Gender and Conflict in Mindanao

The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation commissioned a study in August 2010 to examine the dynamics of gender and conflict in Mindanao. Leslie Dwyer and Rufa Guiam conducted field-based research and a literature review to identify challenges and opportunities for women and men in community and national peacebuilding. Their report argues that programming is more effective when comprehensive gender analysis is utilized, and that such an approach can be transformative in societies trying to emerge from conflict.

CONSIDERING GENDER IN PEACEBUILDING

Worldwide, peace work often has an urgency and import felt in few other domains of social action. When lives and livelihoods come under fire, the overwhelming sense that violence must be halted immediately, by any means possible, understandably dominates discourse. There is a broad consensus that peace and security are essential for economic development and protection of human rights, but the researchers note that there are often sharply divergent visions of peace. Is peace the absence of war or the creation of just societies in which women and men are empowered to prevent and transform conflicts? Should security be defined as citizens' physical security, or does a sustainable peace require more inclusive understandings of human security? The researchers argue that applying a nuanced gender analysis of conflict dynamics helps move beyond stereotypes and identify more effective peacebuilding approaches. But too often, efforts to incorporate gender into conflict mitigation and resolution programming consist of expanding women's participation into pre-designed, ostensibly gender-neutral programs. Such an approach frequently fails to incorporate women's input into program design, or considers how to enhance the quality of women's participation to improve outcomes.

Moreover, taking a gender approach means moving beyond a consideration of women to acknowledge that both women and men are embedded within dynamic cultural systems that give meaning and purpose to their lives, and are subject to gender-specific power dynamics that define their roles and relationships within their families, communities, and societies. Considering the needs, abilities, and constraints of both men and women within the conflict context leads to important insights on the gender-related opportunities and barriers that face various stakeholders. It also yields insights on how to proceed more effectively and inclusively by tailoring the approach to ensure that both men and women have the opportunity to benefit, participate, and fully contribute to peacebuilding efforts.

The high stakes of war and peace make it all the more important to engage in a comprehensive analysis of the nexus of gender and conflict. For example, have proposed solutions gone far enough in addressing the causes of conflict and their different effects on women and men? How do we balance the importance of protecting women's rights with the political and moral demands of stopping violence as quickly as possible? Should post-conflict reconstruction programs aim to restore a *status quo ante bellum* that may include gender inequalities, or should programs

PHILIPPINES

Mindanao is the Philippines' second largest island. The conflict there is one of the world's longest running, tracing back to the colonial era and its dynamics of exploitation and resistance.

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work to address existing gender imbalances during these important moments of transition when societies may be more open to reform and new societal norms are being negotiated? It is sometimes hard to imagine reaching consensus on these questions, but the researchers argue that it is essential to openly raise these tensions and understand their implications if the peace that is crafted is to be just and sustained.

CONFLICT IN MINDANAO

The Southern Philippines has one of the world's longest-running violent conflicts. In 1996, after prolonged negotiations and 26 years of war that cost some 120,000 lives, the Government of the Philippines signed a peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The cornerstone of the agreement was the plan to give the Muslim-majority Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, or ARMM, greater autonomy within a framework that maintains Philippine sovereignty over the region. However, a number of other Muslim groups denounced the agreement and rejected the call to disarm, including the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which today remains a potent non-state military force in Central Mindanao. The government has been engaged in on-and-off negotiations with the MILF for nearly a decade, with occasional escalations in violence between insurgent forces and the military. In addition, the persistent threat of localized clan and ethnic conflicts has a great impact on daily life.

GENDER DYNAMICS OF THE CONFLICT

Virtually every person in Mindanao interviewed for this study acknowledged that decades of conflict have wrought substantial changes in women's lives, as well as in male-female relationships. Women and girls have often borne the brunt of the conflict, but have also taken on new roles, whereas men's roles have often been constricted. Field-based research identified important differences between communities, as well as among individuals, that shaped their experiences of conflict and their responses. Yet, at the same time, strong commonalities emerged across diverse constituencies.

Conflict-related shifts in mobility were cited in every focus group discussion as a major concern for communities, and have resulted in some degree of gender role transformation. Women are far less frequently targeted for revenge killings, and thus have remained comparably more mobile. Women are now undertaking many new activities, including income generation, that were traditionally performed by men. Although women in Mindanao spoke with pride about their success in finding creative ways to stretch resources, they overwhelmingly tended to view their additional contributions during conflict less as examples of empowerment and more as an exhausting strain.

Moreover, when conflict flares in Mindanao, or when ethnic, clan or religious identity is perceived to be under attack, more rigid social norms regarding women's appropriate roles may become more central to identities, circumscribing women's choices and even creating divisions among women, as some women resist those norms and others embrace them.

Mindanaoan women do not see themselves as passive observers to the conflict, as the island's vibrant civil society sector makes clear. Local non-governmental organizations have focused their attention on mitigating clan-based conflict, providing support to people displaced by conflict, and training citizens in small-scale dispute resolution, with high levels of women's participation. Yet women face numerous challenges in organizing effectively. Women's groups in the region have often fragmented along religious, ideological and class lines, and some groups have faced pressure to subordinate discussions of their core gender issues to claims of nationalist or religious identity. **Opportunities to enhance cooperation and seek common ground among civil society organizations, especially those that focus on gender concerns, should be prioritized.**

For Mindanaoan men, restriction of mobility and the corresponding constrictions of their social and economic lives often create a deep sense of frustration and isolation. For

some men, joining in violence seems to offer a chance to regain social prestige and dignity. Others feel that their sense of themselves as an oppressed Moro Muslim minority has been heightened within a constant cycle of conflict and impoverishment. **Consideration of the psychosocial impacts of conflict on men, and the implications of men's mobility constraints and limited educational attainment, should be integrated into future programming, such as the sponsorship of mobile, community-strengthening livelihood and non-traditional educational programs for men and women in areas vulnerable to armed conflict.**

In Mindanao, as in most displacement situations, the majority of IDPs are women and children. Many of those affected by the conflict have undergone repeated cycles of displacement and return that has made normal economic activity very difficult, and led citizens to place a premium on portable skills and livelihoods. Those IDPs who settle in camps face a daily struggle to make ends meet, access clean water and obtain sufficient food; women IDPs in particular have become vulnerable to exploitation, including trafficking in persons. **Humanitarian agencies have begun placing greater emphasis on the involvement of women in relief efforts, but broader social and economic changes are required to ensure that women can embrace these new roles without experiencing even larger burdens.**

Little research has been done on the precise nature or extent of conflict-related psychological distress in Mindanao, how it impacts the social functioning of women and men, or how it may be more effectively addressed. Yet virtually all respondents provided examples of the impacts that high levels of psychosocial disturbance were having in their communities. **This remains an area where more research and action is required, to assess needs and opportunities as well as the efficacy of any existing programs with psychosocial components.**

OPPORTUNITIES TO INCLUDE GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN PEACEBUILDING

In March 2010 the Philippines became the 18th nation, and the first in Asia, to authorize a National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security in response to United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, the landmark resolutions calling for women's full participation in peacebuilding activities and the protection of women during armed conflict. Women from Mindanao-based organizations joined with women's groups from elsewhere in the country for consultations that led to the national plan, and **more can be done to build upon the linkages that were established, as well as cooperate to strengthen the implementation plan.** This field research also suggested that work is needed to expand the involvement of civil society organizations in activities related to the national plan. Less than a quarter of the grassroots level peace-building groups interviewed, and almost none of the ordinary women interviewed in conflict-affected or displaced communities, were familiar with the plan, nor had they participated in the consultative processes leading up to it. Broad-based citizen support will be critical to ensure its extensive goals can be met.

The upheaval of a conflict and its resolution provides an unusual window of opportunity to address major social grievances and injustices. Increasing women's representation at all levels of peace processes, and making women more effective peacebuilders, requires addressing a number of concerns and constraints directly, and the researchers argue strongly for more effective and regular participation of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities in conflict-affected Mindanao. Women interviewed in conflict-affected Mindanao frequently recounted stories of what they had already accomplished as mediators and peacebuilders, suggesting that in some areas of conflicted-affected Mindanao there are long-standing traditions of women's participation in conflict resolution and mediation. This finding underscores the potential to expand conflict mitigation programming in more equitable, and potentially more impactful, ways based on local experience. **Efforts should be intensified to train and support women as mediators and resolvers of community conflict.**

With regard to Track One negotiations, representation is usually determined by the armed parties, and frequently

results in under-representation or the complete absence of women. International organizations can set a positive example and better harness the capabilities of qualified women by expanding their efforts to assign women senior roles as envoys and negotiators. The Philippine government has made some notable efforts in this regard by appointing women to negotiating panels and, most recently, appointing Teresita "Ging" Deles as Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process, in charge of overseeing peace negotiations with insurgent groups, with a particular emphasis on a framework for re-energizing negotiations with the MILF and the New People's Army (NPA). **The participation of women in Track One processes can help solidify the support of women citizens for peace, while strengthened Track Two processes can increase the opportunity for women's perspectives and concerns to be incorporated. Peace processes that include a high degree of civil society participation are more likely to be durable**, primarily because peace is a process that unfolds over time, as commitments are implemented and lives and communities are rebuilt.

Gender and conflict programming requires not only retrospective evaluations of its effectiveness, but research that can provide a data-driven basis for innovative new interventions. Significant knowledge gaps related to the nexus of gender and conflict remain. **Action-oriented and longitudinal studies are needed to explore such macro issues as whether comprehensively incorporating gender considerations, and achieving equitable and effective participation of women, results in a more sustainable peace.** On a micro level, in conflict-affected Mindanao, further **in-depth analysis of the relationship of cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity to the conflict would enhance programs.**

The researchers argue that attending closely to gender can – and should – change the way we look at conflict, and give us innovative new ideas for addressing it. Ultimately, addressing the issue of gender in conflict is not simply additive – bringing in one more stakeholder group to work for peace – but can be transformative of both the approach and results of peacebuilding. Results that would in time make conflict-affected societies more resilient could include such things as provision of services that are more responsive to the needs of both male and female beneficiaries, or more opportunities for women to be substantively involved in peacebuilding efforts.

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