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# THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE MINDANAO PEACE PROCESS



Prepared for the United Nations Global Study  
on 15 Years of Implementation  
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# INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in decision-making in peace processes is one of the pillars of UN Security Council resolution 1325. The Philippines has seen robust women's participation in the peace negotiations between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). In 2014, the parties signed a comprehensive peace agreement<sup>1</sup> after 17 years of negotiations. The peace agreement was hailed for its strong provisions on women's rights as well as for women's political, social and economic participation.

Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, head of the government negotiating panel, was the first woman to be a signatory to a major peace agreement. This is significant considering that globally women were signatories to only two of the 61 peace agreements that were concluded from August 2008 to March 2012.<sup>2</sup> Three women on the government side (and none on the MILF side) eventually signed the peace agreement.<sup>3</sup> Coronel-Ferrer wrote: "Just three of the 12 signatories are women. Still, it's a big leap: nearly all past negotiations were exclusively done by men."<sup>4</sup>

In light of the ongoing clamor from many quarters worldwide for an increase in women's participation

in formal peace negotiations and other peace processes, it is important to ask what were the factors that resulted in the strong participation of women in the peace process in Mindanao? Beyond the question of participation, how much and how well did the women influence the negotiated settlement?

This paper discusses the enabling environment that made women's participation possible, and the strategies the three women who broke new ground used to influence the negotiations. It also offers recommendations on how others can apply the identified tools and strategies successfully.

## BOX 1

### Background to the Conflict

Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippines, located in the southernmost part of the country. With a population of 21 million (2007), it is home to people from various ethnic backgrounds and religions. Mindanao is also the arena of many conflicts caused by social exclusion and marginalization, dispossession of land and natural resources, ineffective governance, poor law enforcement and unequal access to basic services.

Currently, there are many forms of violent conflict that exist in Mindanao: the communist struggle against the Philippine government; feuds between families and clans (*rido*); struggle of indigenous communities over rights to ancestral

land; ideologically-driven violent criminality and banditry; and politically-motivated violence. Among these, the decades-old armed struggle of some Muslim groups over the right to self-determination for a Bangsamoro homeland remains the most persistent among the violent conflicts in Mindanao.

This conflict has a historical antecedent. Mindanao is the home of various indigenous peoples, some of whom were Islamized centuries ago. The Spanish colonizers called them "Moro" after the Moors who invaded Spain. The Moros, who had their own structures of governance under their Sultanates, fiercely resisted the colonizers

and were never fully conquered. After their defeat in the Spanish-American war, under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, Spain ceded territories to the United States, which included the Moro Sultanates. Moro resistance continued against the new colonizers. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the government initiated settlement programs for migrants, who were largely Christian, from the northern islands of Luzon and the Visayas. Laws that enabled migrants to own and utilize land attracted large numbers of people to Mindanao. These programs discriminated against local inhabitants who traditionally owned land

communally and had no knowledge of the new laws on ownership. The descendants of these migrant Christian settlers now constitute the majority in Mindanao, displacing the Moro and indigenous populations.

The Moros insist that this is a “historical injustice,” which has resulted in centuries of deprivation and marginalization of Moro and indigenous peoples, and which must be addressed through the formation of the Bangsamoro (Moro homeland). This claim is at the root of the seemingly intractable violent conflict in Mindanao.

# THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

To begin, it is important to look at the enabling environment that led to the appointment and participation of women not only on the government negotiating panel, but also in the other parts of the system that supported the negotiations and the drafting of the basic law of the new political entity. This includes the panel secretariat, the technical working groups, and the Bangsamoro Transition Commission.<sup>5</sup> Second, it is also important to examine the link between women in Track One of the formal negotiations, and women in the other tracks (Track Two and Track Three), and the impact of this link on the negotiations and their aftermath.

## History and Culture

Before colonization, Filipino women were held in high esteem in society.<sup>6</sup> They could ascend to leadership of their tribes and own property. They were allowed to divorce and could retain their maiden names. The Spanish period from 1521 to 1898 changed this, embedding a patriarchal system into Philippine society and casting women as subordinate to men. The ideal woman was sweet, demure and subservient. When the Spaniards left and the new American colonizers opened public education to all, women and girls were as eager to be educated as their male counterparts. Even today, literacy levels among girls are higher compared to boys in high school. Women entered many professions such as medicine and law, formerly reserved for men only. With 90 per cent of voters in favor of the measure, women's right to vote was officially recognized in April 1937. Women held political positions at various levels and in 1986, when the 'People Power'<sup>7</sup> revolution ousted the Marcos dictatorship, Corazon C. Aquino became the first female president of the Philippines. She was later

followed by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo who held the presidency for nine years.

Under the Constitution framed in 1987 when President Aquino came to power, Filipino women enjoy equal rights with men before the law.<sup>8</sup> In 2009, a Magna Carta of Women<sup>9</sup> was passed into law. It formally acknowledges and upholds all women's rights as human rights. "The State," it affirmed, "shall intensify its efforts to fulfill its duties under international and domestic law to recognize, respect, protect, fulfill, and promote all human rights and fundamental freedoms of women, especially marginalized women, in the economic, social, political, cultural, and other fields without distinction or discrimination on account of class, age, sex, and gender." The Philippines, today, has an entire body of laws<sup>10</sup> that protect women from violence including rape and domestic violence, sexual harassment and trafficking. Furthermore, in 2012, Congress passed a reproductive health bill after more than a decade of lobbying by women's groups.

## Tradition of Activism

Filipino women have a history of involvement in advocacy related to political and social issues, particularly honed during the Marcos dictatorship which lasted 14 years. Skills in mobilization, coalition building, mass communication, training and lobbying are part and parcel of every female activist's tool kit.

On the national level, women have played a major role in peacebuilding in the country over the years. Soon after assuming office in 1986, President Corazon C. Aquino made an unprecedented gesture by discussing a return to negotiations with the chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)<sup>11</sup> even against

the advice of those in her closest circle. She pursued peace after two decades of martial law under Marcos and, in January 1990, she declared a Decade of Peace. She appointed another woman, former Supreme Court Justice Cecilia Munoz Palma, to chair the National Peace Conference that produced a declaration called “Towards a National Vision for Peace.” The declaration captured the spirit of ‘people’s participation’ in the peace process. In 1992, human rights lawyer Haydee Yorac became chair of the National Unification Commission that set out the “Six Paths to Peace.” This document became the operational framework for the government’s peace policy. The process helped crystallize a network of peace organizations and made public consultation a part of governance.<sup>12</sup>

It took ten years after resolution 1325 was passed before the Philippines formulated its own National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Even so, the Philippines would be the first country in Asia and 16th in the world to draw up such a national plan. During those ten years, two women held the Cabinet position of Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process: Teresita Quintos Deles (2003-2005 and 2010 to the present), and Annabelle T. Abaya (2009-2010). It was under Ms. Abaya’s term that the National Action Plan was formulated and signed in 2010 as an executive order by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

In Mindanao, women also organized around peace issues to bring their priorities to the peace table. The Mindanao Commission on Women (MCW), an NGO with a membership including Muslim, Christian and indigenous women, held an annual congress not only to have women’s voices heard but also to be visible to the public and to the authorities. The MCW used a strategy of approaches combining ‘more people and key people’: organizing women into peace circles all over Mindanao and holding annual gatherings of these groups, and nominating women to key positions in the peace process. Thus from 2001 to 2010, not only did an MCW nominee sit at the negotiating table on the government side, this person was always connected to the peace and women’s movement in Mindanao, and had the support of women’s groups. In addition, many capacity-building activities were conducted to inform women about the content of national and international laws particularly relevant to

the situation of women, specifically the Magna Carta for Women and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Training programs were conducted to get women ready not only to become advocates but also to “sit at the table” if necessary.

While women acted collectively around the same issues confronting the Mindanao peace process, various groups began to feel the need to speak with their own voice. Indigenous women formed themselves into a group called “*Babaehon*.”<sup>13</sup> Moro groups included the Young Moro Professionals, Bangsamoro Lawyers Network, *Nisa Ul Haqq Fi Bangsamoro*<sup>14</sup> (Women for Justice in the Bangsamoro), *Suara Bangsamoro*<sup>15</sup> party list, Philippine Council (now Center) for Islam and Democracy, Bangsamoro Women’s Solidarity Forum, *Lupah Sug Bangsamoro Women*<sup>16</sup> and Mindanao *Tulong Bakwet*.<sup>17</sup> Coalitions and networks were formed such as WeACT 1325, Mindanao Peaceweavers and Mindanao Peace Caucus (although only WeACT is an all-women network). The groups engaged in various activities such as conducting teach-ins and consultations about the items on the negotiation table, media training and monitoring of the ceasefire. In 2009 when the Civilian Protection Component<sup>18</sup> of the International Monitoring Team<sup>19</sup> was formed, the Mindanao Peace Caucus formed the first all-women contingent as part of “ceasefire watch” (Bantay Ceasefire), an independent mechanism for civilian protection.

In 2006, the MCW called for a peace summit to give their position paper to the representatives of the government and the MILF panels on the items being discussed at the negotiating table. The conference was called, ‘If Women Negotiated the Peace Agreement.’ Their position paper stated: “If women negotiated the peace agreement, it would be more than just a settlement. It would be fair and durable. It would be wise. It would aim to finally resolve the conflict.” The MCW reached out to the government and MILF to include the Moro National Liberation Front in the negotiations. Although the government and the MNLF had already signed a Final Peace Agreement in 1996, the MCW believed that bringing the MNLF into the process would make for a durable and workable agreement.

After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the government and the MILF in 2013 and the drafting of the Bangsamoro Basic Law commenced, the MCW organized another conference, this time entitled 'If Women Drafted the Bangsamoro Basic Law,' with specific proposals for gender provisions to be included in the draft to be submitted to the Philippine Congress. At this conference, anticipating the need for national

advocacy in Congress, the Women's Peace Table—a national network of women's peace groups led by the MCW, the Philippine Center on Islam and Democracy, and the Women and Gender Institute at Miriam College, provided recommendations for gender provisions to be included in the draft basic law and formed a lobbying group in the Lower House and the Senate. WeACT also mounted a lobbying effort in Congress.

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