Olivio**





“Many people have already suffered from the consequences of war in Mindanao. Our government should secure all means to avoid war and maintain peace. To my fellow Filipinos, I think all we need is to foster mutual respect and understanding.”

**Sitti Hamad**

**SITTI HAMAD** is a Sama from Boheh Sallang, Sanga-Sanga, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi. She is 62 years old.

I was 10 years old when Martial Law was declared. We were displaced from Latoh-Latoh to Sanga-Sanga in 1973 due to Martial Law. The security situation got better in 1974 so our family decided to return to Latoh-Latoh since all our properties were there.

In 1977, fighting between the Moro National Liberation Front and the *Lipunan* [rebel returnees or those who surrendered] broke out and we were once again forced to flee to Tongsinah – an island adjacent to Bongao, Tawi-Tawi’s capital town. War has affected us all. To partially support our family needs, I would collect shells and other sea products during shallow waters and sell them to the market. It was during one of these fishing activities that I experienced bombing. But I survived.

Amidst being displaced many times, life has to go on. I continued studying in between displacements with no assistance. I graduated from high school in 1982 and then went to Manila for my tertiary education. I took up and finished commerce.

After college, I worked at the Office on Muslim Affairs in Manila until 1989. My role was terminated because I didn’t have civil service eligibility. After that I returned to Tawi-Tawi to take care of my sickly parents. My parents passed away several years ago.

I am currently selling goods at the market, as it is harder to get a job at my age.

**WILMA MAHARI NULKIRI** is a Badjao from Boggoc Transitory Site, Zamboanga City. Her family was displaced during the infamous Zamboanga siege in 2013. She is 50 years old.

Several days before the Zamboanga siege in September 2013, I remember some armed men visited us in Monggot, Sulu and invited the local men to join them in a 'parade'. They promised to pay Php 10,000 pesos to those who would join. Little did I know the 'parade' would happen in Zamboanga City.

I still get emotional whenever I recall memories of the siege especially the day I received a call from my son around six in the morning. He told me there were exchanges of fire in our area and they needed to evacuate.

As a mother, to say that I was worried would be an understatement. I just cried and cried and prayed for their safety. I was only relieved when my son called me again to tell me that our whole family was safe and that they had already evacuated to the grandstand. I was in Sulu at that time and it was difficult to be miles apart from them.

After almost a month, I was able to go back to Zamboanga but it was a bittersweet time to see my family but to have no home to go to because it had been burnt down. I was very happy to be reunited but at the same time worried about how we could rebuild our lives. We were uncertain about the government's assistance. We had no choice but to stay in a makeshift tent beside the street in Boulevard, Cawa-Cawa for a year.

Securing food was a daily challenge. We received relief goods but we cannot eat noodles and sardines everyday. By December 2013, we were given Php 1,000 capital to buy *buling* [charcoal], *panggi* [cassava], and we started selling in our area. Our marginal income from selling goods was just enough to buy rice, coffee and other food items we needed to survive.

Amidst the daily challenge to make both ends meet, I would also mediate between conflicting parties. People would sometimes ask me for assistance when there was a problem in the community. For example, there was an incident when some IDPs [internally displaced persons] did not want to transfer to a new transitory. The six families wanted to remain in their current transitory site in Boggoc. I helped to facilitate a dialogue with the local authorities and thankfully it was resolved amicably.

More than two years after the siege, we are still suffering. The government has said they do not want to rebuild houses in our abandoned area so they have placed us in Hongkong. It is very difficult here. The sea is far from us and we have to carry the boat or manoeuvre it with difficulty just to be able to fish. I hope that they can give us the chance to go back to our original address with our own *masjid* [mosque]. My forefather's *masjid*, Imam Kapala must be rebuilt there again. We must return. That is our place. That is our soil.

“Even though we are just Badjao, we have the same feelings. If they are willing to help us we are happier to accept their kind offer after all we are all the same – human beings.”

**Wilma Mahari Nulkiri**





“My only message to the government is that they pass the BBL so that there will be peace. I am hoping that everyone will unite for peace. I am also hoping that the government will build houses for us.”

**Kambaikon Tinyapon**

**KAMBAIKON TINYAPON** is a 50-year-old widow from Barangay Kitango, Datu Saudi, Maguindanao. She is a member of *Umahat* – an organisation of women receiving informal Islamic education.

I was 15 years old during Martial Law. Whenever we received news of armed clashes in neighbouring communities, we would run into a foxhole. My entire family would stay there until everything cleared.

At the height of the military operations we fled from our community in Kitango, Datu Saudi, Maguindanao. We walked until we got to Dulawan in Datu Piang, Maguindanao. We fled because our neighbours warned us about the threat that the military brings especially to women.

Our father built a small hut as temporary shelter in Dulawan and we stayed there for two years. Life was difficult. We had no other source of income except fishing. After two years we went back to Kitango. I got married and had four children. Unfortunately, my husband died after being paralysed.

During the All-Out War in 2000, we fled to Poblacion, Datu Saudi and stayed with my sister. Our house in Kitango was burnt down together with other houses. Until now we do not have a house of our own. Experiencing the war is difficult but living its consequences is even more difficult. I now sell vegetables to get by and I cannot afford to send my children to school anymore.

I wish for the government to pass the BBL [Bangsamoro Basic Law] so we can finally live in peace. I am hoping that everyone will unite for peace. I am also hoping that the government will build houses for us.

**NULKAISA ALIDAIN**, 51, is a Yakan from Barangay Bohe Ibhuh, Municipality of Lamitan, Basilan Province. She is a government employee and a member of Basilan Women Initiative Foundation Inc.

I get goosebumps whenever I recall Martial Law. Those were the times when you could really feel their hatred against the Moros. I was in grade four when the *Ilagas* [Filipino Christian militia] and the military burnt down houses in the village including ours. The injustice and the fear during that time were too much to bear. As far as we know, the Christian communities were spared from harm. I also lost my loved ones.

It was Ramadhan when my uncle and my grandfather were both killed by the military and the *Ilaga* in Balobo, Lamitan. I saw my uncles being beaten up by the military and the *Ilaga*. Their bruises from the beatings would sometimes make them unrecognisable.

Everyday you live in fear. That's how I remembered living in the evacuation centre. The Bangsamoro areas were targets of the military and the *Ilagas* during that time. As a little girl, *Inah* (mother) would comfort us with her encouraging words. She would also remind us to always wear pants so that we were ready anytime we needed to run and save ourselves. So every night, before going to sleep we would wear our pants.

Securing food was most difficult. During harvest season, male relatives would go to our farms at night and harvest fruits to bring to us. In terms of income, selling woven tapestry augmented our family's income. We would also work on the farm especially during harvest season with our parents. There was no playing time for us.

Looking back, I think that experience motivated me to strive hard and finish my studies. In elementary, teachers would come to our centre. In high school, we would walk more than two kilometres to reach the school, without food or money. But I was determined to go to school and learn and earn my degree. I was lucky that my two uncles supported me to finish college.

Years have passed and we survived the atrocities of the Marcos regime. As a survivor of Martial Law, no amount of money can compensate the pain and trauma we have suffered for years. Healing was not easy but attending workshops a few years back made me feel better.

I don't want the next generation to experience what we've been through. That is what drives me to work for peace. Collective action is necessary to end the conflict. Our non-Moro brethren should know our history and narratives as a Bangsamoro people. There should be unity amongst the Moro fronts otherwise it will be very difficult to deal with the government.

As for the government, I hope they will not delay what we have longed for for years. I have been a victim since I was in grade three and now I am 51 years old – violence is still within our midst. Is this the kind of future we will still have? Onward to peace! No to war!



“I was living in the evacuation centre for so many years – from grade four until I completed two degrees in college. I have been a *bakwit* for many years of my life!”

**Nulkaisa Alidain**

**Of choosing  
peace and  
challenging  
your own  
biases**



PAGADIAN

BASILAN





**AMIRA ESMAEL** (left) is a 26-year-old financial database officer;  
**NORAINE TAMPIPI** (centre) is a 26-year-old volunteer;  
**PARHANA HASAN** (right) is a 28-year-old administrative officer.  
They all work at the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA).

We all met at the Bangsamoro Development Agency. Being a part of the agency is life changing on a personal level – spiritually and physically.

We ourselves used to have so many misconceptions about the Bangsamoro prior to joining the BDA even though we are Muslims. We had reservations about being tagged as Bangsamoro because we have grown up hearing it associated with the word ‘terrorism’.

Our perspective changed when we visited Camp Salman to volunteer. We were surprised to see that it was actually a community and not the militarised camp that we typically imagined it to be. The community warmly welcomed us.

That euphoric moment started our journey with the BDA. We came to understand the sincerity of the organisation in serving the Bangsamoro people. It became an instrument for us to be empowered and to be connected with our communities. Being with the organisation also strengthened our identity as Bangsamoros.

The conflict in Muslim Mindanao put us all in difficult situations and so we must all act to help achieve peace. As young people, we believe that there are many ways the Moro youth can actually make a difference in supporting the peace process, especially young women like us. We recognise that subtle forms of injustices have been continuously committed against us Bangsamoros. This includes biases, prejudice and discrimination. We hope that before the non-Muslims judge us, they will give us the chance to let them understand who we really are because all of us have equal rights to prosper and develop.

**HAZAR M. AHMAD** is a 48-year-old Yakan from Candiis, Mohammad Ajul, Basilan. She is an acting secretary of the Moro National Solidarity Party and president of community based women's organisation *Jambanagan sin Bangsamoro*.

I was still a child during the Martial Law but I clearly remember the fear I felt during those days. We left our home behind and walked several miles into the deep forest and mountains. We stayed in Banlipa, Basilan to avoid the conflict. During those days, the *Ilagas* [Filipino Christian militia] and the military threatened our lives. I have seen people who died because they were bitten by the dogs of the *Ilagas* and the military. I remember several people died in our family and in the community including innocent children. I told myself when I grow up I want to continue fighting the *satru* (unbelievers) so I can avenge the deaths of my people.

My brother and some relatives were *Mujahideen*<sup>i</sup>. They were members of the 'Black Shirts'. During the conflict, I would bring food, bullets or information to the *Mujahideen* away from the eyes of the soldiers. I was a child so it was easy for me to pass through military checkpoints.

I always dreamt of reaching the rank of commander. I spent my childhood helping the *Mujahideen* instead of playing. Nobody asked me to do it. I was doing it because even as a child I was always ready to be of service to the Bangsamoro homeland. When I turned 18 years old, I did military training in Syria. While I was there, I had the opportunity to be with non-Muslim Overseas Filipino Workers. They treated me warmly like all other *Kababayan*<sup>ii</sup>. It was during this time that I felt it would be really good to be united with the Filipinos. I realised there is always the possibility of kinship amongst us; after all we are from the same country. The experience transformed me little by little to become a peace advocate.

Our problem in the Bangsamoro is complex and as such it needs a comprehensive solution. But I think education and economic empowerment are some of the key and sustainable solutions to these problems. If people are educated and well informed about their rights, we become an empowered Bangsamoro who can carry out the battle in a legal and democratic process. If people have a sustainable livelihood, that will make us better people. As for the atrocities committed to us during Martial Law, no amount of money can heal our painful memories. But rewriting the history books and acknowledging our struggle would definitely help the younger generation to remember the past so history will not be repeated.

The Bangsamoro Basic Law is good for us. The government should push this forward. The MILF [Moro Islamic Liberation Front] has already given so much. Like a bamboo, they have bent in this agreement in order to achieve peace.

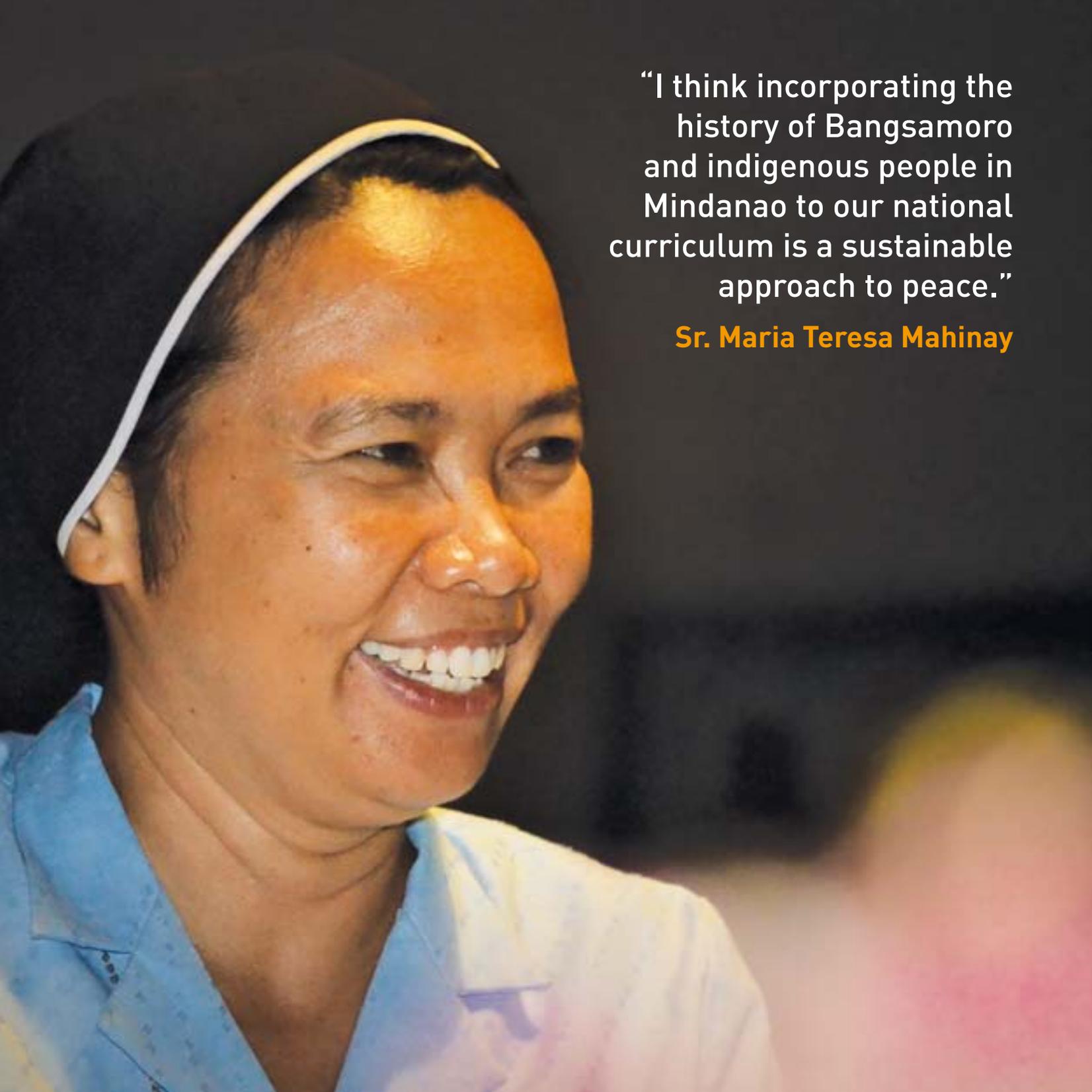
i. Mujahideen is an Arabic term for people who are engaged in Jihad or struggle. In this context, the Mujahideen was a term used to describe those Moros who fought against the Government of the Philippines.

ii. Kababayan is a term used by the Overseas Filipino Workers to refer to Filipinos working abroad.

“When I became a mother I sold all my guns and rifles. Unlike the days when I always had my .45 caliber under my pillow, I now shake when I hold a gun.”

**Hazar M. Ahmad**





“I think incorporating the history of Bangsamoro and indigenous people in Mindanao to our national curriculum is a sustainable approach to peace.”

**Sr. Maria Teresa Mahinay**

**SR. MARIA TERESA MAHINAY**, is 46 years old and works as overall coordinator at *Sabakan*, a Catholic organisation for women and children affected by gender-based violence.

We lost our relatives at the height of conflict between the *Ilaga* [Filipino Christian militia] and *Barracuda* [paramilitary group led by Muslims] in the 1970s. I was three years old in 1971 when my family decided to move us out of Sapad, Lanao del Norte. We initially settled in Kolambugan, Lanao del Norte and then in Bukidnon until my father finally found a job in Surigao.

I grew up listening to two opposing narratives about the Moros. My grandfather had a lot of stories about his positive relationship with his Moro neighbours while some of my relatives who lost family members during the conflict between the *Ilaga* and the *Barracuda* had their own negative opinions about the Moros.

When I studied at Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City in 1988, I came to understand the Moro struggle. In school we were taught about the history of the Bangsamoro and the indigenous people in Mindanao.

MSU was a space for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. I lived side by side with Muslims in the dormitory and made friends with the *Maranaos*<sup>i</sup> who would tour with us in Marawi City. It was through this experience that the stereotypical statement “A good Moro is a dead Moro” was toppled down in my mind.

After college, I took a teaching job for a year at the Dansalan College in Marawi City. Some instances in Dansalan College challenged my perspective towards the Moros. For instance, one of my students killed the husband of our school principal who is a non-Muslim. It was definitely disappointing to hear about that incident. But at times like this, I always think about the good relationship I had with the Moros I came across. I also remind myself about the respect and positive treatment I got from my students and Muslim colleagues.

Reflecting on my experience, I think the best long-term solution to these deep-rooted biases and prejudices is to have more opportunities for intercultural dialogue and sharing. For example, the non-Mindanaons, especially the legislators, should have an immersion in Mindanao so that they can see and understand how the peace process contributes to the bigger development framework of our country.

We can all help achieve peace in Muslim Mindanao. In my current capacity as part of the Good Shepherd Sisters, we reach out to other faiths and cultures – our small humble way of contributing to cross-cultural and people-to-people dialogue. I believe we all long for peace, justice and a life of integrity.

i. Maranao is the term used by the Philippine government to refer to the southern tribe who are the ‘people of the lake’ a predominantly Muslim region in the Philippine island of Mindanao. <http://en.wikipilipinas.org/index.php/Maranao>

**Of daily realities  
and challenges  
beyond conflict**





“After that shoot-out incident that killed someone in our place, I have to go back to the precinct and secure our votes. Of course I was afraid but sometimes you have to make sacrifices that will benefit our people and our community.”

**Mary May B. Julhari**

**MARY MAY B. JULHARI**, 52, is a tribal leader and Indigenous People Mandatory Representative for Barangay Tampalan Women's Organization. Her daughter **NUR-AINA** is a 21-year-old graduate in Elementary Education. They are from Isabela City.

Not all of the conflict in Mindanao is between the military and armed groups. Local politics definitely has its fair share of blame in these conflicts. For example, in the 2007 barangay elections in Malamawi, a shootout happened for an hour because the candidate that we were supporting was gunned down. My daughter was a volunteer at that time and was assigned in the polling precinct. While the people panicked, we asked those outside our house to get inside. We took that moment as an opportunity to remind our people that we should not engage in violence.

Aside from politics, our community is also facing various socio-economic problems that it confronts everyday regardless of the political developments in the peace process. I really want to have better access to government services and development programmes. I also wish for better educational programs for our youth.

I feel jealous when I see other tribes who are better, healthier and more knowledgeable than us. I want the youth to also be given the opportunity to attend *madrassa* (Islamic school). I ask myself why is it not possible for us? Is it because our people are afraid to fight for their rights? Or is it because even educated *Badjaos*<sup>i</sup> are not accepted by society?

As someone who works in the community, it is difficult to motivate our own people to aspire for a better life. Many are confined by meeting their daily economic needs but are not mindful of other social issues such as family planning, early marriage and inter-ethnic discrimination. Despite this, I still continue to do what I do to educate people in our community. I cannot give up.

i. Tribal group widely known as the 'Sea Gypsies' <http://www.ethnicgroupsphilippines.com/people/ethnic-groups-in-the-philippines/badjao/>

**DARWISA JAMILON, 40**, is a Tausug from Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay. She is a community organiser at the Bangsamoro Development Authority (BDA).

There are two unfortunate situations that completely changed my life.

The first was during the Ipil Massacre on 5 April 1995. I was a youth leader when members of the Abu Sayyaf indiscriminately opened fire at the crowd in the centre of Ipil. It happened at noontime. All of the victims were non-Muslims including four of our members. There could have been more from our group if the Muslim members had not gone to the mosque for *Duhor* (12 o'clock prayer) a few minutes before the massacre happened. It was a difficult situation for me because I was responsible for my group and yet I was not able to save them from that misfortune.

The massacre left our community with nothing but mistrust and hate towards the Muslims. We feared for our lives and definitely felt discriminated against even by our own neighbours. We really felt their cold treatment. We feared that the non-Muslim vigilantes would retaliate and take it out against Muslim civilians. During that time, we would not wear our *hijab* (religious headscarf) in public places so we would not be identified as Muslims. For almost six months, we couldn't go to school without escorts from the local government. It took more than three years of confidence building to rebuild the relationship between the residents in our area.

The second incident that changed my life was when I was widowed in the year 2000. My husband was suspected to be an MILF [Moro Islamic Liberation Front] combatant because he was an *Ustadz* (religious leader). Three military assets (two Muslims and one Christian) gunned down my husband on 19 December 2000. We know the perpetrators were military assets because the crime happened very near the military brigade, yet no one from the military offered to rescue or to help.

According to witnesses, the perpetrators even returned to the brigade after they had shot my husband. We reported it to the police but until now nothing has happened.

After his burial, a group of non-Moro vigilantes came to confirm if he was really an MILF member. I didn't feel safe. I remember spending three nights on a boat in the open sea until the municipal government gave us security assistance. I feared that the perpetrators would also come after my two children and me.

My husband's death didn't only leave me with grief, trauma and fear but also the immense responsibility to provide for my children. Every day was a battle financially. I was not used to work because my husband was a good provider for the family but I had to carry on one day at a time. During that time I was only receiving a monthly salary of Php 5,000. I don't know how we survived. All I could remember was being pushed to stay strong for my two sons. I had to stand as a mother and a father for them.

Being a widow, I didn't have much time to grieve, as I had to be strong and pick up the pieces of hope for my children. It was not easy moving forward. I distanced myself from my friends so I could reflect and rise above the trials. I travelled, attended seminars and meetings as much as I could just to divert my attention. In 2002, I joined a 45-day course on peace and development at the Silsilah Dialogue Center in Zamboanga City, which helped me a lot to reflect, heal and determine ways to move on.

Despite the rough journey, I feel proud by just looking at what my children have become. I was able to raise them well. I got a job at the BDA in 2006 and I am honoured to serve the Bangsamoro. By setting myself as an example, I am able to promote the positive image of Muslim women.

“Whatever happened [in the past], let us be hopeful for peace in the Bangsamoro.”

**Darwisa Jamilon**





“I will never forget how my six children and I spent almost eight months sleeping in hidden foxholes beside the barn just to avoid running from the lost commands.”

**Zenaida Linas**

**ZENAIDA LINAS**, 52, is a Teduray farmer from Sitio Bahar, Barangay Pandan, South Upi, Maguindanao.

Our family is originally from Luoy and migrated to Bahar in 1987 hoping for a better life. Land was fertile and productive. We were working with Madam Elsie [Elsie Benito Travilla, profiled on p.10] at that time. It was peaceful here until some Moro armed men came and started their extortion activities.

I will never forget how my six children and I spent almost eight months sleeping in hidden foxholes beside the barn just to avoid running from the lost commands. It was a very challenging situation. We survived but not without consequences. The extortion activities had disturbed our farming, which led to loss of income. We had to stop sending our daughter to school because we couldn't afford her schooling anymore.

The presence of the military here since last year gave us some peace of mind from the outsiders. But we are facing another crisis. Since last year, rats have been infesting and destroying our crops. Farming has been unproductive. To augment my husband's income, I plant vegetables and sell it around the neighbourhood.

Despite the challenges that we encounter here in Bahar, I will never leave this place.

**ANERA MARCABAN, 35, is a Maguindanaon from Pagadian City. She volunteers at the Bangsamoro Development Agency.**

I was in grade school in 1998 when my father was killed in an ambush in the municipality of San Pablo. My father and his companions were there to visit our land property. They were resting after their trip when suddenly the *Tadtad* – a group of Christian vigilantes, attacked them. They were shot and butchered.

Only my cousin survived the carnage and according to him, they tried to ask for help from the neighbourhood but no one was willing to help. Kulasian is actually a community of settlers known to be supporters of the *Tadtad* group that is why even after the incident it was difficult to get back the bodies of my father and his companions. The military did not want to get involved because they thought it was *rido* [feuding between families and clans].

My mother was very dependent on my father. When my father died, I had to take on the responsibility as the eldest child. I became the breadwinner since I felt the need to assume responsibilities to help provide for all of us. I also had to stay strong and show my mother that we can make it through. I socialised with other people just to divert my attention and hide my feelings.

How they killed my father was unforgivable. We deserve justice but we know it will never be given to us. Life has to go on. At some point I learned to accept this unfortunate reality.

“When my father died, I became the breadwinner of the family. I had to grow up and be strong for my mother.”

**Anera Marcaban**





“Life is paralysed during the war and I never want to experience that all over again. When my time has come to leave this world, I pray that my children and the younger generation can finally live in a peaceful community.”

**Salma Ahalul Ballaeti**

**SALMA AHALUL BALLAETI** is a 65-year-old Yakan weaver. She lives at the Yakan village in Barangay Sinunuc, Zamboanga City.

We were in Basilan during the Martial Law in 1972. When war took place, we did not have a choice but to leave our entire home, farm and all our properties. I don't know who started the war or the parties involved. All I know was that it was a war inflicted by the Martial Law. Being a *bakwit* (evacuee) was difficult. We feared for our lives. We had to stay in a foxhole to avoid mortars and bombs. Our mobility was restricted due to lawless elements around the area. For a few weeks, we couldn't even go to the market to buy food.

When I heard that there was a boat that could take the *bakwits* to Zamboanga City, I persuaded my family to leave Basilan. It was the only option to keep my family safe and away from the conflict.

An alliance of missionaries called Ebenezer sheltered us for months in a chapel at Cawa-Cawa Brent Hospital in Zamboanga City. The missionaries provided us with food during our stay at the chapel. After a few months, we moved to Barangay Sinunuc, Zamboanga City and started a new life. It meant forgoing whatever we had in Basilan.

Having no land to till, I went to Sabah, Malaysia and worked in a restaurant for 10 years. While in Sabah, my husband married another woman. He left my children and me without any support. This forced me to go back to Zamboanga City. Since I could not leave my children, I started weaving yakan fabrics to support our daily needs.

Weaving became my bread and butter. We survived. I was able to send my children to school using my earnings from weaving. I am proud to say that one of my sons is now a professional and working in the government. I still weave, albeit income from it can no longer suffice for our daily needs. I teach the art of weaving to my grandchildren and those who are interested. Weaving fabric did not only save us during the time when I didn't have any other source of income, but more importantly it saved our identity and culture.

# Key insights

The stories featured here are just a few examples of the powerful personal testimonies of the women of Bangsamoro across generations, ethnic affiliations and social status. Their often harrowing yet inspiring experiences reveal how women in the Bangsamoro have become the most significant advocates for peace despite suffering through decades of conflict in Muslim Mindanao.

Violent conflict affects everyone but women and girls tend to be the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of society, especially during times of displacements and rehabilitation. These insights into their struggles show how women's responses to the conflict varied and how their respective contexts shaped their roles during and after the conflict:

- **Women as head of the family:** Women suffered from multiple burdens. With the loss of properties and limited economic opportunities due to the consequences of conflict, many were forced to assume the role of being head of the family in order to provide financial and moral support to their children and husbands.
- **Women as a source of hope:** Women were a source of strength to their family, as they remained steadfast and resilient in overcoming challenges brought on by conflict. Their positive attitude towards the future served as an inspiration to the people around them.
- **Women as frontliners:** Some women took up arms and chose to be at the frontline to avenge the death of loved ones or to defend their respective organisations and communities.
- **Women as leaders:** Some women rose above their situation and took leadership roles within their organisations as well as assisting with mediation and rehabilitation in their respective communities.
- **Women as peacebuilders and shapers of the future:** Women used their experiences in a conflict situation as an inspiration to empower themselves in order to serve other people and shape young people's perspectives towards a better and peaceful future.

These stories do not only capture the priceless contributions of the Bangsamoro women to their respective communities, they also contribute to the evolving narratives of women's meaningful participation in the current status and future of the Bangsamoro.

# Background developments

Muslim and indigenous communities in the southwestern region of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago in the Philippines have been struggling for self-determination since the colonial period. In 1969, the Moros took up arms, and over the following years more than 100,000 people died, and millions were displaced. The Government of the Philippines signed a peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front in 1996, and with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 2014.

The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro recognises and encourages 'women's meaningful participation' in the new self-governing region of the Bangsamoro. It has thereby triggered a process for Moro communities to reflect on the constructive and fundamental roles that women have been playing in society, and the challenges they face especially during times of conflict. This process has brought awareness to Bangsamoro constituents about the need to create policies that are responsive to the needs of women, with a special focus on women's empowerment.

## Ethnic groups in the Bangsamoro

### **Main Muslim (Moro) groups:**

- Maguindanao (in Maguindanao province)
- Maranao (in Lanao provinces)
- Tausug (in Sulu island)
- Yakan (in Basilan island)
- Sama (in Tawi-Tawi islands)

### **Smaller Moro groups:**

- Badjao
- Kalibugan
- Jama-Mapun
- Iranun
- Kalagan
- Molbog

### **Lumad (indigenous people who did not convert to Islam):**

- Teduray
- Lambangian
- Dulangan-Manobo
- Higaonon

## Project background

In 2013, Conciliation Resources in partnership with Nisa Ul Haqq Fi Bangsamoro, UnYPhil-Women, Women Engaged in Action for 1325 and Teduray Lambangian Women's Organisation began working on entrenching women's meaningful participation in the Bangsamoro as enshrined in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. With the support of the British Embassy in Manila and the European Union, project partners conducted dozens of grassroots consultations with hundreds of women; formulated recommendations for the Bangsamoro Basic Law; and engaged with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Philippine Government, the Bangsamoro Transition Commission, the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission; and with the two houses of Congress to lobby for specific provisions for 'meaningful participation of women' in the Bangsamoro.



**Nisa Ul Haqq Fi  
Bangsamoro**



**Teduray Lambangian  
Women's Organisation**

## About Conciliation Resources

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. We believe that building sustainable peace takes time. We provide practical support to help people affected by violent conflict achieve lasting peace. We draw on our shared experiences to improve peacebuilding policies and practice worldwide.

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