

# Challenges and Opportunities for Female Combatants’ Post-war Community Leadership: Lessons Learnt from Aceh and Mindanao

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Workshop  
Report

This report synthesises lessons learnt on the challenges and opportunities for female combatants’ transition into post-war community leadership in the Philippines and in Aceh (Indonesia) based on a peer-advice workshop convened in Cotabato City, Philippines, in April 2016, with funding from the Robert Bosch Foundation. The workshop brought together former female members of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) of Aceh (Indonesia) and current members of the Bangsamoro Women’s Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB) of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao (Philippines). The report offers key policy recommendations and support options for national and international peacebuilding and development agencies, particularly in contexts of asymmetric conflict between a state and one or more non-state armed groups.

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# 1 Introduction

It is a well-known fact that most non-state armed groups (NSAGs) have significant proportions of female members across all levels of hierarchy. NSAGs that are rooted in the grievances of large segments of society who consider them to be legitimate representatives of their interests, and whose war-time agendas revolve around demands for more inclusive state-society relations, typically transform into political parties in the wake of peace agreements in order to take part in (local or national) state governance processes.<sup>1</sup> While the male leaders of such movements undergo successful post-war political reconversion, female comrades tend to become side-lined or even actively discouraged from assuming democratic leadership positions.<sup>2</sup> Despite increasing international awareness on the importance of women's active participation in peace(building) processes (see Box 6), the opportunities to transfer female combatants' acquired skills and competencies into effective contributions to post-war development and peacebuilding efforts are not strategically seized. Instead, these women are either told to return to their respective communities, or at best, they are given opportunities to participate in conventional Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in which they receive either stereotyped vocational trainings or standard cash compensation schemes.<sup>3</sup> The few success stories of female combatants turning into post-war leaders are usually restricted to high-ranking women that assume official positions in the political system. There are few examples of former mid-command or rank-and-file female combatants transforming to become political, economic, or social leaders at the community level. This is often even the case in local constituencies from which their movements drew most of their support and legitimacy.

This report incorporates key insights from a workshop conducted in April 2016, which brought together four former female members of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) of Aceh (Indonesia) and seven members of the Bangsamoro Women's Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB) of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao (Philippines). Through peer-to-peer exchange, these women jointly and systematically analysed pertinent challenges, opportunities and lessons learned for female combatants' post-war transition into local social, economic and political leaders. This report is not intended to serve as a guide or toolbox, but rather aims to present sources of inspiration for female combatants undergoing similar post-war transitions, as well as to offer related recommendations to mediation, peacebuilding and development actors on how to best support such transition processes.

In **Aceh**, women represented up to a third of GAM's membership and many of them served in the all-female **Inong Balee Battalion** (Battalion of Widows). While GAM underwent a successful reconversion into the majoritarian party (Partai Aceh) in Aceh, female members' interests and grievances were largely excluded from the 2005 peace agreement and its subsequent implementation process. Eleven years after the conflict ended, women are still severely under-represented in Aceh's political landscape despite the existence of legislation requiring a 30% women's quota in Provincial institutions. Only 12 out of 89 parliamentary positions (13.5%) are currently held by women.

In **Mindanao**, a peace accord was signed in March 2014 between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the MILF, following two decades of negotiations. This accord paved the way for the creation of a new Muslim autonomous entity (named "Bangsamoro") in exchange for the deactivation of rebel forces by the MILF. Many women serve the movement in various support functions, including in the Social Welfare Committee and the **Bangsamoro Women's Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB)**. The ongoing discussions on the accord's implementation will be of crucial importance for these women.

<sup>1</sup> Véronique Dudouet and Stina Lundström. *Post-war Political Settlements: From Participatory Transition Processes to Inclusive State-building and Governance*. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Véronique Dudouet, Hans J. Giessmann and Katrin Planta (eds.) *Post-war Security Transitions: Participatory Peacebuilding after Asymmetric Conflicts*, London: Routledge. 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See Tsjerard Bouta. *Gender and disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*. Clingendael, The Hague, 2005. See also Mark Knight. *Guns, Camps and Cash: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion of Former Combatants in Transitions from War to Peace*. Journal of Peace Research, vol. 41, no. 4 pp. 499–516, 2004.

## 2 Post-war Leadership Challenges for Female Combatants

During the workshop, participants jointly identified five persistent obstacles to female combatants' successful post-war leadership:

- **An exclusionary culture within their own movement:** female combatants tend to be seen by their male peers (and sometimes even by themselves) as lacking the necessary competencies and experience to be given equal post-war leadership opportunities and positions. Moreover, the fact that armed movements often maintain their internal chain of command after transforming into political parties represents a hindrance for female members: their wartime exclusion from power structures prevails during, as well as after, peaceful democratic transitions.

### Example 1

According to the former GAM members from Aceh, the few women who were given opportunities to take up leadership positions in the new party, administration or economic sector, were already closely affiliated to the GAM leadership during the struggle. Their selection was thus not primarily based on their capabilities and skills. In addition, GAM members also perceived that women's political participation is often cosmetic in nature and women are also often actively discouraged by their own movements to assume leadership positions.

- **Unequal access to international support:** Female combatants' lack of direct access to, or contacts within, national and international peacebuilding and development agencies represents a two-fold challenge. First, it is detrimental for peacebuilding and development actors who are deprived of direct information on these women, and as a result, their intervention, support and programming can hardly be sensitive to their demands and aspirations. Second, it further disempowers female combatants in comparison to their male peers and leaves them with little leverage to influence the design and outcomes of the very peacebuilding processes that will shape their own opportunities to acquire leadership roles.

### Example 2

The MILF BIWAB women see their lack of access to, and knowledge about, support options by international donors and INGOs as a major challenge for empowerment and action. The international community only has access to their top (male) leadership, and does not reach out to them due to the chain of command and internal power structures.

The former GAM female combatants faced similar experiences during the post-agreement peacebuilding period. As a result, the type of assistance provided to them did not really match their needs and aspirations. The few programmes that targeted them have focused on cash compensation rather than support for political and economic empowerment.<sup>4</sup>

- **Flawed terminology and classification of female combatants in peace agreements or DDR programming may pose serious restrictions on their post-war options.** While many female members of NSAGs do not bear arms nor participate in active combat, they nevertheless often receive military training and assume various key support functions for armed struggles. The categories assigned during pre-DDR verification processes (such as "combatant", "associated" or

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<sup>4</sup> Shadia Marhaban. The Reintegration of Ex-combatants in Post-war Aceh: Remaining Challenges to a Gender-blind Planning and Implementation Process. In: Veronique Dudouet, Hans J. Giessmann and Katrin Planta (eds.). Post-war Security Transitions: Participatory Peacebuilding after Asymmetric Conflicts, London, Routledge, 2012.

“disqualified” members) play a vital role in determining the level and type of support such women are entitled to.

#### Example 3

While the BIWAB provides key support functions to the MILF armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), its members do not actively participate in armed actions and are thus not officially recognised as combatants.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore likely that they will be excluded from the post-war normalisation programmes (as DDR is referred to in the 2014 peace accord).

- **Overall social exclusion and patriarchal cultures** lead to social, political and economic inequalities for women. This may include unequal land rights, unequal economic means and opportunities, as well as reduced access to, representation in and influence over, political arenas.

#### Example 4

The patriarchal culture that prevails in Acehnese society embodies a stigmatisation of women who wish to run for political offices. In combination with a culture of corruption, patronage, and democratic deficit, women’s ability to break the glass ceiling becomes more challenging. Within both Mindanao and Acehnese societies, there are also cultural narratives around women being weaker and less competent than men, which (to different extents) negatively influence their own self-image and self-assessment of their capabilities. Most women also require their husband’s permission to pursue leadership aspirations.

- **A lack of formal civilian education** also contributes to women’s lack of confidence and skills for post-war leadership.

#### Example 5

Both the women from former GAM and BIWAB MILF reported that a lack of formal education due to the war legacy and the general level of poverty pose obstacles for their ability to gain some of the vital competencies and skills for social, economic and political leadership. This is especially the case for English language skills, computer literacy, political training, and business and marketing skills. Both groups also reported that their experiences with the international community’s gender stereotyped vocational trainings, such as learning how to sew dresses and make embroideries, were ill-fitted to their individual needs, wartime experiences and post-war aspirations to play leading roles in their communities.

### 3 Opportunities for Female Combatants’ Leadership

During the workshop, participants jointly identified three main areas of opportunity to enable the fulfilment of their community leadership aspirations.

- **It is fundamental to draw upon international frameworks and streamline processes** for women’s political, social and economic participation. Furthermore, it is also vital to seek active

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.c-r.org/news-and-views/comment/women-behind-frontlines-and-their-continued-struggle-liberation>. (last accessed October 26, 2016).

support from international actors and build alliances with local civil society to ensure female combatants' interests are being fully taken into consideration during negotiations, the drafting of peace agreements and in their subsequent implementation. During these processes it is also important to uphold that female combatants do not only represent themselves and their own interests, but may very well also represent their own constituencies and broader movements. If these group's interests and aspirations are not sufficiently accounted for, the need to revisit agreements and implementation processes may rise.

#### Example 6

The 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (as well as its succeeding resolutions over the last 15 years) has been used as the international beacon for including women in peace processes.<sup>6</sup> Following the footsteps of the UN, other international agencies and organisations such as the African Union, NATO and the EU have all created Special Representatives for Resolution 1325 or equivalent. In addition, they also made great attempts to streamline various gender sensitive approaches into their peacekeeping and peacebuilding strategies and operations. The promotion of inclusive political settlements and state-society relations is also a key cornerstone of the "Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals" formulated by the member states of the International Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected states. This commitment, codified in the 'New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States', also reaffirms an obligation for supporting women's participation in relevant state organs, civil society and other institutions committed to peacebuilding.<sup>7</sup>

- Non-state armed movements often follow clear chains of command and have well developed structures. In many cases, women within their movements have their own battalions, organisations or associations. **The structures that exist during wartime can serve as a building block to create civilian democratic structures for self-empowerment**, capacity building, and self-organised trainings for the enhancement of democratic leadership competencies and skills. These structures may also function as a platform to gather and voice joint interests and needs, as well as a hub for direct collaboration with civil society, and international peacebuilding and development actors.

#### Example 7

In the case of Aceh, former female combatants managed to collectively transform the all-female battalion Inong Balee into the Aceh Women's League (LINA), a civilian democratic structure used for collective capacity building trainings for former female combatants. The civilian nature of the organisation and its cooperation with civil society, enabled its members to receive international assistance. The platform also became a hub for empowerment and ownership, as well as a focal point for collaboration and influence over other political structures and decision-making processes.

- During war, members of non-state armed groups are quite isolated from outside exposure and international input, and their female members even more so. **Exposure to peer-advice from other contexts** during peace processes and implementation is vital for gaining new ideas and inspiration, and to learn from best practices for fulfilling peaceful democratic leadership aspirations.

<sup>6</sup> María Villellas, Pamela Urrutia, Ana Villellas, Vicenç Fisas. *Gender in EU Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Policy and Practice*. WOSCAP, 2015: [www.woscap.eu/documents/131298403/131553554/Scoping+Study+-+Gender.pdf/ebda2ef3-ac44-4555-b721-ec159246bf4d](http://www.woscap.eu/documents/131298403/131553554/Scoping+Study+-+Gender.pdf/ebda2ef3-ac44-4555-b721-ec159246bf4d) 2016. (last accessed October 26, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Erwin Van Veen and Véronique Dudouet. *Hitting the Target but Missing the Point ? Assessing Donor Support for Inclusive Politics in Fragile Societies*. OECD, 2016 (forthcoming).

### **Example 8**

Both groups of participants reported on the benefits of having peer-exchanges with women from other movements, as well as to gain exposure to the international community, in order to break their isolation and to gain new ideas, support and inspiration for strategies and methods for action. During wars, women live quite isolated and become dependent on the group and leadership for information and action. Exposure for both female and male combatants to international exchange with former members of other NSAGs who have successfully transitioned to democratic politics also contributes to breaking cultural taboos over female leadership.

## **4 Lessons Learnt for Peacebuilding and Development Actors**

At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to jointly formulate direct advice for peacebuilding and development actors. Acknowledging that all work with female combatants needs to be well anchored with the leaders of armed groups in order to materialise, and that direct financial support is often only accessible once a peace agreement has been signed, the following advice may serve as an inspiration for developing new ideas for joint action.

### *Gain the right information*

- Map and build a detailed understanding of the overall movement's power-dynamics, structures and chains of command, both during conflict and after transition. This includes creating a thorough understanding of women's sub-structures, their position within the broader movement and constituency, as well as their relationship to the top leadership.
- Create a distinct and transparent network with solely female combatants. This should not be limited to the top female leadership and commanders. A separate network for women reduces the risk of their interests and aspirations being mediated and/or influenced by male leadership. Also identify the key female combatants who have potential to serve as multipliers and focal points for further collaboration.

### *Support with sensitivity*

- Support female combatants' collective and individual active participation at all stages and levels of the peace process. This should not be limited to the top female leadership and commanders.
- When supporting peace negotiations and the drafting of peace agreements, be aware of the importance of classification and terminology describing women in the respective movements. These may heavily impact female combatants' future prospects and opportunities for post-war leadership and access to assistance.
- When seeking external expertise, explore if there are women from similar types of movements who have undergone the same transition in the past and can be brought in to provide direct peer-to-peer advice and share their own lessons learned and experiences.

### *Timing of support*

- When the time is ripe, jointly explore support options to create female combatants' collective civilian and democratic organisations that can assist their self-empowerment, capacity building and training.
- The impact of technical and financial assistance can be maximised if channelled directly to female combatants' own civilian structures and/or local civil society which represents their

interests, instead of being channelled through the (local) or overall movement. This increases assistance efficiency and women's ownership of the process.

- Do not fall into the trap of designing gender stereotyped DDR or vocational training programmes. Explore support options for women to gain high quality social, economic, and political leadership capacity-building early on, so that these match their needs, experiences and aspirations.