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October 31, 2007

In Ongoing War in Muslim Mindanao, Women Are Peacemakers and Breadwinners



by Imelda V. Abañon
Philippines

In times of war and during the peace process, women have played key roles, particularly in the protection of their rights and those of their children.

Unfortunately, women are still kept away from the table when decisions that affect their lives are made. This is especially true in areas of conflict, which Muslim Mindanao has been for at least 35 years. The second largest island located in the southern part of the Philippines, Mindanao is home to some 16 million people. By some accounts, insurgency began back in the 1960s, when the central government in Manila declared a "homestead" policy which encouraged Christian migration to Mindanao; settlers from Luzon and Visayas began to occupy the ancestral land of the Moros and other indigenous people in Southern Philippines.



• Cultures clash in the Philippines as US military presence targets Muslim schools and mosques in the ongoing war on terrorism. Photograph by Dominic G Diangson. •

Mindanao has long been considered the poorest island, having the highest incidence of poverty of any region in the Philippines. Continual armed conflict has only aggravated that poverty.

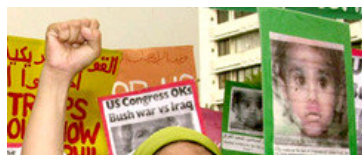
The so-called "war in Mindanao" started in 1971, when leaders of Moro society published a manifesto demanding that the government take action to stop attacks on their community after a Christian-led para-military group, Ilagah, left 65 men, women and children, dead and mutilated at a mosque in Cotabato. When President Marcos declared martial law in 1972 instead, the first organized Moro counter offensive was launched and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) announced leadership of an openly-declared Moro secessionist movement. Since then, the island has been a battleground between government troops, communists and secessionist groups wanting to establish their own Islamic state. Over 10 million people have been affected by the conflict, and nearly one million have been displaced from their homes. Following a renewed conflict in 2000 and again in 2003, more than a million people were displaced.

"This is the face of war. Years of war and sanctions have already created an extremely vulnerable population. There are many casualties already and communities have been displaced. Women and children suffer the most," says Amirah Ali Lidasan, National President of the [Suara Bangsamoro Organization](#) in Mindanao.

Lidasan, a strong-willed Muslim woman who wears the traditional head scarf, says that the number of displaced families in Mindanao has swelled under the present Philippine administration.

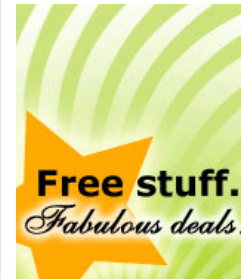
Women and children carry a great burden

In August of this year, the people of Mindanao were again pummeled with all-out war offensives by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) against Muslim separatist rebels, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The conflict has claimed the lives of about 40 government soldiers and more than 60 alleged rebel fighters. Reports say that 23,000 more villagers have been forced to flee their homes since then.



Philippine government offensives in Mindanao's Basilan City were also initiated in August against the killers of 14 soldiers, ten of whom were beheaded and mutilated during a clash on July 10th. At least 8,000 soldiers were deployed in Basilan and Sulu to hunt down the rebel groups.

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• Amirah Ali Lidasan campaigns for peace and the rights of the Moro people in the Southern Philippines. Photograph courtesy of *Suara Bangsamoro*. •

Lidasan's husband and young son were among dozens of civilian Muslim Filipinos killed in US-led military operations in 2001. US soldiers were deployed to Mindanao in the wake of September 11th to rid the country of its Islamic terrorists. She expresses profound sadness that the latest military offensives are again increasing the number of people affected.

She says that residents of Basilan City and Sulu fear for their lives "as the soldiers bombard their communities, farms and houses with bombs and high-powered artillery."

"It is highly dangerous to live in this war-torn area. Women and children are highly vulnerable to military operations, especially if the military is using high powered artilleries and air strikes," she says.

Just last month in Basilan, a mother of a 10-month old baby was wounded in the left leg because a bomb struck her farm while she was harvesting food. She was then brought to the hospital.

In this situation, women in Mindanao must carry several great burdens. When their men go to war, they become the primary breadwinners of the family. They must take care of their children while also making a living.

Women's peace mission

Nevertheless, women believe they hold the key to both peace and development in Mindanao: as frequent victims of poverty and conflict, they have a huge stake in promoting peace as a means to economic growth.

In August, thirteen women peace advocates from Asia-Pacific countries went to war-torn Basilan City with a mission to avert further escalation of fighting between the government and the rebels. They wanted to express international concern and also solidarity with the people of Mindanao.

According to Memen Lauzon-Gatmaytan, solidarity and networking coordinator of the Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID), the mission was "a quick-response initiative to the critical peace and security conditions prevailing in Mindanao."

"Obviously more civilians, [the] majority women and children, are being affected by the ongoing military operations in the conflict areas of Basilan," Gatmaytan says.

The thirteen international delegates came from the Asia-Pacific region, specifically New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Dubbed the "International Women's Peace and Solidarity Mission in Basilan and Mindanao," the group of women peace advocates said in their statement that the first significant step towards resolving the conflict in Mindanao is to resume the peace talks between the Philippine government and the Muslim rebel groups.

"At the same time, we also call for enhancement of the role of women in the peace process and of the need to highlight women's roles in, but not limited to, health, education, and post-conflict reconstruction activities," the statement read.

The group also asked the media to help avert the war and ease tension "by *truth-telling*, not just news-telling. Instead of painting the images of war, the media community must help project what the people are doing in order to address the conflict situation."



Noting the thousands of civilians displaced by the continual military actions, the women peace advocates urged, "No more widows, no more orphans, no more macho wars. *Peace* is the braver option... We reiterate our unwavering commitment to the belief that in the face of raging armed conflicts, peace remains the braver option."



• Women in the war-torn areas of the Southern Philippines must bear the weight of caring for their children and providing family income. These women scrape together a meal of vegetables for their family. Photograph courtesy of www.davaotoday.com. •

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• *US military presence in Mindanao has been met with mixed reviews. Photograph by US Navy Mass Communication Specialist, 1st Class Michael Larson, courtesy of Soldier's Media Center.* •

Even Roman Catholic Church leaders have appealed to the Philippine government to end its military offensive in Mindanao.

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"It's always the civilians who are caught in the middle. The fighting should not go on, and there should be a search for the real reasons why there is a conflict. Nobody will be left alive until kingdom come, with all this fighting," mourned Manila Archbishop Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales.

Waiting for the elusive peace

Fear and uncertainty has completely overwhelmed the daily lives of Filipino Muslims in the Southern Philippine islands.

This region needs assistance to uplift the lives of the poor, particularly genuine land reform that would greatly benefit the Muslim people by freeing them from the bondage of feudalism. Always one to describe the predicament of the Muslim Moro population plainly, Lidasan says:

"My hope is that at long last we will have our treasured freedom and justice. As Muslims, we are prisoners of the national government: we cannot assert our rights as Muslims or Moro people, we cannot assert our identities, we cannot claim our ancestral lands and we are limited in our representation through various governmental means.

"We are being discriminated against, and yet we are told that we have an autonomous region, but we do not have any control over our resources, and the military is crawling all over our oil and mineral-rich communities.

"The national government limits our quest for knowledge, especially when it comes to our religion. Our *madrasahs* are being watched and even targeted as terrorist schools if they are supported by Arab missionaries and relief agencies. But the government does not give us adequate resources for school buildings or books. In the media, they make a big show of the computers donated and schools built by the US soldiers, but [those are] not schools with Arab ties.

"We have become suspicious of gifts from the US soldiers because we know that they ask something from us. They ask us to not complain about their presence and that we tolerate their "little wars" in our communities. Instead of an education budget, the government maintains a bigger budget for war in Mindanao. And most of our schools in conflict areas are being used by the military for their detachments, otherwise they are turned into evacuation centers. No wonder we are one of the areas of the Philippines with poor literacy."



• *Women and children in the Southern Philippines pay a great price in times of war but play a major role in peacemaking and economic recovery. Photograph by Vanessa David.* •

In a land where bad news is the norm, perhaps the occasional story of progress and peace-making is the more significant story. Women are eager to become active partners in government efforts to promote and sustain peace. It is our hope that our legitimate concerns to overcome barriers to the attainment of social transformation be addressed with more than just lip service.

About the Author

Imelda Visaya-Abaño, began her journalism career in 1998 as a reporter at the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the leading daily newspaper in the Philippines. Her areas of interest are women and children's issues, science, environment, health, agriculture and education.

In 2002, Ms. Abaño was honored as the Asian Winner of the *Global REUTERS-IUCN Media Awards* on Environmental Reporting.

Ms. Abaño vows to continue serving her community through balanced news and fearless views. She believes in better journalism for better communities.

(3) COMMENTS | [more from POLITICS](#)

COMMENTS (3)

Nancy Van Ness:

Peace is always the braver option. Thank you, Imelda, for this powerful picture of these brave women. I think more and more that those who have to destroy others are dominated by fear that they may not even recognize. These women who live, raise their families, and work in the midst of continual violence are the brave ones. They have looked at fear directly and are willing to choose to work for peace.

What is the key to helping male dominated society see this? I know personally a number of men who are members of organizations like the US Veterans for Peace and Iraq Veterans Against the War. These men remind me of the women in the Philippines. They have lived in war and choose peace, often at great risks to themselves. Many of them enlisted in the armed services to defend their country, and by extension their families and communities which they love. When they saw that that was not what they were actually doing in the military, they committed to working for peace.

If some of our men can do that, what is the key to that change? Is there some way we can promote that intellectual, affective shift in more people?

Posted by Nancy Van Ness | October 31, 2007 5:32 AM

Louise Belfrage:

Imelda - thank you for an insightful story. I am wondering about the relationship between Muslims and Catholics in the Philippines, the conflict your are writing about dating back to at least 1972 with the stating of martial law. How did the faiths get along before that? Under Japanese, American and Spanish rule...? The mix between the Moro tradition and Islam is not often written about and I would be grateful to know more.

Posted by Louise Belfrage | October 31, 2007 8:36 AM

Anonymous:

Ms Abano's story, like so many of the stories I've read on The WIP recently, really reinforces the idea of a cultural, world wide consciousness to create a shift, a transition of our mind set. These stories of hope, strength and courage... The more I focus on the work of the peace keepers and their vigilant ways the more profound they become to me. They're actions convince me we can channel our energy and honor the peace keepers by glorifying their deeds. Not because they are working for glorification, but because peace is a glorious reality.

Posted by Anonymous | October 31, 2007 10:41 AM

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