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Arlyssa Bianca Pabotoy
Miriam College

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“WePeace” and Women Peacekeeping in the Philippines

Arlyssa Bianca Pabotoy
Miriam College, Quezon City, Philippines

The “Women’s Agency in Keeping the Peace, Promoting Security” or “WePeace” is an initiative to capacitate selected community women in the Philippines on gender-responsive peacemaking and peacekeeping. This essay describes how the project has helped form women peacekeeping teams and enabled women’s increased participation in existing peacekeeping mechanisms. The community women are from four different areas in the country facing different conflict lines: tribal wars, clan wars or “rido”, internal displacement, and development aggression.

Where are the Women?
In the Philippines, a country that holds the title as “one of the most gender-equal in Asia”, ranking 8th among 149 countries in achieving gender equality as reported in the World Economic Forum (WEF)'s Global Gender Gap Report for 2018 (CNN Philippines, 2018), women in high-ranking positions are not a surprising sight. You would often hear of women CEOs, women presidents in corporate and/or academic institutions; women dominating the sciences, medicine, sports, arts, media, and almost all other fields. You are also very likely to see women in public service: military, foreign service, and in local, regional, and national government institutions. Women are visible in significant political roles. Out of 146 cities in the country, 40 are under the leadership of women mayors (Samonte, 2021). In the current administration, there are 7 female senators (out of 24), the largest number in the Senate’s history, while there are at least 87 female House members (out of 304) (Bueza, 2019). The incumbent vice-president is a woman (1 out of the 2 female vice-presidents in the country’s history), and there also have been 2 female presidents, elected in 1986 (Corazon Aquino) and 2001 (Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo) (Official Gazette of the Philippines).

The Philippines has held onto the role of being a trailblazer for women’s participation in a region that is often male-dominated; the country seems to be a Mecca for women to so easily step into these key influencing roles. This status of women in the Philippines is owed to many movements, efforts, and glass ceilings shattered for women to participate fully and meaningfully in society’s spaces. One of the biggest successes was the creation and implementation of R.A. 9710 -- the Magna Carta of Women. This comprehensive human rights law eliminates discrimination against women through the recognition, protection, fulfillment, and promotion of the rights of Filipino women. A salient feature in the law is increasing the number of women in third level positions in government to achieve a fifty-fifty (50-50) gender balance (Philippine Commission on Women).

But a narrative like this seems too good to be true. It glosses over the reality that this is not the singular narrative for all women in the country, and that in truth, only parts of that glass ceiling have been shattered. Not discounting tremendous efforts put forward by women in politics, it cannot be denied that there are cases of women becoming placeholders for male relatives who have previously held office. Unfortunately, it is very common in Philippine
politics for relatives to take turns holding the same office. Data analyzed from 1988-2010 showed that a substantial majority of elected women mayors in this timeframe are relatives of the term-limited incumbent. (Labonne, Parsa, and Querubin, 2017).

In local communities, far from the hustle and bustle of metropolitan glamor, women continue to live under a glass ceiling. Women are seen as key consultants to key issues in the community – but rarely decision-makers. In communities facing serious issues of heightened conflict, women continue to struggle to recover and rebuild from war, but also struggle in making their voices part of the choir that is singing the songs of peace negotiations and agreements.

**An Archipelago of Peace and Security Issues**

As diverse as its issues, issues of peace and security in the Philippines are just as different with varying phases, places, and faces. As an archipelagic country, the Philippines is disconnected geographically. The physical disconnection leads to the different experiences in the North, a breath away from Taiwan, and the realities of the South, a boat’s ride from Indonesia.

Peacebuilding in the Philippines is multifaceted and highly complex. Ranked 129th out of 163 countries in the 2020 World Peace Index, the possibility of a natural or human-induced disaster looms large. This low ranking is due to terrorist and non-state armed groups that remain a threat to national security, the proliferation of illicit firearms, and the high levels of internal conflict and extrajudicial killings. In 2019, the Institute for Economics and Peace listed the Philippines to be at the most risk from the climate crisis with 47 percent of the country's population highly exposed to climate hazards such as earthquakes, tsunami, floods, tropical cyclones, and drought. The climate crisis, a threat multiplier, increases incidences of internal displacement, loss of livelihood, interruption of commercial activity, and inability to cope and recover with the continued influx of hazards coming in and out of the country.

**Gendered Conflict**

Conflict impacts women differently from men. When men are in battle or in hiding, women bear multiple domestic burdens that range from providing for children to shielding the family from harm. Sexual violence has also been continually used as a tactic of war. As explained in UNSCR 1820 (2008), “Women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instill fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group”. This increases women’s insecurity and fear, as well as their vulnerability to rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence in times of conflict.

However, viewing women solely as victims of conflict and violent extremism ignores the fact that women have taken up key roles in peacebuilding. In many cases on the ground, women are peace advocates; negotiators; mediators; values “formators”; healers and “reconcilers”; evacuation center managers; role models; relief operations coordinators; and facilitators of dialogues. It cannot be disputed however that women have also been
recruiters and have played other supporting roles in violent extremist activity (Nario-Galace, 2019).

**Women Peacebuilding and the Center for Peace Education-Miriam College**

The Center for Peace Education (CPE) is an advocacy center of Miriam College, one of the premier educational institutions in the Philippines. Grounded in challenging violence in all its forms, CPE believes that to reach peace, we need to teach peace. Beyond its campus in Metro Manila, CPE has developed and implemented extensive work on women in peacebuilding, from the conception of the consultations informing the National Action Plan of UNSCR 1325 -- Women, Peace and Security in the Philippines (PNAP-WPS) to becoming the secretariat of the Women Engaged in Action on 1325 (WE Act 1235), a network of women and peace organizations in the country localizing UNSCR 1325 to communities from North to South.

In 2016, WE Act 1325 conducted an action research project on the Barometer of Women’s Security. The research found that the main peace and security issues that circled around the participants’ communities are armed conflicts, resulting in mass evacuation and internal displacement; the proliferation of firearms; and the presence of lawless and armed elements. Community women who participated in the research posited that peace in the community will be more sustainable if local women were meaningfully involved. They also argued that strengthening the capacities and participation of local women is critical so that they can take on the role of “peace and security monitors and conflict solvers” (Maligalig, n.d.).

**The Women in the North: Active Community Peacekeepers**

A few years ago, while reading her weekly newspaper, Dr. Jasmin Nario-Galace, Senior Associate of CPE, chanced upon an article covering the story of a group of women from Bontoc, Mountain Province, who had risen to the challenge of involving themselves in peacebuilding and peacekeeping work in communities. Active since 2001, the Bontoc Women’s Brigade supports the Philippine National Police (PNP) by conducting nightly rounds monitoring and ensuring drinking bans and community curfew restrictions are enforced. Rowdiness and fights, often fueled by alcohol, are kept at bay, avoiding eruptions of petty conflicts that are sometimes fatal (Cimatu, 2019). In a neighboring province, another all-women peacekeeping team was formed in the municipality of Lagawe, Ifugao. Similar to their counterparts in Bontoc, they conduct nightly rounds in specific areas to ensure compliance and implementation of drinking bans and local curfews.

Both provinces, Mountain Province and Ifugao, are part of the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) -- the only landlocked region in the country (Department of Interior and Local Government-CAR, n.d.). Its populations are largely composed of closely related indigenous peoples (IPs). Collectively, they are popularly known as Igorot, and are often grouped into several ethnic or ethno-linguistic identities, such as Apayao or Isneg, Tinggian, Kalinga, Bontoc, Kankanaey, Ibaloy, Ifugao, and Bago (Cordillera Peoples Alliance, 2006). The Cordilleras have preserved their indigenous practices and cultures, and still use the indigenous justice system of bodong in addressing disputes and conflicts. It was through this newspaper article covering Bontoc, and discovering their sister group
in Ifugao, that the possibility of replicating these teams across the country, addressing different lines of conflict, materialized.

**The Women of WePeace**

The Women’s Agency in Keeping the Peace, Promoting Security, or WePeace, is a local application of the WPS Agenda. WePeace is an answer to the call of community women through promoting horizontal peace while simultaneously supporting the agenda’s pillar of participation.

Through long-standing partnerships of the CPE, a nationwide training for women’s peacekeeping was organized in 2019. The two-day capacity-building training covered these topics: policy and legal mandates; women’s rights; gender sensitivity; conflict resolution and mediation; and monitoring and documentation. Informal women peacekeeping groups have been formed since then, which have been sustained through the follow-up sessions of WePeace’s partner organizations, and through their participation in other existing groups, such as women’s and church groups, in the barangays, small territorial and administrative districts forming the most local level of government.

The training reached almost 83 community women leaders from four distinct communities addressing four different conflict lines: (1) clan wars, locally called “rido” in Alesoan, North Cotabato; (2) internal displacement in Surigao del Sur; (3) tribal wars in Tabuk City, Kalinga; (4) and development aggression, in the form of development projects that violate indigenous peoples’ rights, in Infanta, Quezon Province (see map in Appendix). It had about 15-20 women participants per area, chosen and nominated by CPE’s partner organizations. These organizations are the Balay Mindanaw Foundation, Inc.; Prelature of Infanta, Quezon; St. Louis College of Bulanao; Aksyon para sa Kapayapaan at Katarungan; and Women Inspiring Women for Peace and Security. A 2019 outcome document, *At the Frontline: Women Peacekeepers in the Philippines* contains the WePeace training modules written by the 12-women training team composed of peacebuilders with different expertise from government, academe, civil society, religious, and indigenous groups. Copies of this document have been distributed to the participants, partners, and local government units.

**WePeace Alesoan, North Cotabato.**

While WePeace set out to help women meaningfully participate in community peacekeeping, the seeds of participation grew two-fold: not only are they aware of peace and security issues, but they have also become more aware of the endless possibilities they have as women. The members of WePeace Alesoan, North Cotabato, realized that what would have been impossible for women before, such as visiting a former campsite of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front or following cases on land issues and clan wars, is in fact possible. They describe these experiences as “Something we could have never done before this [WePeace] training!”

A municipality of North Cotabato in Central Mindanao, Alesoan faces recurring incidents of shootings, unresolved land conflicts, family feuds, petty crimes, cases of rape, and proliferation of firearms. Central Mindanao also has had a long history of violent conflicts...
and displacement. Present in North Cotabato are several revolutionary groups: the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front), MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and alleged sightings of the CPP-NPA-NDF (Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army-National Democratic Front).

WePeace Aleosan emphasizes that an important step in meaningful field work is maintaining their engagement with the local Peace and Order Council and Barangay Peacekeeping Action Team (BPAT). A participant shares, “We continue [making our presence known] because we, women peacekeepers, know we can engage. Our goal is to achieve peace, which is a similar goal to their work.” Their presence and active participation enable them to draft and help implement barangay ordinances, raising their awareness and guiding their response to the peace and security concerns in their community.

WePeace Surigao del Sur

Surigao del Sur, a province of the Caraga Administrative Region (CARAGA), is known as the Timber Corridor of the Philippines and Asia’s mining capital. There are 145,111 indigenous peoples called “Lumads” in Surigao del Sur. Scattered throughout seven towns, the tribes of the Manobo, Mandaya, Kamayo, and Mamanwas are the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in the province (Bautista, 2019). Lumad communities in Surigao del Sur and neighboring provinces have had a long history of recurrent internal displacements.

The region is vulnerable to conflicts arising from the uneven distribution of resources. In 2019, a total of 2,126,898.2 hectares of mining permits have been issued when the entire CARAGA region only has a total land area of 1,884,700 hectares -- a significant discrepancy of 242,198 hectares (Bautista, 2019). The Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) is also known to have a presence in the province. The suspension and termination of peace talks between the Philippine government and the CPP-NPA-NDF, the declaration of Martial Law from September 2016 to December 2019, and the bombing of Lumad schools have caused tension and fear among Lumad communities.

Because communities are often caught between the military operations of the government and the CPP-NPA-NDF, ensuring their own security remains a challenge. Our Lumad participant recalls learning of threats to their tribe, which she cannot document out of fear. One significant incident has put a blanket of fear over their community: “We have evacuated, carrying dead body of our fellow tribe member who was killed in our community. That was an unforgettable experience which challenges us, up until today.” She shares that she carries this unforgettably heavy experience outside her home as she engages in peacebuilding and peacekeeping, and then comes home to be overwhelmed by household chores. Hers is an experience of the many women whose lives carry the weight of multiple burdens following conflict.

In 2019, WePeace participants in the municipality of Lianga worked on drafting an ordinance strengthening measures against violence against women and children (VAWC) and improving the role of their women’s desk in their barangay. While in the municipality
of Cagwait, a re-echoing had been organized to both share the knowledge from the training, and organize more women in the area.

**WePeace Tabuk City, Kalinga**

Composed of different ethnic groups, WePeace Kalinga is part of the Cordillera Administrative Region. Similar to Bontoc and Ifugao, they too have intact indigenous communities, political structures, and cultures. To this day, the indigenous system of *bodong* or “Peace-Pact”, a customary process of conflict resolution, remains the front-line justice system before a settlement case is raised to court. Revenge seeking, once required of the bodong justice system in ancient times, continues to be a practice. Weapons used in seeking revenge have evolved from the traditional spears or bows and arrows to firearms (Lawagan, n.d.).

Traditionally male dominated, women play secondary roles in the *bodong* with opportunities to be heard reserved for a very few elders, assertive or educated women. But the *bodong* is also slowly changing with the times, welcoming more participation of women (Lawagan, n.d.). For WePeace Kalinga, this window of opportunity opens doors for more women to meaningfully engage and participate in mediating disputes of tribes in their communities.

In recent years, the *bodong* has also been giving the chance for more people to mediate cases using the provisions embedded in the Itabuk Pagta, the agreed laws within a *bodong* by two tribes. What makes this Itabuk Pagta special is that its revisions are inclusive of all citizens residing in Tabuk City: members of the Binodngan (a local tribe), non-Binondngan, migrants, and even Muslims. This Itabuk Pagta covers all ethnic groups living in Tabuk City, closing the gap on tribal discrimination. Building on this opportunity, WePeace Kalinga conducted an information, education and communication campaign on the current Itabuk Pagta, reading it using a gender lens, and participating in mediation processes in coordination with the *bodong* council.

WePeace Kalinga is confident in their contribution because they have seen it for themselves -- in peace seminars, women are those who are more strongly engaged. They explain, “When women speak in a *bodong*, the solutions come. When women raise their voice, the tension doesn’t get as high, and settlement comes.”

**WePeace Quezon.**

In Quezon Province, the continued effort to construct the controversial Kaliwa Dam as a short-term solution for the water shortage crisis in the National Capital Region remains a threat to the safety of the residents in the surrounding municipalities, ancestral lands of indigenous peoples, and diverse ecosystems in the province. The proposed dam construction is at the heart of the Sierra Madre Mountain, and is likely to displace thousands of indigenous people from the Dumagat Remontado tribe (Haribon Foundation, 2019). With heightened tensions in the province, there is a strong call to ensure peaceful measures in both safeguarding and advocating for the interests of the locals. WePeace Quezon joins residents in continuing its advocacy for human protection and raising awareness on the
implications of the dam construction. As women peacekeepers, the group continues to hold dialogues and engages with those on the ground.

Gender deconstruction was a key concept that made an important contribution to the work of WePeace Quezon. Engagement in peacekeeping work continues to both be a process of unlearning narratives of what women can or are only “fit” to do, and learning the many ways they can, indeed, engage and take up meaningful spaces in leadership and decision-making roles in the community. Kaye Villaflor, our trainer on Gender and member of WePeace Quezon Province, emphasizes that the essence of gender sensitivity is not about who has power or authority. She shares,

Gender sensitivity refers to acknowledging the presence of the other and understanding and respecting their choices and situations. When people learn to respect others, and do not let authority, power or entitlement oppress others, a peaceful life is realized. Men, women, and everyone in the broad gender spectrum must realize this.

Support for Sustainability: Supporting Women
WePeace often supports the work of the respective CPE partner organizations on the ground. Many of the women peacekeepers conduct monitoring and documentation work. Because of the complexity of the political environment, familial and societal expectations, and financial considerations in doing voluntary peacekeeping, the difficulty of sustaining the peacekeeping work can cause setbacks in their progress. WePeace continues to have needs, such as financial resources, and more importantly, government recognition. Government recognition opens the access to legally mandated government funds set specifically for gender and development. More importantly, support from their respective Local Government Units is critical in sustaining and ensuring security while continuing their peacebuilding work. Securing the lives of those who secure peace is critical in sustaining peace.

The reality remains that receiving formal government support is a tedious and bureaucratic process which has even become more complex due to the many adjustments and restrictions in the pandemic. Be that as it may, even operating on an informal basis, WePeace continues its work, and its presence and impact cannot be discounted.

Reframing the Picture: Women in Peace
Building on the existing roles these participants play within their communities, be they formal political positions or informal roles as community volunteers, the training has helped improve the women peacekeepers’ knowledge and understanding of women’s rights and sexual and gender-based violence (SGV). This increase in knowledge has, in turn, helped improve the way they mediate conflicts, document and handle cases on violence against women and children (VAWC).

The training has opened a space for the sharing of community peacekeeping experiences; learning about what women in the north are doing for peace was an eye-opening experience for a lot of the women peacekeepers. While these provinces are kilometers apart, there are
common security concerns including recurring incidents of internal displacement; gun violence and proliferation of firearms; unresolved land conflicts; petty crimes; and the vulnerability to climate change. Almost as challenging as the incidents WePeace participants monitor is the public perception of women doing peacekeeping work. Our women peacekeepers are often criticized for being “pakialamera” (nosy) and just in it for the “chismis” (gossip). When asked if this bothers them, WePeace teams just roll their eyes, laugh, sharing “We need to humble ourselves because what we are doing is not for us; it is for them.” They continue to explain that the issues of their community are bigger than the comments they hear, and that they are reassured to find support and allies, especially in their partners and family members, who are also advocates for peace.

In 2020, a full-length documentary, “Alab ng Kapayapaan (Sparks of Peace): Women Peacekeepers in the Philippines”, was produced and premiered online, gathering a total of 2,000 views. The documentary showcases the beginnings of the Philippines’ National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in 2010, women and peacebuilding at the grassroots level, and stories of the women of WePeace. WePeace has served as a space for experience sharing understanding both different and similar cultures, contexts, and efforts of different communities, of different women, towards issues of peace and security.

Conclusion
Equal and meaningful participation seems easier to talk about on paper. It is often easier to visualize the kind of world we dream to live in than to build it. Power dynamics and positions of influence that took centuries to build, takes even longer to challenge to rebuild. With the introduction of women peacekeeping in Aleosan, Surigao, Tabuk and Quezon, we have seen fearless and sincere women who, when given capacity and opportunity, are willing and able to uphold and spread peace in the spaces they take up. The phrase, “You are just a woman!” plays like a broken record to WePeace. When women peacekeepers are questioned if they really can do the work they have set themselves to do, they have found a great rebuttal to all these questions: “We know how to love and that is our greatest strength in peacekeeping.”

On the long and arduous road of the real, unified, all-encompassing “most forward in gender equality” title, where are the women? Women are stepping up for their communities, offering a different take on what peacebuilding can look like: dialogical and nonviolent. Women steadily plant seeds of peace and opportunities for more women after them, not as placeholders but as the trailblazers whose perspectives are more than just for consultations but are perspectives that can move forward a better society. Women continue moving the movement of women forward, shattering parts of the glass ceiling that remains unbroken knowing that if women who came before them could do it, then so many more can do it after them. These are women for women and for peace. These are the women of WePeace.
References


