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Recognizing Women's Strength and Sacrifices in Armed Conflict Situations: Strengthening the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security

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Introduction

The first in Southeast Asia, the Philippines launched its National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAPWPS) in 2010. This came in 10 years after the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325¹ which called for the "integration of gender across UN Security Council policies and operations;"² recognizing the effects that armed conflicts have on women and girls, and increasing women's participation in peace and security processes. Women have been linked to peace and security with the belief that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without the contribution of women which represent almost half of the world's population.³

Following this milestone is United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1820 adopted in 2008 to address the issue of widespread sexual violence on women in armed conflicts. This has become a major issue because despite the continuous condemnation of the act, it is still being perpetuated, even reaching appalling levels of brutality. In particular, this resolution addressed the issue of sexual violence and abuse of women and girls in armed conflict, noting the inclusion of rape and other forms of sexual violence as war crimes. It also demanded the complete cessation of acts of violence by all parties to armed conflict and affirmed the intention to end impunity for the perpetrators of such crimes.⁴ These two resolutions, among others, enable states to craft a national action plan (NAP) that would operationalize the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda.⁵

This policy brief aims to discuss how NAPWPS contributes to gender and development (GAD) and the attainment of peace and security in the country. Specifically, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is the impact of armed conflict on

women?; 2) How did NAPWPS evolve in the Philippines?; and 3) How can the NAPWPS framework be further developed?

Women in Armed Conflict

Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines, has experienced long-running conflicts.⁶ Several armed combatant groups such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and the Maute Group are active in Mindanao. While conflicts between these armed opposition groups and the government's military forces affect the population, local conflicts or clan clashes (*rido*) produced greater damage to the daily lives of civilians. To have a better grasp of the situation, the conflicts must be placed within the social and economic contexts of Mindanao, where lack of social opportunity resides. The decades of conflict resulted to an impoverished south, although it has vast potential and rich resources to be developed. Most Muslims regard poverty not as a natural condition but as a result of political choices, government neglect, and discrimination.⁷

Armed conflict presents the following impacts to women:

1) *Physical Impact.* Women experience sexual violence with mutilation, beatings, and torture. Women and men alike suffer from the effects of war and armed conflict situations. Both can be caught between warring parties and can be displaced to escape conflict. However, the impacts differ for men and women. The aftermath of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 illustrated that 70% of the remaining population are women. Women are less likely to be killed outright and are perceived less of a threat than men. In a gender perspective, as much as the number of fatalities matter, the process or the question of "how" the civilians are killed is the key consideration.

This means that the form of violence prior to death is different for both genders. Even if women survive, rape and sexual abuse are eminent after the conflict. According to the Women's Refugee Commission,⁸ women which comprise most of the refugees and internally-displaced peoples (IDPs), are prone to prostitution, sexual slavery, and human trafficking.⁹

2) *Social Impact.* Armed conflicts affect women in the society. Essential social services, which women depend for their well-being, are greatly disrupted by armed conflicts.¹⁰ When social structures break down, women are likely to be forced and manipulated into various roles such as domestic servants for fighting groups or as sexual slaves.¹¹ This leads to poor social standing placing women in often submissive, supportive roles.¹² There are also situations where girls are forced into early marriages and take on the discrimination and judgment of the society, thus, hindering their social growth.

3) *Economic Impact.* Women suffer economic burdens. Since men often go to war as combatants, they leave their familial and economic responsibilities to women. For instance, there is an agricultural community in Cotabato where armed conflict between the military and the MILF is a regular occurrence. In this case, women take on the role of plowing the fields and tending the land to generate income. By doing this, women in this community may be caught between crossfires or be sexually-abused. Another situation is present in a community in Lanao with *rido* conflicts.¹³ It is important to note that men are vulnerable in cases of *rido* because they are the primary targets for revenge.¹⁴ As a result, men in this area limit their presence in public to avoid being mistaken for an enemy, among others. In a situation where men's mobility is crippled, the gap between educational status of men and women arise. Some men are forced to drop out of school as early as primary education, leaving them being only qualified for low-skilled work. This places a heavier burden of income generation on women.¹⁵

4) *Health Impact.* Armed conflicts bring enormous health consequences for women and girls. According to the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), women and girls are highly vulnerable due to their sexual and reproductive roles. Also, gender discrimination causes the inequitable distribution of food which can lead to malnutrition and other health problems. The conditions of women and girls in camps must be addressed to reduce the difficulties and risks and ensure proper distribution of supplies.¹⁶

5) *Psychological Impact.* Armed conflict brings psychosocial impacts to women, men, and children. Psychological distress is felt by people who experience or witness violence. When women in Mindanao were interviewed, they spoke emotionally of their children having post-traumatic stress disorder, nightmares, and anxiety. People tend to sink into depression and panic upon hearing sounds from a plane above or slamming doors. Specifically, women who are left with children have to endure these kinds of situation for their family.¹⁷

Thus, women are impacted in different aspects by armed conflict. Although men and boys suffer the same threats, women and girls have become the primary targets, as gender-based and sexual violence have become "one of the defining characteristics of contemporary armed conflict."¹⁸ To address these vulnerabilities and impacts, the advancement of the WPS agenda, through the development of the NAP, is crucial.

Setting the Agenda for Women, Peace, and Security

Women peace activists from all over the world have long called for a commitment to prevent war and recognize the capacities of women in resolving challenges to peace and security. At one point in history, it can be observed that actors in the international system have focused on militarized approaches to security, dispute resolution, and protection of civilians in conflict. Women continue to bear the burden of conflict through lack of voice in peace negotiations or exclusion from peacebuilding efforts and countless cases of sexual violence, among others. However, the key to sustainable peace is the inclusion of women. In other words, peace is inextricably linked to equality between women and men.¹⁹

The passage of UNSCR 1325 in 2000 made the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the forefront of international community's concerns. It provided the impetus to highlight both the impact that armed conflicts have on women and girls, and women's valuable role in peace processes. This resolution set the agenda for addressing the issues and challenges women face in areas of conflict through the four pillars of participation, prevention, protection, and peacebuilding and recovery.²⁰ Therefore, the development of a NAP is a great platform for states to re-ignite their commitment to empower women and alleviate them from gender-based adversities.²¹ The NAPs serve as a framework for the implementation of the WPS agenda in several UN member states. It might be true that NAP has garnered the attention and

engagement of countries but there remains a question of whether it is achieving the fulfillment of the human rights of women targeted by UNSCR 1325.

Following this international initiative, the Philippines complied. Peace and security has always been an integral concern in the Philippines. With decades of armed conflict in the northern and southern parts of the archipelago, securing peace is one of the top priorities of the country's leaders, noting President Rodrigo Duterte's Six-Point Peace and Development Agenda which includes "building a culture of peace and conflict sensitivity."²² Being the first Mindanaoan President, he vowed to honor and implement all signed peace agreements for the Muslims of Mindanao.²³ The Agenda also include "integrating gender in the peace process, including the implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security."²⁴ Likewise, more and more Filipino women are engaging in public office. Based on the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) data in 2016, 21.5% of all elected officials are women which is the highest it has been in seven years.²⁵ Thus, the Philippines' effort to Women, Peace, and Security is not far sight.

The national commitment to WPS started in 2008 through initial efforts to formulate a NAP. The Philippine NAP is born out of collaborative and consultative processes between the government and civil society, cognizant of having a gender perspective in peacebuilding and national security. In 2010, the Philippine NAPWPS was finally adopted through Executive Order No. 865. This also created the National Steering Committee on Women, Peace and Security (NSC WPS)²⁶, the implementing institutional infrastructure of the NAP. Months after the adoption of EO 865, the Women Engaged in Action on UNSCR 1325 (WE Act 1325), a national network of civil society groups, was formed and tasked for the implementation of the NAP. To ensure the NAP's proper implementation, WE Act 1325 accomplished initiatives, ranging from policy review to peace education and media campaigns. It is important to note that these initiatives "are done as a network; individually by members; or through bilateral and multilateral cooperation among members of the network."²⁷

The first six years of implementation of NAPWPS characterized women working with and for women. Through the four pillars – empowerment and participation, protection and prevention, promotion and mainstreaming, and capacity development and monitoring – the WE Act 1325 bonded Filipinas across the nation despite circumstances and differences.²⁸

The Evolution of NAPWPS

Since the promulgation of EO 865, NAPWPS in the Philippines has undergone three generations: 2010-2013, 2014-2016, and 2017-2022. In 2011, a civil society monitoring report of the Philippines was published by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders. This report underscored the lack of strategic collaboration between the government and civil society and the lack of a unified monitoring mechanism that is needed to measure the impact of the NAP. On the other hand, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has been proactive in recruiting more women to enter the military and the peacekeeping team. Nonetheless, the report suggested that after a year of implementation, bigger strides must be made to achieve significant results.²⁹

Following this was the civil society report in 2013 which took note of the accomplishments in NAPWPS and provided recommendations for improvement. This led to the crafting of the second-generation NAPWPS which was responsible for the establishment of a NAPWPS Technical Working Group (TWG), composed of GAD Focal Persons of agencies. Also, it was in this generation that the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) and Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), two of the main enablers of NAPWPS, issued a Joint Memorandum Circular (JMC)³⁰ which called for the integration of WPS activities to the annual GAD Plans and Budgets (GPBs) and GAD Accomplishment Reports (GAD ARs).³¹ It aims to protect and empower women in conflict and post-conflict situations.³² Although this was a milestone in institutionalizing NAPWPS, gaps were still discovered.

Now on its third generation, the NAPWPS 2017-2022 is equipped with all the considerations from previous studies, both gains and shortfalls.³³ According to the official document, the main strategy done for an effective implementation was consultation and collaboration between various stakeholders.

New features of the third generation NAPWPS include:

1) *A broader framing.* Women's human rights is a foremost concern, as stipulated in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This is to ensure women's human rights before, during, and after armed conflicts are prioritized and it would also assess the impact of these situations to their lives. There is also an explicit articulation of the Agenda 6 in the Six-Point Peace and Development Agenda of the Duterte Administration

which incorporated a gender perspective to peace. Furthermore, the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2017-2022 explicitly identified the need to make government more responsive to peace, conflict, and security issues and the continuous commitment to ensure that women are further enabled and empowered to fulfill their roles. The PDP echoes Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 which promotes sustainable development through peaceful and inclusive societies and effective and accountable institutions.³⁴

2) *Expansion of women's role.* The role of women – both as leaders and participants – in the peace process proves to be an effective path to peace. This new feature “seeks to continue the best practice of women’s presence in formal peace tables as well as in other informal spaces”.³⁵ Advocates of this feature say that women bring a more comprehensive peace plan to the table by highlighting societal needs over the needs of the warring parties.³⁶ Various initiatives for women to empower other women and their involvement in the front, back, and center of the process are also supported.³⁷ Further discussion on the role of women will follow in the succeeding sections.

3) *Strengthening coordinative mechanisms.* Since women in conflict situations suffer from negative impacts in terms of physical, economic, social, and political impacts, “NAPWPS 2017-2022 aims to strengthen the coordination and harmonization of protection and rehabilitation initiatives for women and girls in various situations of emergencies” with the inclusion of protection protocols for the frontline women responders, because they, too, are exposed to vulnerability.³⁸

4) *Multi-level implementation.* With regard to monitoring and evaluation, this generation aims to create Regional Action Plans for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and in the Cordilleras that would be more inclusive and reflective of the respective situations, needs, and progress of the regions. This would change the top-down vertical approach of the NAP at the local levels by looking into the unique context of each place.³⁹

These new features complement the following pillars and outcome areas of the NAPWPS:

Substantive Pillar 1: Empowerment and Participation. All women and girls are active agents of peace through empowerment and participation. However, women are still excluded from negotiating tables despite their contributions to peace. According

to data, women’s representation in peace processes has lagged.⁴⁰ This pillar involves some key action points such as integrating a gender perspective in Track 1/formal peace process and women’s participation and leadership in Tracks 2 and 3 peace process.⁴¹ To note, UNSCR 1325 emphasizes the vital role of women and the need to strengthen their voices in various facets especially in decision-making and matters concerning peace and security.⁴² Furthermore, studies suggest that “The participation of civil society groups, including women’s organizations, makes a peace agreement 64% less likely to fail.”⁴³ Also, the resulting agreement in peace processes is 35% more likely to last at least 15 years with women’s participation.⁴⁴

Substantive Pillar 2: Protection and Prevention. Necessary measures are being taken to protect women and girls before, during, and after conflict situations and prevent women’s rights violations such as violence against women (VAW).⁴⁵ Also, the tripartite dimensions of immediate and sustained protection, access to justice, healing and rehabilitation, and acknowledging the needs of former women rebels are addressed.⁴⁶ To further ensure that women’s situations are contextualized, NAPWPS is integrated in the disaster risk reduction and management framework in conflict-prone areas and a gender-sensitive inter-agency program is developed.⁴⁷

Support Pillar 3: Promotion and Mainstreaming. Full implementation of the NAPWPS is required at the national and local levels. This is translated through GPBs, GAD ARs, among others,⁴⁸ which are monitored annually.

Support Pillar 4: Monitoring and Evaluation. The key word to this pillar is accountability. To better monitor and evaluate the progress in the implementation of NAPWPS and achieve its goals, a comprehensive system is developed using evidence-informed tools and enabling mechanisms.⁴⁹

Policy Considerations

Although relatively new, the NAPWPS was a huge accomplishment for Women, Peace, and Security in the Philippines. Women in the sidelines are slowly being put at the forefront in matters concerning themselves and the security of the country. However, some policy considerations must be presented to ensure continuous implementation and development.

First, gender-sensitive response to women in armed conflict situations must be strengthened. The education and training of peacekeepers and military

personnel on the diverse needs of women will shorten the recovery phase and keep them from being at the disadvantage. Education and training will result to clear strategies and action plans in rehabilitation programs for women.⁵⁰ Likewise, the full utilization of the capacities of women and their increased participation in peacekeeping operations are encouraged.⁵¹

Second, socio-economic programs for women must be developed. Physical threats must not solely be addressed but also social, economic, and political threats to women. The loss of livelihood, which may be due to displacement, is a struggle for women who depend on it to live. Also, loss of property, inability to work or find work, and increased poverty are the usual economic consequences that women face during and after armed conflicts.⁵² To add, Nyakabwa and Lavoie argue that most destitute women refugees who are victims of sexual assault decide to make profit out of their situation to be able to support their children.⁵³ This must be prevented in all ways possible. Thus, post-conflict reconstruction must include socio-economic structures to provide livelihood for women that will aid them not only in rebuilding the society but also in rebuilding themselves.

Third, the inclusion of local women from the conflict in peace tables will generate better results. In its goal to empower and increase the participation of women in peace processes, the NAPWPS must not only be focused on the goal of including women in decision-making because mere “female presence does not necessarily provide the key to peace.” Durable and lasting peace will be achieved if the quality of representation is upheld.⁵⁴ The institutionalization of the Whole-Of-Nation Approach under Executive Order No 70, signed by President Duterte on 2018, must be intensified in practice to further enable local government units, agencies, and people in the conflict-affected community, especially women, to take the lead in peace engagements and provide recommendations in attaining sustainable peace, thus resolving the decades-long armed conflict in Mindanao.⁵⁵

*Finally, greater knowledge of and collaboration with the grassroots level will result to better prevention and protection mechanisms.*⁵⁶ Considering the diversity of experiences that women go through will ensure effective mechanisms that are appropriate for every context. Strengthened collaboration with civil society organizations will enhance network-sharing. *At the same time, the grassroots level must be educated on the NAPWPS.*⁵⁷ This may be done through community discussions and orientation about the

government’s efforts and women’s rights that are indicated in the NAP. Echoing former OPAPP Secretary Teresita Quintos Deles, “peace that does not change the lives of poor village women and their children is no peace at all.”⁵⁸

Conclusion

Women in Mindanao have seen, experienced, and suffered in armed conflict situations which re-evaluate their roles within their families and in the society. For some, it is an opportunity but for many, it is a burden. Thus, it is their right to be empowered and protected. The government, as the prime protector of its citizens, has produced the NAPWPS with the help of civil society organizations not only to uplift the status of women in Mindanao, but also to increase women’s participation in decision-making processes. The pillars of empowerment and participation, protection and prevention, promotion and mainstreaming, and monitoring and evaluation guide the NAPWPS implementation. Although progress is being made on its own pace, several considerations must still be addressed.

On October next year, NAPWPS in the Philippines will mark a decade after being adopted. It is important to convene and reflect on its accomplishments and shortcomings and re-examine its suitability for the fast-changing Philippine society. If the road to peace becomes successful, women might never have to suffer from conflict, might never have to experience violence and abuse, and might never have to keep their voices from being heard.

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Endnotes

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