

Minorities within Minorities: Filipino Muslim Women in the Midst of Armed Conflict

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The war in the Southern Philippines has usually been referred to as a pervasive conflict between two religions: Muslims in the South against the Christians from the North of the country. This war, however, as protracted as it has been, has essentially evolved into many different forms, such that it is not only a religious war. Spanning three decades, this war is embedded in, and fueled by, political, ethnic, ideological, territorial, economic, and historical conflicts. This paper will focus on the impact the war has had on Filipino Muslim women and the consequent role women take in peace making. The first two sections will describe the ongoing armed conflict and will provide the oppressive context of the war such as existing conditions of poverty, inadequate civic services, graft and corruption in local and national government, and other forms of civil strife. These sections will provide the necessary background for the discussion on women who are caught in the crossfire of war.

A Brief History of the Conflict

Muslims came to the Philippines in the 14th century from the Malay Archipelago and settled in the southern region, the islands of Mindanao. During the Spanish colonization of the Philippines between 1564 and 1898 and the later American colonization in the 20th century, the Muslims in Mindanao adamantly refused to be occupied and controlled, whereas the North was more open to conquest and assimilated more easily. Thus, the Muslims' current demand for autonomy from the Philippine government is not new. In the 1950's, Mindanao, which was previously home for a majority of Muslims who owned about 40% of the land, became a very attractive place for Filipino Christians to migrate. The resettlement policies of the government consequently led to Non-Muslims gaining ownership of resources that were previously owned by Muslims.¹ This triggered the economic inequities and territorial claims of Muslims for their land, resources, and wealth. Politically, although the rich resources of the south were utilized, the government has neglected to serve the Mindanao region. All this has spurred Muslims, otherwise known as Moros, to fight for their autonomy which, in turn, mobilized the Philippine government to tighten control over this region. In 1996, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), an organization that united the different Muslim cultural groups to advocate for independence from the Philippine government, entered a peace pact with the government, and negotiated for autonomous sovereignty. This instituted the ARMM (Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao) which has become the home to most of the Muslims in Mindanao. A group of Moros split from the MNLF and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), because they refused to recognize this pact and have taken to fighting for their autonomy. In more recent years,

¹ Meinardus, (2004).

the MILF appears to have solidified and strengthened due to relations with terrorist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah². For all that the war stands for, it is undeniable the many lives that have been lost on all sides: the Philippine military, the MILF, and the civilians caught in the armed conflict. It is recorded that between 100,000-150,000 people³ have died and many thousands had to resettle or flee to evacuation sites in the Mindanao war since 1971.

The Economic, Social, and Political Context of the War

In the Philippines, where poverty has been a rampant problem, the consequences of the war become persistent, the conflicts that arise enduring, and the trauma of the war long-lasting and vicious. The number of those who are extremely poor for the year 2000 is recorded at 40% of the population, about 32 million people who are earning less than \$1 a day.⁴ In Southern Philippines, which is this war's battlefield, the poverty rate is so much higher at 63% compared to the already high rate of poverty nationwide.⁵

The Philippine government does not provide for social security such as unemployment benefits, medical insurance or education. Moreover, basic utilities and services (e.g., running water, sanitation, electricity, and health care) are not adequate. These services are all the more indispensable vis-à-vis the reality that the number of offspring an average Filipino woman will have in her lifetime is 3.7 children (the highest rate in Asia)⁶. The existing infrastructures such as public transportation, roads, education, and other government services are problematic. All these conditions are not only exacerbated by the war, but these services have also been truly scarce in Mindanao, thus fueling the discontent and hostilities of Muslims towards the state.

The Philippine government and politics have been characterized by a lot of corruption, instability, and fragmentation which further divert the government from the war. The current president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, for example, has been accused of electoral fraud and the previous President, Joseph Estrada, has allegedly pocketed millions of pesos in excise taxes and bribes from illegal gambling syndicates. Moreover, such prevalent threats to leadership challenge any withstanding efforts to ending the war and civil strife in Mindanao. Additionally, the Philippine military, which has a crucial role in the armed conflict, has been fragmented and unpredictable. For instance, there have been several coups staged in the span of the last three decades, where military loyalties to politicians quickly change.

Compounding civil strife is another armed conflict waged in tandem with the conflict in the Southern Philippines. Communist insurgents—more commonly known as the New People's Army (NPA)—have fought the state for reasons such as social

² Puerto, (2005).

³ Ploughshares, (2000).

⁴ National Statistical Office, (2000).

⁵ Synergos, (2004).

⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, (2001).

injustices, governmental graft and corruption, and economic inequities. The NPA is another violent combatant for the Philippine government. Thus, to the country, the consequences of these wars have become deeply entrenched and more wide-ranging. Incidences of violence are provoked by the military and by the MILF, and subsequent attacks from each side of the warring parties turn out to be more and more violent.

The war in Mindanao is oppressive not only because it is a combat between the military and the Muslims, but because it takes place in the poorest region of a third-world country, where government is corrupt and leadership is unstable, where the military is fragmented and has constantly changing loyalties, where violence is continually espoused by both divides, where the education, health, and economics of the region are a stark contrast with the rest of the country, and where women persistently become pawns and victims of this war.

The Trauma of War on Women in Mindanao

Intense poverty is the backdrop of this war. However, it is also one of the roots of insurgency. It is not quite clear whether women are poorer because of the war or whether severe destitution leads to greater fighting. In any case, the provinces in the ARMM, where most Muslims reside, have the lowest Human Development Index (the HDI is an indicator of real income growth, of people's capacity for a long and healthy life, of the acquisition of skills and knowledge, and of their access to needed resources) in the entire country⁷. The ARMM has also a low Gender Development Index (the GDI is a measure of the inequality in the achievement of women and men based on life expectancy at birth, educational attainment, and standard of living)⁸, which means that these women are severely disadvantaged. The same deprivation is evidenced in education. In the National Census Bureau reports of 1994 and 2000, females have lower simple literacy rates compared to males and compared to the rest of the country⁹. Such figures are troubling for the women in Mindanao, especially since females in the other areas of the country have a consistently higher literacy rate than men.

We contend that because women are caught in the crossfire of war, they become most vulnerable, most powerless, and the most victimized. Women are expected by Muslim men to sympathize with the reasons for the war even when they do not necessarily consent to it or want it. Women need to be supportive of their men who are at war, by being messengers or spies, and as such do not carry guns and they do not fight. Thus, women become easy targets of violence from the military, or from their own relatives (e.g., father, stepfather, husband, live-in partner), or from clashes between families and clans¹⁰, and they are then powerless in the hands of their captives. In war, it is not uncommon for sexual and physical abuse to happen against women. According to the State of the Women of Mindanao Report (2004), violence such as incest rape, sexual

⁷ Sorza, (2005).

⁸ Sorza, (2005).

⁹ National Census Bureau, (2003).

¹⁰ Mindanao Commission on Women, (2004).

harassment, wife battering and abuse in relationships are prevalent in the everyday lives of many women in Mindanao, especially those who live in remote areas.

Since the breakouts of bloodshed occur close to their homes, women suffer from actual violence against them, and they also endure the suffering caused by combat on their families. In the throes of destruction and war, Moro women take on numerous roles, such as “wives and mothers protecting their rebel husbands and sons; nurses who tend to the wounded; couriers who smuggle information, food, and medicine; and caretakers who look after the survival needs of the young and the elderly”¹¹. When their husbands are fighting or being killed, and when their children are lured into battle for the hopes of revenge¹², women take on the sole responsibility of caring for their families. Women now have the bigger burden of moving on in lives after multiple traumas, while being depended upon for income, emotional resource, and protection.

Women grieve over losses of their husbands and children to the war, the loss of their home and other resources, and the loss of their livelihood, peace, and security. They are constantly fleeing to evacuation areas and do not have any semblance of constancy and comfort. There are about 200,000 evacuees in Central Mindanao who have been displaced due to the armed conflicts between government troops and Muslim groups¹³. The Department of Social Welfare report that there are 53,339 people who are still dislocated in West-Central Mindanao, and 15,000 evacuees sought refuge in seven evacuation centers in Jolo¹⁴. The war in Pikit alone, in 2003, displaced 20,000 individuals or 4,000 families who fled to safer areas¹⁵. It is reported that these evacuation centers have limited medical supplies, and evacuees sleep on concrete floor in warehouses or school buildings, and a few kilos of rice and several cans of sardines are rationed to families per week. A migration of another sort is also happening among Muslim women who travel to Manila and are seeking to work abroad, specifically in the Middle East. There are about 15,000 Moro women living in the Islamic Center in Quiapo while waiting for job openings, travel documents, and passports¹⁶. Since many are victimized by illegal recruiters and are undocumented workers, many women are abused by employers, are declared missing, or are displaced¹⁷.

For women in Mindanao, who are amidst warfare, the state of their health has been reported as bleak. The State of the Women of Mindanao 2004 Report further specified that in the Mindanao region, the ratio of hospital beds to people and the ratio of doctors and nurses to people are worse compared to the rest of the country. Public health practitioners and personnel who deliver medical supplies seldom visit Moro areas¹⁸. To illustrate, the life expectancy for women in Muslim Mindanao is 62 years, while for

¹¹ Mindanao Commission on Women, (2004).

¹² Pinsoy, (2005)

¹³ Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, (2003)

¹⁴ Juvida, (2000).

¹⁵ Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, (2003).

¹⁶ Juvida, (2000).

¹⁷ Juvida, (2000).

¹⁸ Mindanao Commission on Women, (2004).

women in the entire Philippines it is 73 years¹⁹. The provinces in the ARMM have the shortest life expectancy in the country and have very high levels of infant and maternal mortality²⁰.

Although Moro women have been reported to be the most distressed and who have suffered a lot of the trauma²¹, substantive data on women's health issues brought on by the war is still wanting. Since women live in such terror, fear, and heightened, prolonged stress, one could easily assume that they would experience a complex array of health issues. There are, however, no accounts if and to what extent the war has caused post traumatic stress disorder, psychophysiological disorders, or poorer functioning of the immune system. The absence of any information about the consequences of the war on women's health is in itself a problem. This problem underscores the issues of data-gathering in a volatile area which include the lack of safety, the limited resources for research, diagnoses and treatment, and the issues of mistrust of health practitioners or researchers who may happen to be Christians and from the North.

In Mindanao, women experience and re-experience the enduring consequences of a lingering war. To them the war is the cause their poverty, the displacement from their provinces and families, the violence on them and their families, and the absence of actual information on the state of their physical and mental health. Where the stress of combat is prolonged and when there is no apparent end in the warfare, there is fear, anger, and a deep sense of hopelessness for a future without strife.

Psycho-social Support for Women in the War

How can Filipino women be empowered to stop the daunting psychological, physical, and financial injuries of an unending war? The answers to this question ideally and necessarily involve first putting an end to the war. Healing for Muslim women means progressing into a state of safety, security, and stability. This will essentially involve all parties—the government and its military, and the MILF and the families/clans in Mindanao—to agree to a ceasefire and work out compromises to end this war. This considerable task may be numerous years in the making, but starting the process will definitely put a respite to the trauma inflicted by the war, and will decrease the chances of re-traumatization. In fact, the Mindanao Commission on Women has urged the government and the MILF peace negotiators to speed up the signing of a peace agreement so as to lessen extensive suffering²².

Specifically, on the socio-political level, the government has to make a concerted effort to care for their citizens, especially the destitute, the powerless, and the victims of the war. Prevalent graft and corruption has infiltrated most governmental infrastructures so that the poor in war-torn provinces have been robbed of their right to live decently.

¹⁹ National Census Bureau, (2005).

²⁰ Mindanao Commission on Women, (2004).

²¹ Philippine Daily Inquirer, (November 30, 2005).

²² Philippine Daily Inquirer, (November 30, 2005).

Prioritizing the healing in Mindanao signifies an allocation of greater resources to women's education, health, and psychoemotional interventions. Concrete interventions such as creating infrastructure (transportation, communication), increasing access to health, education and psychological services, do not only reduce poverty, but also foster environments of safety, security, and progress. These efforts serve to facilitate the resolution of conflict, the end of a war, and the start for healing and growth to happen.

Women in Mindanao, with their resilience and fortitude, have made extraordinary efforts in the area of conflict transformation and peace-building. Local, national and international women organizations (e.g., Mindanao Commission on Women, Women Network Group, Bangsa Moro Women for Peace and Development, Mindanao Peoples Caucus, Mindanao Peace Advocates, Initiatives for International Dialogue, GABRIELA, Asian Women's Human Rights Council) have been instrumental in pioneering the work for dialogue, resolving conflict, and lessening hostilities. There have also been other non-governmental endeavors such as the partnership of Mirant Philippines and the Asian Institute of Management which established a Center for Bridging Societal Divides where they train "bridging leaders"²³. The program specifically allows for a dialogue on peace, social justice, and development among people in the context of work or livelihood that was brought about by foreign investors. A case example of this project is the La Frutera's banana plantation, which gave about 2,000 residents work and where both Muslims and Christians work side by side, and in the process coexist and resolve their conflicts. Due to the "bridging leaders" program, a foreign investor proposed this major banana plantation to the mayor of Datu Paglas, who in turn persuaded the MILF Chairman to withdraw Muslim soldiers from the town. The plantation is now generating much revenue for the local residents that not only alleviates poverty but also has caused MILF members or supporters to leave the armed struggle²⁴.

Some other poverty alleviation and conflict transforming projects that have worked to empower women and lessen the divide are cooperatives. The efforts of the Bangsa Moro Women's Cooperative²⁵ and the Asian Women's Cooperative Forum, for instance, concretely help women build their livelihood, alleviate them from poverty, heal them from the war, and enable them to take care of their families. Cooperatives, for instance, have programs that help women reclaim power over their financial lives such as the Emergency Fund, the Youth Tipid (*to save*) Movement, and credit assistance to finance small businesses²⁶. Cooperatives also have programs that provide social support to women and train them on leadership, organizational management skills or educate them on certain topics such as family planning, health care, child care, and provide them with literacy classes²⁷. These cooperatives resonate well with the values in the South such as strong family bonds, friendship, status obligations, and responsibility in neighborhood²⁸ and build on the relative freedom that Philippine women have compared

²³ Synergos, (2004).

²⁴ Synergos, (2004).

²⁵ Fajardo, (2000).

²⁶ Raposas, (2000).

²⁷ Raposas, (2000).

²⁸ Austin, (1995).

to other women in Muslim countries. Establishing more cooperatives for women that advocate healing-oriented programs can increase self-efficacy and empowerment, creating networks of support for crises, support for their children's education, and for their own vocational and livelihood aspirations.

Cooperatives and evacuation centers may also be the venue for gathering information on women's health issues—as it is only by assessing this that informed medical and psychological interventions can be offered. Cooperatives and support groups in evacuation centers are recommended to help women express their feelings of anger, guilt, pain, and fear, feel empowered, acquire insights and provide support for each other. Through such community groups, women could rewrite their stories, believe in themselves, rekindle their power to hope in their dreams, and reclaim their lives.

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