Muslim women in the Philippine state of Mindanao cope with the worst effects of the conflict there between insurgent groups and the government. They hold families together, yet have little voice in efforts to foster peace, writes Amina Rasul, president of the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy, which is working to empower Muslim women religious scholars.

OF THE MORE THAN one billion people living in poverty today, the great majority are women. They are often disadvantaged in terms of education and are considerably less mobile because of their traditional role in caring for others. Armed conflict exacerbates gender inequalities that exist in different forms and to varying degrees in all societies, making women particularly vulnerable when violence breaks out.

In addition, over the last century, the face of war has changed. According to the International Action Network on Small Arms, almost 90 percent of casualties in modern wars are civilians, the majority of them women and children; a century ago, 90 percent of those who lost their lives in war were military personnel.

Sadly, violence against women in conflict zones is often an extension of the gender discrimination that already exists in the affected communities. Women’s experiences and contributions are virtually ignored in conflict zones and in nations emerging from war, despite the fact that women can play a significant part in peacemaking, if given the opportunity. Women are often excluded from the reconstruction process after armed conflict, as well as from peace-building initiatives. This is why the Platform for Action adopted by the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women, held in 1995, identified the effects of armed conflict on women as one of 12 critical areas of concern requiring action by governments and the international community, and stressed the need to promote the equal participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels.

In a similar fashion, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as a policy framework to strengthen women’s role in peace-building. Its most important message is that women are not only victims of violence, they also have a potentially powerful voice in peace and security issues. These are issues Muslim women in the Philippines know all too well. They live the reality of conflict every day.

MINDANAO’S CONFLICT CULTURE

In Mindanao, Muslim women are greatly affected by the conflict between Muslim armed groups and the central government. This is further fuelled by deep-seated grievances that remain unaddressed — devastating poverty, lack of access to education and economic opportunities, festering land issues, lack of equitable representation and social discrimination.

Muslim women in the Philippines really are caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock is the armed confrontation between the government and insurgent groups and the oppressive forms it takes. The hard place is the growing power of extremist fundamentalist groups who want to monopolize Islam. These groups accuse anyone who talks about democracy, moderation or gender equality of being un-Islamic or anti-Islam. They tend to focus on women’s obligations, and not on women’s rights. The situation is made worse because Muslim women in Mindanao’s conflict areas are often unaware of their rights.

Armed conflicts in Mindanao, which have been going on for decades, displaced some 700,000 civilians, mostly farmers, between 2008 and 2010 alone. Women suffer particular hardship, often shouldering an additional burden due to traditional gender roles. Their labor, strength and determination keep their families and communities going during war and throughout the long, slow process of rebuilding peace. And yet their voices are not heard in the negotiations for peace.

It is for these reasons that greater political participation for women is crucial. The logic is simple: women, who bear the brunt of conflict-related problems, should be represented in the political process that would determine conflict or peace.

GOING BEYOND POLITICS

Increasing women’s representation in political office is now a widely held development goal. In fact, it is one of the indicators for tracking progress towards the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goal No. 3 (promote gender equality and empower women). Globally, the percentage of women occupying seats in legislatures has increased to 19.2 percent. The Philippines ranks 48th out of 186 countries in terms of the percentage of women in parliament.

In the Philippines’ May 2010 elections, 62 women were elected out of 280 seats in the House of Representatives (22.1 percent). There are three Muslim women in the House, among 17 representatives of predominantly Muslim districts. However, this is not enough. Muslim women in Mindanao must go beyond electoral politics to find ways to peace and a better life.

It is important to note the emerging activism of women in Muslim communities in the Philippines, which is a direct response to the double burden that women bear. First, they are primarily responsible for the welfare of their families but lack access to programs and support. Second, while Muslim women are not responsible for the armed conflict that has reduced their communities to refugee status, they bear the brunt of keeping the families and communities together. Great responsibility is laid on the shoulders of Muslim women and yet they are not heard but only seen. And when they are seen, they are relegated to a minor sector, together with children and youth, as if to say that they are intrinsically powerless.

While ensuring women’s participation in formal
political structures is important, advocates have also called for their meaningful participation in the peace process and other issues that directly impact their families and communities. Women cannot simply be treated as victims of war. They need to be empowered to be effective partners in finding negotiated solutions to conflict.

Muslim women realize that since they are one of the most vulnerable segments of the population in conflict situations, they need to be more active not only in achieving peace but in addressing serious social, political and economic issues. Muslim women have found that they can be a potent force in any social, political or economic undertaking.

Today, more and more Muslim women are entering the realm of civil society. They have become more vocal in expressing their disenchantment with government promises that go unfulfilled. More women have become active in conflict resolution programs, in mass actions to stop armed conflict and in establishing zones of peace. They are also some of the most active partners in interfaith dialogues and they are addressing issues related to their own vulnerabilities — human trafficking and related crimes such as forced prostitution, sexual slavery and others.

However, one very influential group of women have not been fully engaged: the Muslim religious scholars and teachers.

**EMPOWERING THE ALEEMAT**

In Philippine Muslim communities, male religious leaders (ulama), who have had formal training in Islamic studies in a *madrasah* or an Islamic institute abroad or in the Philippines, are of course very influential. But there are also thousands of Muslim women with similar education. The *aleemat*, as the female religious scholars and teachers are known, are generally not organized as a group but provide support to the ulama organizations and also teach at madrasahs. The *aleemat* have much to offer as a group, although they have been largely overlooked by institutions that provide capacity-building for women’s civil society organizations. Representatives of the *aleemat* asked the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy (PCID) to develop a program for them so that they, too, could focus on peace and development as a unified group. Since the *aleemat* may be considered a point of intersection between women and the ulama, it was logical and imperative that they be involved in peace and development initiatives.

In 2009, a group of *aleemat* approved a “Declaration of Muslim Women Waging Peace,” a strong statement proclaiming their commitment to attain peace and development in Mindanao. The women’s agenda is clear and basic. They want a more peaceful community so that their families can survive and live with dignity and security. In Muslim Mindanao, life can be oppressive and dangerous; changing this is their main priority. The declaration called on the government and development partners to acknowledge women’s capacity to participate in conflict resolution, peace negotiations and reconstruction activities. It also called for access to financial resources and economic development, education and Islamic values formation, greater access to health services and clean elections and governance.

The 2009 declaration was anchored on the realization that women are the most vulnerable group in the conflict zones because they have the primary responsibility to find food and shelter for their children. It thus underscored the need to have more capacity building for the *aleemat*.

While there have been previous efforts to enhance the role of women in conflict areas, this project was significant because of the *aleemat*. The project’s goals include providing baseline data and training for the *aleemat* and a forum for the sharing of experiences between and among women peace advocates of various faiths.

In response, we launched a project to empower the *aleemat* in collaboration with Muslim women’s civil society organizations. This collaborative network allows both religious organizations and more secular civil society organizations to equally gain from sharing their experiences.

**NOORUS SALAM: THE LIGHT OF PEACE**

In 2009, PCID implemented the “Empowering the Muslim Women and Aleemat Project,” which led to the organization of a national network of Muslim religious women scholars and civil society leaders called the Noorus Salam, or Light of Peace. During the conferences held under the program, participants identified the most common violations in their areas as follows: dishonesty, sexual harassment, arrest without warrant, injustices and discrimination. The majority of the participants considered illiteracy, extreme poverty, ignorance of the law, lack of respect and poor understanding of Islamic values and social norms as major reasons for continuing violations of human rights in their communities. One participant noted that cases of human trafficking in Lanao del Sur province in Mindanao are easily dropped as there is no government-sanctioned Commission on Human Rights (CHR) office in the province where victims can file a complaint or report.

Having identified a set of common issues, the Noorus Salam members are now organizing to strengthen human rights education in communities and undertaking training to become human rights advocates. Peace and human rights, however, are so tightly linked to law, elections and development that they are not easy to disentangle. The group also wants civic education, particularly training on clean and honest elections. Health care, financial independence, literacy and education are also constant priorities.

The creation of Noorus Salam, a core group of Muslim religious women and civil society leaders, is considered a breakthrough for Muslim women in the country, as it is the first such organization on a national level. It will allow Muslim religious women scholars and teachers to have a strong role as advocates for peace and development in the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao in coordination with women in civil society organizations. The women also intend to tackle stereotypical images of the Muslim community and promote good relations with non-Muslim communities.

In the process, the role of the *aleemat* is made even clearer. They are catalysts and custodians of change, guiding and leading their communities in a changing and challenging world.

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5 Declaration made during the 2nd National Ulama Summit, 2009, organized by the PCID.

6 Referring to the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy.

7 Supported by the One Woman Initiative (OWI) through the Charities for America Foundation (CAFAmerica).