

**I HAVE  
TO  
SPEAK**

**VOICES OF FEMALE  
EX-COMBATANTS**  
FROM ACEH, BURUNDI,  
MINDANAO AND NEPAL

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*In memory of Gypsy Queen Buisan Sumampao,  
(1992 – 2020)*

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# INTRODUCTION



*This booklet seeks to amplify some of the hidden and forgotten voices in conflict. These stories of female ex-combatants from diverse political, religious, ethnic and national backgrounds show that women and their experiences of armed conflict have to be taken seriously for building sustainable peace.*

*These are their stories as they tell them to each other. Six ex-combatant women collected the stories, reflecting as they did so on their reasons for joining the movements, their time as women in war, and how their lives unfolded once peace was restored. Theirs are stories of friendship and camaraderie, of life and death, of perseverance and resistance, and of rebuilding lives after war and continuing the struggle in peaceful ways.*

# THE PROJECT

The stories are the result of a participatory research project, which collected first-hand knowledge on female ex-combatants' actual experiences during and after armed conflict. It analysed the various challenges, opportunities and lessons learned by women who were members of non-state armed groups that signed peace agreements and demobilised 10-20 years ago. Given this timescale, female combatants' narratives will not be the same today as they were immediately after the conflict. They are influenced, mitigated and consolidated as the women's lives unfold, in response to the peace and reintegration process, international engagement and the evolving political situation.

Six local researchers from five demobilised armed groups in Aceh (Indonesia), Mindanao (Philippines), Nepal and Burundi played an active part in the research and documentation process. 43 women shared their stories with the researchers and all of them are included in this booklet. Different thematic sections are introduced by example questions developed by the researchers. Following on from the Berghof Foundation's work with non-state armed groups, former female combatants had expressed a desire to have their experiences – both positive and negative – analysed and shared within their own societies, in other conflict-affected contexts and with international policy-makers. Since October 2018, with funding from GIZ and in collaboration with local partner organisations, we have supported these female ex-combatants in recording video interviews with their peers and presenting the results to other female combatants from different contexts.

# BACKGROUND

Many peace processes are conducive to non-state armed movements gaining political capital and entering government through post-war power-sharing or electoral processes. However, these groups' female members (who often make up as much as 30 per cent of the membership) are frequently sidelined by their male peers. As a result, women are sent back to the domestic sphere or encouraged to assume gender-stereotypical roles while the men effectively assume the majority of post-war leadership positions. Due to various political, socio-economic and/or cultural conditions, these women miss real opportunities to translate the agency they have gained during the conflict into constructive contributions to conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

The way women are perceived and portrayed during and after conflicts affects which women's issues are considered in subsequent peace processes. If women are predominantly imagined as victims of the conflict, they only have to be taken into consideration as such in designing the post-war order and in reconstruction and reconciliation efforts, sidelining many of the issues women fight for during conflicts, such as the transformation of gender relations. This may lead to many women's needs and demands remaining unaddressed. A more nuanced picture of the various ways in which women join and participate in conflicts is necessary to prevent war and enable sustainable peace.

# ACEH

Having maintained its independence as a sultanate until the 20th century, Aceh has a long history of fighting against all colonising forces – the Dutch, the Japanese and then the central government of Jakarta. In the 1970s, the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka – GAM) formed and continued the fight for independence until 2005. After several failed attempts at a negotiated peace, GAM declared a unilateral cease-fire after the devastating tsunami in 2004, resulting in both GAM and the Indonesian government returning to the negotiating table. The peace agreement was finally signed in Helsinki in 2005 and created a special autonomous status for Aceh, allowing for the formation of local parties, self-government and the retention of most revenue from natural resources 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). Although female fighters played an active part in the conflict, their concerns were absent from the peace negotiations and no provisions on women were included in the 2005 Helsinki Agreement. While GAM successfully transformed into a political party in Aceh, female members' interests and grievances were largely excluded from the implementation of the peace agreement. Fifteen years after the conflict ended, women are still severely under-represented in Aceh's political landscape despite the existence of legislation requiring a 30 per cent women's quota in provincial institutions. Only twelve out of eighty-nine parliamentary positions (13.5 per cent) are currently held by women.





**BURUNDI**

**NEPAL**

**ACEH**

**MINDANAO**

## **BURUNDI**

After independence from Belgium in 1962, Burundi remained under Tutsi minority rule for the next thirty years, with significant Hutu opposition forming in the process. Several cycles of at times violent upheaval resulted in the start of the civil war in 1993. CNDD-FDD and (PALIPEHUTU-) FNL formed as the most important Hutu insurgent groups, fighting against the Tutsi-dominated army and at times each other. Both groups relied partly on forced recruitment and a significant number of women did not join voluntarily. After the Arusha Accords in 2000 set the baseline for post-war Burundi, the CNDD-FDD signed a peace agreement in 2003 and a new constitution was passed in 2005, ending the civil war. Smaller groups and CNDD splinters, such as the FNL and FNL-Icanzo, followed a few years later. Two DDR processes were undertaken and despite having to present a weapon to enter the programme, which few female combatants could provide, 15 per cent of the combatants who went through it were women.

After winning the parliamentary elections in 2005, the CNDD-FDD started its transformation from rebel movement to political party and remains in government today. The FNL continued its military struggle until it also transformed into a political party in 2008, albeit with much less electoral success. The constitution that entered into force after a referendum in 2005 stipulates a 30 per cent quota for women in state institutions – currently 36 per cent of MPs are women. The aim is to represent Burundi's diversity in terms of gender and ethnic groups.

## **MINDANAO**

The largely Muslim Moro population of Mindanao, Philippines, faced discrimination and repression under the Marcos regime from the late 1960s. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was one of the groups that took up arms against the Philippine government at that time. Many women were part of the movement, largely in non-combat and support roles, such as medical care and communications, but some also carried arms and engaged in combat.

There were no gender provisions in the 1996 Final Peace Agreement and women's civil society organisations continue to criticise this whilst advocating for the inclusion of women in local government and decision-making structures, e.g. in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Instead of a disarmament and demobilisation programme and post-peace agreement, there was an emphasis on social reintegration and economic development. One of the key challenges for the female ex-combatants of MNLF in Mindanao today is the recruitment of their sons and daughters by other, sometimes radical extremist groups in the area, such as Abu Sayyaf.

## NEPAL

The Nepalese Civil War started in 1996, when the Maoists took up arms to overthrow the Nepalese monarchy. Women and girls were included as active fighters in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) – the armed wing of the Maoists – as well as taking up leadership positions and serving in support roles throughout the conflict. Often, the motivation for women to join the revolutionary movement was to fight against patriarchal structures and the inequalities they were facing in Nepalese society. The Maoists had an explicitly stated women's empowerment and gender equality agenda as part of their programme to support all socially marginalised groups in Nepal. Within the PLA, women usually went through military training and often took active combat roles afterwards.

After the signing of the peace agreement in 2006, 20 per cent of the combatants qualifying for DDR were women, although an estimated 40 per cent of combatants during the war were female. Many former combatants are disillusioned with the implementation of the peace agreement and their objectives—a society free of gender discrimination and oppression – are still a long way off. Overall, despite the presence of some key individuals, broad participation in mainstream politics remains difficult for women in Nepal.

# INTERVIEW



*“I am one of the women who participated in the armed forces. As you are an ex-combatant also, I would like to talk with you about your life before you decided to leave for the rebellion. I also want to know how things started and how they ended. Would you allow me to start the interview?”*



My name is Cynthia. I grew up in *Gitega* province, in the commune and zone of *Gitega*. When my father was still alive, we wanted for nothing because he was a hard worker, but unfortunately, he died and our life became very hard. My mother married another man and stopped sending us to school.

The first reason I joined the group was the bad life we lived. Secondly, I went to the forest to avenge my father. My father used to ask people to provide food for the armed groups. He collected the food and then they came and took it home. They came back to our house for the same reason and I went with them and didn't go back home. When we arrived in *Nyabihanga*, after crossing the *Ruvyironza* river, they gave me something heavy to carry until we entered the *Mwaro* province. They named me Goliath.

# CYNTHIA

from BURUNDI

*As women, we have to be united and help each other: you may not have to fight a forest war but you may have to fight a war in your own house.*

I spent around five months without doing any military training. I was preparing the food for our chiefs. I buttered their bread and cooked their chickens. They loved me and started training me to do running exercises so that I become fitter and was able to walk long distances without getting tired. They did not beat me.

After five months, the chief of the camp or his substitute began to train us in shooting. They looked at you to see if you were strong enough and how old you were before they assigned you to a particular task. I was very strong and vigorous – that is why they rapidly trained me even though I was only thirteen years old. Luckily, where I was, things like [sexual harassment] were strictly forbidden. Women were highly protected. Wives sometimes remained with their husbands. If you tried to force these matters, you were in danger. It was not permitted. I got nothing like a salary or a reward except that I could get news from my family. I wrote letters by hand and sent them through our messengers. Finally, I got word from them that they were living a bad life and then I started to steal in shops and kidnap people for money. I sent what I stole to my family back home.

I fought three hot wars. The first one was in *Tenga*, where we went with two hundred and fifty combatants and lost thirty persons in that battle. From the government [enemy] side, we gained eighty guns, seventy uniforms and other military equipment. The second one was the military campaign in *Rushubi*. I killed thirty of our enemies' soldiers but I was captured during the battle. At that time, if you are captured, you wouldn't be killed. You would be kept alive for further interrogation. They killed three of my team right way. Then they carried me to their camp to ask me some questions. Suddenly, I got my hands on a telephone and informed my group and after two hours, they surrounded the place. They went on the attack and I escaped.

I was always depressed and upset whenever I saw that people we were supposed to protect were violated and looted. Moreover, the ones we needed alive were killed by government soldiers. That is why on the day of the battle of *Rushubi*, I didn't kill those thirty soldiers because I was happy to do it. I did it out of anger at how they always kill innocent civilians.

In our group, we had informants who often told us how things were going. We heard that our leaders had held some mediation meetings. Finally, we heard about the peace accord when we were in the *Rukoko* forest and they gathered us in *Gitega*. I was very happy that day because I heard I was about to meet my family again. Our families came to welcome us but they called me by the wrong name because my name had already been changed many years ago. My name was Goliath and I was not meant to respond to other names.

Our leaders told us to demobilise with humility, love and integrity so that they could bring us back to our homes. There were cars for transportation and we were given a sum of money. When I got the money during demobilisation, I was asked if I would join the national security police. I went through six months of training and they sent me to *Gitega* to work there. As I was thin due to the life I lived at home, people didn't respect me much. I wrote to our leaders asking if they could excuse me from police duty. They helped me so finally I opened a restaurant in *Gitega* Second Avenue. I bought five cows and a parcel of land and the rest of the money I spent on having a good time.

When I got home, I told my family how life was in the rebellion. I summoned my whole family to tell them what pushed me to leave for the rebellion. I gathered together my uncles, aunts and cousins to show them that I was not as they used to see me. My mother apologised because she thought that I went there because of her. I advised the young boys to be careful when wanting to join any kind of rebellion because I saw there is nothing good in the forest. It was difficult because they knew I was a warrior and I had suffered a lot. They would not start fighting with each other in my presence because I hated people who mistreated one another. It would remind me of what I had seen in the war. I felt like I could kill anyone who mistreated others even though they were just civilians.

My life started to get worse because I stayed with my brother and he hated me so much. I started to think about returning to the rebels. But I stayed because of my children. I saw that no one would take care of them and I decided to remain with my kids. I gave myself a list of conditions: if I don't find a husband who will pay a dowry, introduce me to his family, agree to a marriage contract and get married in a church, I won't get married again. I divorced my first husband when my youngest child was one year and two months old and I told myself that I would only get married again when I had bought a parcel of land for my kids.

There should be something to protect women because I see that when those problems happen, it is mostly the women who are the victims. It is good that all the women get together and talk about their problems so that if tomorrow something dangerous happens in their lives, they have each other to protect themselves. As women, we have to be united and help each other: you may not have to fight a forest war but you may have to fight a war in your own house.

# PATHWAYS INTO THE FIGHT

*What was the reason that pushed you to go to the armed group? How do you see yourself as a person who had once been involved in the struggle?*

CONSTANCE





Jayapuri



Mado

## SARU | NEPAL

I was born in a very rural part of *Kailali* District in Nepal, a place called *Pahalwanpur*. It is one and a half to two hours from any town. When I was born, my father was a bonded labourer and my mother was as well. We had no shelter; we used to live in other people's homes. My family has suffered a lot since my childhood and is of a rebellious nature. We are part of the *Tharu* community, an indigenous group in Nepal. There is a lot of discrimination against women within the *Tharu* community, with some primitive ideas, and practices are very different. Although we were bonded labourers, my brothers somehow got a chance to study. However, the girls were seen as people not worth investing in for education as it was assumed we would go to live in our husband's home after marriage.

## JAYAPURI | NEPAL

When I started my political career, women were very oppressed. There were no equal rights. Women were not allowed to engage in politics; they were regarded as nothing but baby-making machines and child marriage and polygamy were practised.



## **GITA | NEPAL**

I started working for the Party because there was active discrimination and oppression of the *dalits* by the so-called high-caste and low-caste people. I believed the Communist Party would help change this situation and provide equal rights for everyone. I also believed the Party would help to end the prevailing oppression of women. The movement started as a poor people's movement and I am the daughter of a poor family. It motivated me to get involved, learn about injustice and fight against it.

## **FRANCINE | BURUNDI**

Before the war started, I had already finished secondary school, where I focused on health studies, but I still lived with my parents. When the war started, we used to flee, and when it calmed down we would come back home. One day, rebels passed our village and our parents ran away but we were caught in the bush where we were hiding. It was an accident – I didn't plan to go with them. They questioned us and said they would kill us if we did not join. I was afraid, so we did as we were told. We could not say goodbye to our families. We had no choice, we were forced into it. It was a very difficult life, but when they heard I had a skill they urgently needed due to my studies in medicine, they said that I was lucky as I got to care for the sick and wounded.

## **MADO | BURUNDI**

I did not join the rebellion for a cause. A woman who found me alone in hiding took me. She told me that she was taking me to a safer place but she was lying. She was in charge of the admission and recruitment of newcomers.

## **CONSTANCE | BURUNDI**

Before I joined the group I grew banana and manioc. We used to carry out the fermentation of banana wine, but when the war broke out in 1993, we could no longer bring in the harvest. Any time you saw a soldier with a knife or a gun, you had to run away. They would come to destroy everything. They would even come and cut down all your banana trees. After seeing all of this, I decided to leave. I joined the group so that I could protect my children and family.



Francine

# PATHWAYS INTO THE FIGHT



Salawati



Ligaya



Tripani

## **SALAWATI | ACEH**

After I found out what the Free Aceh Movement was fighting for, I was motivated to know more about its struggle. I attended a GAM meeting where they explained that we would not achieve our struggle without the presence of women. The male members of GAM asked women to get involved to help them gain information about supplies and the location of the TNI. They really involved women in fighting together for independence. Today, many people say *inong balee* [all-women battalions] were only used when men needed them. That is actually the mindset of people who do not really understand. People think this was the case because they do not know the extent of women's involvement and the extent to which the GAM engaged *inong balee* in the struggle. I personally feel that women were not just being used.



## **LIGAYA | MINDANAO**

Looking back, my own and my relatives' involvement started when we were still in college. There was a point in time when the status of Bangsamoro was not good. We decided to drop out and joined the struggle. In fact, we went with others from the areas around Davao, from the city into the jungle. We lived in the jungle for four years, leaving our better lives behind. We never hesitated.

## **NURLIELAH | MINDANAO**

I have been in the movement since I was a child. I was only eight years old when I joined the movement. During our time, there was no lower age limit; as long as you are willing and able, you could join the group.

## **SYAMSYDAR | ACEH**

That day, my father went out for a while. When he came home at seven o'clock for evening prayer, the military suddenly arrived. They told him to surrender but he refused, so they shot him. My father was shot in the chest. I was devastated. I was so anxious, I wanted to cry. But I knew that if I cried out, the government forces might hear it and maybe I'd be arrested. If I was arrested in the forest, I might have not been released again. I could not stand it any longer so I ran away with the GAM people again.

# LIFE IN CONFLICT

*How was life after joining the rebels? If there was a battle, would you go with others to fight? Looking at the bloodshed and your dying friends, weren't you regretting what you were doing? Didn't you feel like running away?*





## **FABIOLA | BURUNDI**

When the war was hot, I was afraid. When my friends asked me why, I told them that I disliked killing, even though others were not afraid of it.

## **TRIPANI | NEPAL**

We had already understood the Maoists' agenda of achieving rights, equality and freedom. In a district like *Rolpa*, it was very easy to comprehend the Maoist doctrines of overthrowing the rule of the bourgeoisie. I used to explain this to the women. I would tell them that women had been systematically marginalised by the state and had faced gender inequality. Then I used to convince them that the Maoists were fighting against this.

## **NAWIRA | MINDANAO**

As a woman and a mother of five children, my focus was on the health and hygiene of the people in the organisation. My expertise was managing the deliveries when the combatants' wives gave birth. However, as a mother and wife and as part of the organisation, getting out of the house to do this was too difficult for me. I was away from my house, my home, for one to two nights waiting for each new baby to arrive. So whenever I needed to go out, the paramedics would come to my house and take care of my children. One day, when I was out, I realised it felt so good to have these women volunteers in the MNLF. Apart from helping me with my work, they also helped me to run the clinic.

### **LILA | NEPAL**

I witnessed my friends dying, in the midst of battle, with bullets flying all around us. I have had many traumatic experiences where there was blood every-where.

### **ANNICK | BURUNDI**

There was no good time in the forest for me. You cannot sleep when you want. You cannot eat when you want. There was nothing good about it.



### **GITA | NEPAL**

We were unsuccessful twice in battle. We lost many friends and commanders. I see them in my dreams sometimes. I also dream about the war, about winning battles and so on.

### **TRIPANI | NEPAL**

Fighting war is always exciting. However, the incident that still affects me happened in *Rukum*, *Khalanga*.

At that time, I was in the attack force, but our plan did not work. Many of my friends were injured, martyred, and the situation was out of control. There was a pool of blood and many of them were lying on the ground. I felt I was about to lose control. My friends were dying and we were losing the battle. We brought everyone back but I always felt that the losses we had were far greater than our gains there. The *Khalanga* Barracks attack was the most painful experience of my life.

### **FRANCINE | BURUNDI**

When things got really hot, there was no way to heal people. We had no choice but to leave them lying on the ground where they fell. We had no medicines for our patients, unless they were stolen from hospitals. We coped by using wood as splints for broken legs, for temporary relief. Yes, your close friends could die in front of you while you were helping them to breathe their last breath. You also had to try to defend yourself or find somewhere to hide. Then after the battle, you would try and gather everyone in one place to provide treatment for them. But most importantly, if someone died in battle, you had to take their gun and if possible their uniform. If someone died when we had already crossed a river or were far away, we didn't come back to bury them.

# LIFE IN CONFLICT



Hadi



Nurlielah




Nawira



Chance



## **BAGMATI | NEPAL**



When returning from attacking *Satbariya*, on the way to *Murkuti* in *Pyuthan*, my second eldest son became a martyr. After that, when attacking *Bhalubaang*, my son-in-law became a martyr. My daughter was six months pregnant at the time. She was in *Baglung* with the forces, participating in the war. My niece and brother-in-law's son also became martyrs during the war; there are five martyrs in my family. In 2007, my husband also became a martyr. I have been fighting until now. The enemies burned all our houses and our property; we had no choice but to go underground. My family sacrificed a lot for the cause we fought for. As a political candidate, I took part in the election and I won. I am now an elected representative and I intend to avenge the sacrifice my family made for the cause.

## **HADI | ACEH**

When I spent time together with friends, I was happy and motivated. At the start, when we had just joined, we did not think about how the struggle would end. But afterwards, people were dead. Friends were dead. That did not occur to me at first.

## **SALAWATI | ACEH**

Togetherness is the most beautiful thing. When we ate, we enjoyed sharing, even if there was very little to share. Togetherness is the one thing that makes us happy. During the conflict, there was no difference between happiness and togetherness.

## **FRANCINE | BURUNDI**

We could get close to people. When arriving in the movement, it seemed like you got another family. You had to create a new family and new friends because one day your friend might die and the next day it would be your turn. We do have to love each other.

## **MADO | BURUNDI**

I did not have anyone to comfort me. Everyone was in need of comfort.

## **NURLIELAH | MINDANAO**

The struggle, *jihad*, is between life and death but we Moro have fought for lasting peace and sustainability because we want to save the coming generations. We women used to be part of the most delicate and dangerous missions. My membership in the movement pushed me to focus on my goal and I forgot to get married at all. Until now, I am single and here in the revolution, I aged.



My name is Daryani from North Aceh. Now I live in *Blang Rantau* in *Sawang District, Riseh Tunong*. I am one of those who have witnessed and experienced conflict. I am one of the key women who joined the guerrillas in the forest.

I heard stories from time to time that Aceh had gone through wars. I heard the stories of Cut Nyak Dien, a woman fighter, and I realised this means a continuation. Cut Nyak Dien had died but now thousands like her have been born. I joined GAM because I noticed them, where they ate, where they lived, what their purpose was. I still have the intention to support the progress of Aceh, but is what I chose right or not?

I used to be a female adviser. I am a woman, and if there were women who according to GAM did wrong, I could not accept it if men interrogated them. Because women need protection and advice. We as women in GAM shared that feeling. We asked ourselves: “Is this child really guilty?”



# DARYANI

from ACEH

*Conflict is not a way out.  
Is conflict a way to achieve  
independence? No.  
It's peace. Peace can create  
a secure environment.  
For whom? I have already  
seen conflict; I don't want  
to feel it any more.*

Was she in the wrong? In what respect?" We should embrace each other. We are all Acehnese. Why do we have to discard her? What did she do wrong?

After I got married, my husband also joined. Sometimes, I had time to reflect, is this is my life? I had no meals, only a few clothes; there was no bed while I was just married. I carried my clothes and towels around in a bag. Sometimes my husband went to war with his friends. All I could do was wait. But because I was with him during the conflict, we were happy. That was the other side of the conflict – we barely felt the difficulties. One day my stomach hurt. I wondered what illness I had but apparently, I had a miscarriage. But because I had no money, I had to survive all by myself. We stayed in one combatant compound. I felt worse while my husband was going off to fight but I never gave up. One day I sought treatment. Only with leaves, with capa leaves, those are wild leaves, and I finally recovered. My foster mother had taken me for medical treatment to Sawang. I told her, "I have no money but I need medicine and I want to have children."

We lived in one place, in a combatant compound in *Riseh Tunong*. We lived in a yard, which we shared with another family. I never complained, sometimes I didn't eat, they cooked rice on a boiler, sometimes I asked for some rice, they gave it to me, maybe because they respected me, not because I was someone's wife, no, but because we were in this struggle together. They moved during the night, so I moved too. If they stayed asleep in the forest, I did too. One night we came across a hut, but there was no one in it. Only a lamp. I was afraid. I just gave up. It was a struggle. "Oh, so this is what it is like," I said. Only the three of us. Me, my husband and his weapon. It was our friend. I said, "Just give up."

After that, in 2003, I became pregnant. I was still participating even though I was pregnant. Maybe this is my destiny, I thought. On the one hand, it was sad, the conflict, with my husband going away to fight. On the other hand, I felt joy because I'd have a baby again two years after a miscarriage. I said to my child, "Where are we going, son?" Thank God my child is strong.

I was looking for my husband because I had had no news of him. I was pregnant for nine months and women who were nine months pregnant, nine days, nine hours and nine seconds had already given birth. I gave birth in *Aceh Besar* in August 2003. My husband was not there even though my child was a boy. I couldn't stand it: when would my child meet his father? Three days after I gave birth, I had four stitches. I just gave up because I wanted to get well soon. The seventh day I made a decision to return to North Aceh. My parents cried. My father said, "Don't take your child because he's still a baby." What did I answer? "Father, I am indeed your daughter, but I am the wife of a man, so let me go, maybe I'll be happy there." I had prepared the baby and some herbal medicine.

I was searched and the medicine was found. I was asked "What is this?" The driver of the car was nervous. I answered, "It isn't marijuana, sir, it's my medicine." I told them that I needed the medicine because I had just given birth. We left straight away after that. I arrived in *Geuregok* and the driver asked me, "Where are you going? Where are you taking a child that small?" I didn't say a word. I finally met my husband in *Cot Mee*. That's when he saw his child for the first time. Then I moved and moved again. Acehnese people say that before the forty-fourth day after giving birth a woman cannot go anywhere, but I did not feel it.

After the peace agreement was signed, I was in *Aceh Besar*. In 2008, I became a teacher. A new junior high school opened. I applied to become a teacher. It was not my profession but because I was interested in healing the trauma and shedding the prolonged feeling of sadness, why not? Even though I am a stay-at-home woman, I can manage time, so let me be with people.

Today I am still alive. For my child and his generation, their time will come. All the Acehnese people really want is independence. Who doesn't want to be free? What is independence? We see examples in other regions, but God has not allowed it for us. But the spirit must still be there. Even though it is different now. Today there are no wars, now there is only politics.

Conflict is not a way out. Is conflict a way to achieve independence? No. It's peace. Peace can create a secure environment. For whom? I have already seen conflict; I don't want to feel it any more. Peace will come for Aceh. As for the Free Aceh Movement, it is just one group, so if it is gone, who will continue? My message to those who survived and remain is: unite! What is the real aspiration? What is the true nature of the struggle? While observing politics, are the political steps taken by GAM correct? What is the purpose? The figures who are in power may still have the spirit to fight for the rights of the Acehnese people, but what is really being fought for? Sooner or later people will know where the end of this struggle is, but there is a new generation now. I have a child. Will he follow in my footsteps? Is the current situation right or not? Freedom is not as easy as turning your palm.

# WOMEN AT WAR

*Can you share what type of problems you faced as a woman and mother apart from the problems of the war?*

JEANETTE



## **SARU | NEPAL**

I fled with my child into the jungle. It was really hard for me to take care of my daughter as there was no hygiene, sanitation, food or water. During the night, the jackals would gather round us and howl. I was really scared that the jackals would take my daughter.

## **FRANCINE | BURUNDI**

Life during war was not easy. War is no joke. If you were lucky, you would get water and soap to wash your body. During your monthly period, you would use worn-out combatant clothes or paper taken from schools.

## **LIGAYA | MINDANAO**

When I lost my husband, who was also involved in the struggle, it was so challenging. I had five children and was pregnant with my youngest one. Seven days after the death of my husband, I gave birth to a baby girl by Caesarean section. I felt so down and I told myself, if I don't help myself and be strong, I will be drowned in grief and my children will suffer.

## **LAMBAI, LEMI | MINDANAO**

It was during our stay in the forest. I was doing the laundry and received a report from the commander that there was a group of government soldiers coming to our area. I had no choice but to leave all my laundry and start running for my life because that time, I was on their capture list. And the most painful part was that I miscarried my first pregnancy due to pressure and fear while running to hide from the armed men.

## **SARIFA | MINDANAO**

As for the role of the women during the struggle, well, it involved a lot of first aid. We were also messengers and we helped assemble firearms during training. Whenever the organisation was in need of supplies and materials for survival, despite the very critical situation during martial law, usually what we did was to disguise ourselves to look like ordinary civilians.





We would go down to the market and with the help of some doctors who were friends of the organisation, we could get boxes of medicine, foods and other supplies. In 1974-75, we pushed for the creation of the women's group with Bainon Karon, who is now a Member of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority Parliament.

#### **ANONYMOUS | NEPAL**

I have seven children and was still breastfeeding the youngest one, who was four and half when I was engaged in the war. Once, the enemies got hold of my eldest daughter and me. They took us to the station and kept us for 19 days, torturing and raping us. Only those who have been in the hands of the enemy know what it is like to be tortured. They compelled us to go underground. Along with my seven children and husband, I left our home to fight for my country and its people.

#### **JEANETTE | BURUNDI**

It was difficult to have to sleep in the same room with men. There was a man who was always asking me to have sexual intercourse with him and I refused. But when the others had gone to war, he sexually abused me. I was constantly wondering whether I had been infected with sexually transmitted diseases.

#### **NURONIHAR | MINDANAO**

After my first-born got sick with dengue, I got a call telling me that my husband was missing. My husband died and I was not able to see his dead body. I thought it would not happen. I did not know what to do at the time. I have five children and back then, my youngest was only two and half years old. But with the help of God, they survived. It was the hardest part of being a parent, raising them alone. I didn't expect any help. Every time I remember what happened, I cry.

#### **LIGAYA | MINDANAO**

I became a widow at the age of 35, still young. But when I thought of remarrying just to survive, I realised it wouldn't be an answer to my problems. I asked myself, if I were to find a man and married him, would he work hard for my children? Would he feed them and send them to school? For me, it did not seem possible, as my children were not his. So I decided not to get married again.



Namaste, my name is Onsari Gharti Magar. I am the former Speaker of the House. I was born in *Rolpa* district, a rural area in the upland region of the country.

I became part of the Maoist People's War because I am a woman. We had class discrimination, caste discrimination, gender discrimination and geographical discrimination in the past. The Maoist People's War had the agendas to end these forms of discrimination. I was influenced by these agendas and I participated in the war. When we worked for our own liberation by engaging in the People's War, we were ready to sacrifice ourselves. There were so many major problems we faced and small issues were not considered problems. The patriarchal mindset in state and society helped to project the same patriarchal mindset in the Party and our communities as well. I had to take the lead and fight against these practices and mindset. I had to fight because being a woman, I was not accepted as a leader.

# ONSARI

from NEPAL

*The patriarchal mindset in state and society helped to project the same patriarchal mindset in the Party and our communities as well. I had to take the lead and fight against these practices and mindset. I had to fight because being a woman, I was not accepted as a leader.*



There were two types of soldier in the war, male and female. Women had to work hard to establish themselves and gain recognition for their leadership abilities. They were also in search of their self-identity and had to be practical at the same time. Also, a man can never give birth to a child; women have to bear the pain and sacrifice. I am one of the women who faced all these challenges.

It was a challenge to become pregnant during that time, but I wanted to transform my life as an experiment. I wondered if women really do become weak when they give birth to a child. Will they still be able to take on other responsibilities? I wondered if giving birth to a child was the end of every other development prospect for a woman. I was confused and I was experimenting with all these things. We were ready to sacrifice our lives for the cause and during that time my child was born.

I started my political career in the student movement and until now I have worked as the Politburo member of the Maoist Party. I was in charge of many districts during the war. I served as the Battalion Commissar of the People's Liberation Army, starting from being a member of the Party. I fought and worked for different forums. I think I have helped to elevate the status of women as I worked as the Central Committee member of the umbrella organisation of women. It gained commendable importance during that time. We all worked hard for it. Likewise, the Maoist People's War has played various roles against caste discrimination. I myself am from the Magar community and served as the President of the National Magar Liberation Forum.

The Maoist People's War was a violent struggle but the aim was never to kill people. The Maoist Party and the People's War wanted peace; however, we did not want a negative peace, we wanted peace with rights and freedoms for people. We had to take up arms for the peace we wanted. We were very clear from the start of the Maoist People's War that we were not fighting a war for a position or status. Talking about myself, during the People's War and also after the peace agreement I always took the side of truth. I never compromised. Maybe that has helped me to create an environment, which enabled me to come to this point. We live in a patriarchal society, which works in various ways to dominate women.

I would like to appeal to everyone not to tolerate oppression but instead to rebel against such practices or convince others to do so. I cannot see an alternative to constant struggle to achieve our goals. We created opportunities from the People's War, and in the same way, there are opportunities around us and we need to identify and utilise them or else they will be taken by somebody else. I became a Member of Parliament three times, I was the Sports Minister, I was the Deputy Speaker of the House in the second Constituent Assembly and later I also got the opportunity to play a role as the Speaker of the House. I believe I turned my challenges into opportunities and worked hard for them.

There are more wars ahead that we need to fight. We drafted a constitution but the implementation still remains to be done. The form of the war might be different but we need to fight it with double the strength. If you look at the lives of both rural and urban women, we have many opportunities. We can be proud in the eyes of the world as we have a woman President and Speaker of the House. However, to have complete freedom and rights for women, there are many issues that need to be resolved.

Nepali women fought the People's War for ten years and participated in the People's Movement. We have stories from the past that go beyond the time of the war as well. Nepalese women have created capital for the women across the world. We were able to achieve recognition of women as human beings. We have achieved this success in exchange for blood, many women have become martyrs. I would like to remember my friends who have contributed by shedding their blood to achieve recognition for us as women, as people. We are enabling inclusiveness in many places, for example in the police and army. Women in the civil administration are able to compete through the quota for women. People who died during the war are not here to see or experience these achievements. They did it for the future generation. Due to their sacrifice, even I was able to become the Speaker of the House and many women at the local level have been able to take on leadership positions. A 33 per cent quota for women has been established in the constitution and now we can represent ourselves to the world as well. We have been able to create capital, in the form of identity, for women across the world. I would like to appeal to all the women in the world to study Nepal and own the capital we have.



My name is Hema, I am from *Kaligaun, Jajarkot* but I live in *Lalitpur* district these days and am engaged in pig farming. I was born in 1982. *Jajarkot* is a very underdeveloped district. It does not yet have any proper connecting roads; maybe that will happen soon. I was involved in the People's War from 1996, starting with the student union and later with the women's organisation. I was fourteen years old back then.

I did not understand much in the beginning. Later, in the student union in our school, we discussed our responsibility to fight against injustice and oppression. I learned about the importance of bringing a new system to our country. I could see many injustices in our village, including men's attitudes towards women and the attitudes of the rich towards the poor. Their behaviour was not acceptable to me. Maybe that was because I am from a poor family. The oppressors were village leaders and "*panchayat*"; we had to do whatever they told us to do. We had to provide them with "*bethi*", which means we had to go and work for them for free, for a day or two.



# HEMA

from NEPAL

*The leaders made pawns out of us! I want to ask them, if your motive was to seek power and money, why did you involve the common people in the war?*

My parents did not support me in joining the fight against oppression because I was studying and also because the police tortured us and took us to the jungle in handcuffs to beat us. The good people of the village would rescue me, saying that I was a good student and I should get a chance to study. When I returned home, the Maoists came and also beat me, saying that I gave information to the police. I was in a very difficult situation, tortured by both the police and the Maoists. I had to make a decision and choose a side. I chose to become a Maoist and so I became one.

My parents asked me to stay at home and continue my education at school but after discussing it with them, I was able to convince them. I was interested in going to school but many girls and women like me were oppressed. I thought about the liberation of those people and myself. I had to do something about it. I could become a teacher if I studied and got an education. But not everyone can be a teacher, so for the liberation of all women, I returned to the cause.

It is true that I used a gun and fought as a commander during the war. I was told that women couldn't fight in a war and be part of the assault and they should be part of other departments. "Assault" means the first group of people who fight with the police on the ground. I fought together with one of the leaders and I raised my voice so that I was part of the assault as well. There were difficult times; we had to walk through rivers and our feet got blisters because we walked for long hours in the water. We had to fight with the police. I saw my commander die in battle, and that was hard, but in the end, we won the war.

I also faced many hardships in my life personally. I was the only woman walking with ten men in the jungle. I didn't want to have all their eyes on me, so I decided to start a family and got married at the age of sixteen. I got married in 1998 and I found that I was pregnant soon afterwards. I had to manage things without the support of my husband and I was not sure how long the Party would support me morally and otherwise. I faced many ups and downs but I continuously fought for the rights of the country and the people, placing their needs above my own. I fought on, risking my life.

The biggest difficulty I faced was when I gave birth to my child. I did not get any rest, I had to go and fight the war. I never rested, not even for a day. I always had my gun by my side. I did not want to rest because I was not the only one facing such difficulties. During the birth of my child, a friend of mine and leader of the Party sent me to stay at a house in a village where I was treated worse than a stray dog. The people ate together inside their home and I had to eat alone outside. I slept in a very rough place outside the house and had to listen to them talking about how they faced problems because of me. I wanted to get out of that house but the Party had told me to stay there. When I went into labour, I had not eaten for two days. I had a dream that I was hungry, then I woke up suddenly and found that I really was hungry. I was scared to go inside and search for food, as it was not my home and they might think of me as a thief. There was a pile of mud kept outside for the maintenance of the house; I ate about three kilograms of mud that day. The house that I was staying in held a religious gathering. The whole village came and had a feast but they did not offer anything to me.



Later on, a doctor came. I asked him to drown me in the river because I felt it was better to die than live like that. The doctor helped me and my child was born but two hours after the birth, the police came and we had to run and hide in the jungle. All I had to eat was three spoons of curry once every three days. I could not tell anyone that I had just given birth to a baby. I could not tell them I was hungry. I had to live like the others in the jungle. I used to bleed a lot but there was no one to help me. My baby was four days old but we were constantly on the move because the police were chasing us. I used to cover my baby's face with a cloth. Finally, instead of letting my child die, I decided to leave my daughter with my elder sister. I then rejoined the army because I believed that I should contribute to the war and continue to fight for our cause. I fought as a woman commander after that. Three months after giving birth to my child, I fought in *Pachkatiya, Jajarkot*. I felt weak but I could not just stay behind feeling weak, I had too many responsibilities for that. A person's courage is the driver and the vehicle is our body. I summoned up my courage and pushed my body to its full potential back then.

Now, I look healthy on the outside, but I am weak on the inside. The doctors say that I need to control my negative thoughts and emotions and concentrate on the positive aspects. I have never seen happiness and prosperity in my life. Not in my family, not in the Party, not from my husband. I don't think I will get any happiness from my children either. The leaders made pawns out of us! I want to ask them, if your motive was to seek power and money, why did you involve the common people in the war? You should have fought for power and money from the start. You used us, as we were genuinely fighting for the rights of people and against injustice. You have let down the members of the Party. Where is the unity that we had when we were fighting in the jungle, when I left my child and fought for the cause? Have you thought about that? These people are in power now, they have the means to do many things, but they have done nothing. I did not fight to start a pig farm.

**RETURN AND POST-WAR LIFE**  
PEACE AGREEMENTS,  
REINTEGRATION, RECONCILIATION

*How did you leave the rebellion? Did you hear about the peace accord? Let us turn to the signing of the peace agreement, how was the economic stability of women? And how was the first day of the signing of it, how did you feel?*

MARIE



# RETURN AND POST-WAR LIFE PEACE AGREEMENTS, REINTEGRATION, RECONCILIATION

## FRANCINE | BURUNDI

We heard on the radio that the regime had agreed to mediation. When the war was over, they took us to camps and they taught us how to live together with ordinary citizens. I was very happy to hear that I was going to live with my family again.

## JEANETTE | BURUNDI

I left the rebellion because life was worse than it was before I joined. We just left without telling anyone. There were many others with us but some were caught and they were executed.



Bagmati



Leela



Nuroniha



Manju



Gita

### MARIE | BURUNDI

I went to the bathroom and ran away without informing anyone. They did not come looking for me. I was empty-handed. I went to the communal administrators alone to ask for forgiveness and reintegration into society as a civilian.

### GITA | NEPAL

I was the battalion commander of the army in *Salyan* when I heard the news about the peace agreement. We never wanted violence; we were happy to hear about the peace agreement as we sacrificed a lot during the war. We wanted the peace agreement to address the concerns of the injured and martyrs and wanted the agreement to liberate the people. We were happy.

### SARU | NEPAL

When we heard about the peace process, we were in the barracks. At the time, we felt very surprised about it as we thought we were in the middle of something without having achieved any of our goals. We thought: how can we settle things in a peace process when more than 17,000 people lost their lives for the cause? I was really worried at that time because I thought our party was no different from the others, that it would not bring real change. We had promised our people that we would definitely meet our mandate, but I do not feel that we have been able to bring the envisioned and aspired change. I opted for voluntary retirement at that time. All the ranks had different types of settlement and as platoon commanders, we received 500,000 rupees after the government and the UN decided on it. I used the money to start my business but I felt I could not leave my Party. I was involved in it for more than 10 years. I thought that I had fought for a cause and after the settlement, I was worried that I might again be restricted to household work. I had a garment shop but I felt that I had again been limited in terms of my rights and activities in a place where we fought for freedom. So I sold my shop, got a loan, bought some land and built a house.



**RETURN AND POST-WAR LIFE**  
FAMILY, WORK, LOVE, COMMUNITY,  
RETURN

*So when the peace agreement was signed, how did you go through the transition from the movement into community life? Were there obstacles or opportunities for you?*



# RETURN AND POST-WAR LIFE FAMILY, WORK, LOVE, COMMUNITY, RETURN



Jacqueline

## **JACQUELINE** | Burundi

When I came back from the rebellion, some neighbours were afraid of me because they considered me a criminal. I thought about going back to the rebels because of that.

## **FABIOLA** | BURUNDI

I can say that it was not easy to arrive back home and to be reunited with my family. Some of them were afraid of me but I felt I could approach them and although I was not talkative, I became familiar to them again.

## **ANNICK** | BURUNDI

You know, there is always gossip. They talked about me but after a while, they kept silent. It hurt me but I told myself that things would be good. At home, we lived in peace.



## ANGE | BURUNDI

My family welcomed me when I came back home because they came to pick me up from where we were staying. In the beginning, it was not easy because there were people crying from seeing their long-lost family members. They saw how thin and tanned I was, covered with scars from injuries. Gradually, as time passed, we found we couldn't stop smiling. I had received a small amount of money from demobilisation, so I asked my parents and my close friends about setting up a business. They helped me decide which business I should choose. I set to work and now I am living peacefully.



## RAMATAN | ACEH

During the conflict, I worked in humanitarian aid, providing assistance for women and children. Now I am employed in this field, handling cases of women and children. I have been working at P2TP2A – Integrated Service Center for Addressing Violence Against Women and Children – under the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Children Protection. So it's not far off. I am very happy in my work today. Our mission is humanitarian, helping the community every day and advocating for victims of human rights violations. After the peace agreement, we were able to go out of town. There were no more obstacles on the road, no extortion – people were able to find ways to build a better economy. The military will not arrest you when you go to the sea or the forest; you are free. Thank God for this peace process. We hope Aceh will always be peaceful.



# RETURN AND POST-WAR LIFE TRAUMA, HEALTH

*Did you suffer from  
consequences of having  
participated in the  
armed groups?*

ANNICK



# RETURN AND POST-WAR LIFE TRAUMA, HEALTH



## **MUTIA | ACEH**

In my experience, after the signing of the peace agreement we immediately began to reintegrate into the community. We had lived in conflict for decades and still had a mindset of war and suddenly we had this peace agreement. I myself have never had any trauma counselling, so my personal experience was that the trauma was not healed, it just flowed with the current. There was no special effort to set up a body for the *in-ong balee* in particular. When we are on the roads and we see the TNI crowd, we still have this fear. It means we still have not fully recovered psychologically.

## **CHANCE | BURUNDI**

We went through many things; being raped, being beaten as slaves, carrying 50 kilos of weight when we were sixteen years old.

## **FRANCINE | BURUNDI**

I had heart failure due to the fear I used to have from conflict. I also suffered from stomach ache because we rarely got anything to eat.

# REFLECTIONS

*Remembering your experience in the group and the war, you joined to end discrimination and inequality. Looking back now, do you think you have been successful in achieving these goals? How do you feel now? Did you have difficulty when transforming from being a combatant of struggle to being an advocate for peace?*

## **GINA | MINDANAO**

When my husband was still alive, he told me: “If no one in my family will follow my footsteps, they will never have a happy life!” It was some sort of curse. “If I die in the struggle, it is your duty to continue.” And even without him, I was also a revolutionary long before I married him; I was already a member of MNLF. But my role changed from being a medic to being a wife when I married him. We lived the life of revolutionaries so our lives were never normal. And although my children went to school, in one way or another they participated in the struggle. Now, looking back, I almost have guilt in my heart. It was a good thing that no one from my family was arrested, because if they had been, I would have carried the guilt forever.

# RETURN AND POST-WAR LIFE REFLECTIONS



Patience



Rekha

## HERMIE | MINDANAO

You know, I am not a brave woman but when it comes to my rights, I will fight for them until death. As long as there is struggle, I am still here. It's always in my heart to help any time. Although I'm still fighting, as a mother to my children, I won. But the struggle is not over yet. I want to see what freedom really is. I hope for peace and abundance in life for everyone. I want my children to continue what I have started.

## JAYAPURI | NEPAL

Compared to the past, the situation has definitely got better. One of the major changes is the development of political consciousness. Also, the system of governance in Nepal changed and today we are a Federal Democratic Republic. We have adopted the federal system with three layers of government – centre, province and local. In terms of equality, we have progressed a lot as well. Nepal's constitution guarantees women at least 33 per cent of seats in Parliament. I am working in a senior position in the Party, I am a Member of the Parliament and I was also a directly elected Member of the Parliament in the last Constituent Assembly. I was a minister once as well: the issue of 33 per cent of female inclusion was at stake and I rebelled against the system and became the minister for thirteen days. Many rights have been achieved but we still cannot say that we have full rights as of now.

## LILA | NEPAL

During the People's War, women's engagement was around 40 per cent. Now, more than 25 per cent of them are living their lives as housewives. If women are able to convince their families and especially their husbands that another way is possible, then they can definitely lead in society. There is a lack of confidence and capability among women because they are not able to convince society of this. Leadership does not only have to be political; it can be in any sector, in any organisation and in different walks of life. I think women should come out of the kitchen.

## REKHA | NEPAL

My aim is to bring about an agricultural revolution in Nepal. I am still engaged in agriculture. I have been raising the daughters of the martyrs from my income from agriculture. Speaking from the heart, I feel deep pain inside me. If I had known that the Party would be where it is today, I would never have engaged in politics. There are many other stranded commanders, not just me. Everyone has suffered a lot. However, I am proud of one thing: if there was no Maoist Party and if we had not started the People's War, there would be no empowered women like us today in places like *Rolpa*.



## AIDA | MINDANAO

All that I ask for women like me is that their rights are given to them. We should be true to ourselves. Let's not set aside the rights of women, as women are the hope of men.

## ANNICK | BURUNDI

I told myself I could change my way of thinking and my reactions. All the awful thoughts must be changed. I have to work with my own hands without causing any harm to anybody.

## GINA | MINDANAO

It was not really difficult to transform from being a combatant in the struggle to being an advocate for peace. It should be noted that we were university students, preparing for our careers. This was cut short during the struggle and now it's like going back again, with more experience, of course. Sometimes bitter life experiences make us better women, stronger women. Tragedy makes women stronger in life.



I am Hadja Giobay S. Diocolano, the Executive Director of Kadtabanga Foundation for Peace and Development Advocate Inc and the State Chairperson of Western Kutawato State Revolutionary Committee. I was born in *Margues, Datu Odin Sinsuat*, I spent my childhood in this place but I started my schooling at *Mirab, Upi*, in *Maguindanao*. Since my parents were strong supporters of the movement, they decided to permanently stay in *Upi* in order to be close to its members. During the struggle, I can say, our family was an average or middle-class family. We are also one of the well-known clans in the province of *Maguindanao*.

I joined the Moro National Liberation Front at the age of thirteen. I joined the movement because I witnessed how Moros have been oppressed and deprived of almost all forms of human rights by the military. Looking back, I remember hearing these questions from men in uniform the moment they entered the house of a Moro family: “Auntie, do you have any chickens here?” and if a Moro woman answered them with a no, their next question was, “Do you have a daughter, a young and single one?”





# GIQBAY

from MINDANAO

*We should understand that as women, we have the right to take part in every area of society. Our voices should be heard.*

Women at that time did not have the right to fight for what they are, to protect themselves from violence and oppression. So as young as thirteen, I insisted on doing my part although I knew because of my age, I couldn't become an official member of the revolutionary movement.

Before I officially became a member of the Moro National Liberation Front, we underwent military training for a month. It was extreme training for combatants: we went jogging, climbed ropes and were taught how to carry and assemble guns and ammunitions. We also learned military tactics. Right after I became an official member, I was assigned to work in the auxiliary forces of the movement. Eventually, I became one of the trainers of the new sets of military women and finally, I joined the medical team. The movement had faced extreme turmoil due to the huge number of casualties among the *Mujahideen* in clashes with government forces. During the war, wounded Moros were not safe in the hospitals because the government forces would come and find them. I organised the women in every community and municipality until I became the Municipal Vice Chairwoman of the Bangsamoro Women's Auxiliary.

This offered women an opportunity to take part in extending assistance to the movement, which was truly an overwhelming achievement.

Being part of the auxiliary forces was one of the hardest tests for me as a woman during the struggle. We went from *Cotabato City* by boat to escape the military checkpoints. Along the way, we were expecting trouble from the military since they had very good intel about our movements. Suddenly, just before reaching the harbour, we heard gunshots, and with that, our boat started sinking. We stayed under water for hours and hours, waiting until the military operation finally ended. Really, I thought it would be my last day on earth. If I were to tell you how hard it was, I would say, I felt as if I was drowning and I found it almost impossible to breathe at all. Thank God, we survived. We stayed in *Lanao* for many years. I often thought of my family, how my mom was getting sick and old as the days went by. My father became blind due to an accident but I wasn't with them to take care of them because my brother and I were in the middle of the struggle.

The most important days of my life have coincided with very important dates in history. The death of my mother happened on the anniversary of the founding of the MNLF. I gave birth to my eldest son one day before this anniversary and my youngest arrived on the day of the signing of the peace agreement. This timing has given me more reasons not to give up my loyalty to the movement.

During the signing of the peace agreement, we worked out things in a very rough ways just to win independence but only autonomy was given to us. But the women never stopped fighting with their pens and minds. The rest of the team and I worked hard to create the Kadtabanga Foundation. There were fifteen members and I was the only girl who took the risk. Creating and maintaining a humanitarian organisation is never that easy. Luckily, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) offered us a variety of skills-building events. UNDP taught us techniques and strategies along the way that enabled us to learn things that were very helpful for our chosen journey. The Foundation has turned many post-conflict areas in *Maguindanao* into Peace and Development Communities.

Reaching out to them is some of our best work. One of the most notable achievements is the transformation of what was previously a known ambush site into a Peace and Development Community. Our current programme focuses on youth. We look forward to our kids following our footsteps as peace champions. We focus on them to help eradicate the mindset of war and combat, especially now that ISIS recruitment is rife in our area.

I won the UNDP N-Peace Award in 2017. This stage of my life really drove me more to become active in helping and preserving the gains of peace and development for my community. I consider all this an overwhelming success. Hearing compliments and words of support from my fellow Bangsamoro is truly worth more than any award.

A final word to women. I encourage you to continue helping other women in Bangsamoro. One of the major concerns of our organisation is to push the idea of educating women to help them become fully aware of their rights. We should understand that as women, we have the right to take part in every area of society. Our voices should be heard.



I was born in *Bujumbura City*. I grew up in *Bwiza* and *Jabe* but now I live in *Cibitoke*. Before I joined the armed group, we lived with my mother because my father had already died but I cannot say that we lived a bad life because of that.

My boyfriend was in the armed groups. The government security forces often came to my home because they thought I would know where he was. I wanted to flee the country but later I decided to go with my boyfriend. He came in the night with his friend, both disguised. I only found out that it was him afterwards. My family found out that I was in the forest after three weeks. My mother knew about the security risk of staying with them and I had already told her that I would disappear one day. But she thought I would flee the country and not join the armed groups.



# CHRISTELLA

from BURUNDI

*A woman is peace, a woman is love. Our place is not in the forest: our place is developing our country.*

At first, it was very difficult because I went there as a refugee, thinking that things would rapidly come to an end and I could go back home. I was astonished when they put me in military training. They taught us what our main goals were. They would also talk about how they would bring peace to the country – and we would believe them. When I finished the training, they put me in the group that was protecting the stock of weapons.

We would go for two or three days without food. Bombs were dropped all the time without any breaks. We had no time to think about food because all we could think about was whether we would escape the bombs this time. I was afraid and I wanted my boyfriend to hold my hand all the time. He comforted me and was always with me until I felt I could stay there and face any situation. No one mistreated me because he was there. They feared him and if he went to the battlefield, his close friend took care of me in his absence. I was also astonished to see that I stayed strong in those conditions.

We were one group in the beginning but as we were growing increasingly and losing so many of our people in battle, the group started to divide. It was around that time that my boyfriend died. His friend was still alive but I started to think of abandoning the movement. I was like someone who has lost their mind because I lost my boyfriend. Every time we went into battle, I looked for ways to escape and desert so that they would think I was killed in the battle. Finally, I fled during a battle and went into hiding. If you were unlucky and they caught you deserting, they would automatically kill you.

I managed to stay hidden. I tried to find somewhere to stay for a while. I spent around a year in hiding because I could not show myself to my family. After I surrendered to government soldiers, they tortured me. I finally talked because of the pain but I didn't tell them much: if I told them everything, my group in the forest would know that someone had revealed their secrets and come to find whoever had betrayed them. I don't know where I was being held. You could see some traces of human blood on the floor and I asked myself if I was going to be killed in the same place. I spent two months there being mistreated until I revealed who I was and where I had been. At home, my family finally found out that I was a prisoner and they pleaded for me and I was released soon afterwards. When I came back, everyone was very happy because it was as if I had been resurrected from the dead but my mother kept doubting and wondering if I would be caught again. My neighbours would point at me, saying that I was a danger to society but after some time, we reconciled and got used to each other again. My friends did not know where I came from because I told them that I had been abroad for a job and had failed to make money. That was to protect myself from them spreading gossip.

I would spend the whole night without sleeping because every time I closed my eyes I relived what had happened to me. I was very afraid, to the point that I would become crazy. My mother saw what kind of problem I had and she came and slept next to me. I wanted to be like the others because when you have been with these groups, people do not consider you are a normal person. They always think the worst about you, as if you had been born with a gun in your hand.

What advice do I have for others? Firstly, I have to speak about what happened to me because if you don't speak, it is difficult to get over the remorse. Secondly, people have to know the truth because if they do not know, they will make the wrong decisions. I tell them to keep away from the things that can stimulate or push them into armed groups. There is nothing good coming from those groups except being killed and killing the innocents. Frankly speaking, there is no life in war. I saw that we had been tricked: they said that we had to save the country but instead we killed so many people.

For women who are returning from the war, I would tell them that women's place is not in the forest. Before they decide to leave their families, they have to make sure that things are as they should be. Life is not made of good things only. What happened to us should be a lesson to others. War is not a simple game for children. You can be raped, killed, kept as a slave, mistreated and tortured. You don't just learn how to shoot or build bombs – you have to be transformed into behaving in an inhuman way. Women were born to love and spread peace. A woman is peace, a woman is love. Our place is not in the forest: our place is developing our country.

## ADVICE AND LOOKING AHEAD

*What are your future plans? What can you tell women who also participated in armed groups like you? What is your message to your comrades, especially women who were directly involved in the conflict and to the government or NGOs who would be willing to help improve the capacity of these women?*





## **SARU | NEPAL**

Firstly, for women to have leadership capabilities, there should be a very enabling environment at home. The husband should also be really supportive. Many male members of our party who were engaged in the People's War are now showing hypocritical behaviour as they are comfortable curbing the freedom of female family members. Especially after the peace process, many women party members were confined to their homes because of their male counterparts. I believe that the support system should develop at home with our husband and family and then involve society and the leaders. Only then can we think about the development of women's leadership. My husband is really supportive and helps me to actively participate in programmes. He also helps at home with household chores and with the kids.

## **LEHA | ACEH**

My advice would be that there would have to be assistance with activities, training for women and education. Many women do not have the opportunity to go to school so they lack education. Let's increase skills through training with the aim of changing the economy of women at home. Let's share knowledge and provide education, socialisation and seminars on what we have achieved as a reference for the future to those who are in power.

## **JONITHA | BURUNDI**

People should know that there is nothing good about war. They should stop thinking about the war and focus on their own development, especially through self-help groups where they can get a loan and start their own businesses.

## **RAMATAN | ACEH**

I see that some former combatants are now going back to school or college and I really respect that. They want to become skilled in public speaking or gain other expertise. Although the government does not give

these combatants any attention or show any concern, these women want to change their lives. There is genuine willingness on the part of the women themselves, which is a positive sign. I do have hope for the government. The survivors of this conflict still have a long way to go towards recovery. Whilst the tsunami survivors have recovered and had trauma healing and even housing assistance, there is no assistance for conflict survivors today, and even if there is, it is not distributed evenly. I think the government should embrace conflict survivors, combatants, everyone.

#### **BAGMATI | NEPAL**

Of course, women are able to compete with men. We can compete with our thoughts and ideas and if women take heart, we can do everything. We have that courage and have demonstrated it in the past as well. We believe in ourselves. Ordinary women have to unite and work together for our shared cause. I am 60 years old now, and I am still working to unite women and fight for our rights.

#### **PATIENCE | BURUNDI**

I ask the women who were with me in the war to come and be together in associations for development. As for the women who did not go to war, they should not think about the war because it is a very bad thing.

#### **MUTIA | ACEH**

Stories about the hardships experienced by women do not represent women's political struggles today. Some *inong balee* women are in Parliament but most of them are not. These women only accept *inong balee* because they need their vote, then they pretend to defend the rights of *inong balee*. It was a promise during the campaign period but after being elected, they were quite dismissive of the *inong balee*. An independent economy could improve welfare. We could directly link the donor and the *inong balee* themselves without intermediaries, from. What is the form of [economic livelihood] the *inong balee* [want], only the donor agency that monitors it, and no need to use intermediaries anymore because we are concerned, if we use intermediaries, the assistance would not be effectively allocated to the *inong balee*.

#### **NURLIELAH | MINDANAO**

By sharing our stories with you, I hope you understand how much we invested our time and life for this legacy. We had meals without rice; most of the time, we only had bananas or potatoes to stave off hunger. The only thing that made us believe we were still alive was that we knew we had to eat to survive. Although we don't yet have full independence, we truly feel the positive changes since the peace agreement. Our young generation

must understand that what we achieved should be sustained and nourished as time passes. Always bear in mind that the sovereignty you are enjoying right now is the fruit of our struggle. The greatest reward we get from the struggle is seeing every Bangsamoro family enjoying the benefit of living peacefully and harmoniously. Today, I see students well-dressed and with smiles on their faces.

## **MANJU | NEPAL**

Talking about my own experience, as we see everywhere in the world, women are treated as second-class citizens. The change we wanted was not fulfilled. Even women leaders are guided by the principle that we are just the wives of our husbands. To bring about change in the prevailing practices, I believe that we need to build our capacity. Firstly, I think we need to be educated, which does not mean that we need to get a bourgeois education and get a degree. Many women who were part of our revolution have a degree but their awareness of the need to adopt the required changes in society is minimal. Women who want to be in a leadership position, either in the Communist Party or in the Congress, have to be someone's 'special person', someone's wife or be related to a man. We are not able to see our true identity.

## **SARIFA | MINDANAO**

To all my Bangsamoro brothers and sisters, my only request is that you continue the struggle and seek the way to lasting peace without causing conflict and war. Another thing is the continuous empowerment of our women in society, so that we prove our worth as Bangsamoro. Women should understand that our role doesn't end inside the house; let's continue the projects for the development of women and focus on implementing the projects for the benefit of all the people in our community.

## **BAI | MINDANAO**

Shifting is done gradually; you cannot easily shift from struggle to the moment after the peace process. However, after the peace process, life is very sweet. We could not just continue going to war forever, losing lives. It is very difficult, so difficult, to lose lives. So the best thing is to move forward. Keep moving towards the positive. We will have a peaceful environment. When you have a peaceful environment, you can help so many people. By doing so, you can encourage them to work. You can count on them to get involved in projects provided by our government. If they choose not to, at the very least you can do so on their behalf.

## **TRIPANI | NEPAL**

If there is one thing I learned from the insurgency, it is that the person who struggles can live their life. This always gives me inspiration. We have faced a lot of pain and sorrow in the past. In my village, people call me for social and political discussions. So I am happy. I don't believe that life has to go the way we want or believe. In my opinion, what has happened in politics was whatever was supposed to happen. I don't think it happened because they cheated us; maybe they too are at the mercy of events. Family life is

like that as well. I think we should compromise as time goes on. I am separated but still happy because I am independent. I am able to make my own decisions and I am happy about that.

## **CONSTANCE | Burundi**

Now, in my role as a counsellor in the *Gisyo* area, I advise other women who were combatants like me that peace is something we should protect together. They have to be peacekeepers every time. They have to respect and love each other. There are only three or four indigenous people in this neighbourhood who survived the war. The others died in the war. They should stop fighting because today, we are all the same. We are not Hutu or Tutsi. We are all the same.

## **RAMATAN | ACEH**

Conflict survivors have not yet recovered psychologically. It is the government's duty to arrange this, just like there has been psychological help for the tsunami survivors. Combatants have to ask the government, GAM leaders or anyone else they think can bring change and demand the attention they deserve. Many combatants who used to take part in the GAM training have a low education level. Some of them never progressed beyond junior high school, high school or elementary school.

It's up to the government to provide new, equivalent schooling opportunities for them. This is the government's contribution to combatants. Likewise, for relatives of conflict survivors who may be orphans today, they should be supported with scholarships. Families of conflict survivors should be given opportunities to continue their studies, from elementary school up to college. I think it is especially challenging for women once peace has been restored: they usually have no option but to return home to their community and go back to taking care of the family, looking after their husbands, cooking and cleaning. In fact, they also need to be empowered because we see a lot of potential in them.

## **NURLIELAH | MINDANAO**

To my fellow Bangsamoro, male and female, we should help each other in preserving and developing our religion, our home and our people. It's time to unite for once. Let's set aside the past and all that happened that caused pain to one another; we should be working together now! As for all our young people, I encourage your parents to train you in decision-making as you are the next generation that will continue this legacy. The government should focus on the welfare of the young ones, especially those belonging to the urban poor. I also appeal for the rights of every one of my fellow revolutionaries who is disabled and those Bangsamoro, women and men, who are veterans. There are many widows and widowers, and there are orphans who lost loved ones during the war. The government should never forget their contribution and they should be the priority for programmes and grants. At least this way, we could say that we are never forgotten.

## JAYAPURI | NEPAL

I consider myself successful in revolution, struggle and change. I had to go through many struggles in life for this success, it was not easy. If we develop self-confidence within ourselves, we can face the difficulties along the way. In Nepal and in many other countries where there were revolutions, women played a great role. All the women who have been engaged in revolution should adopt this spirit. I said earlier as well that if we can, we should secure a good position in politics, play an important role in our society and country. If not, we have to be positive and support ourselves and never let go of our

self-confidence. In Nepal, we had a historic People's War and People's Movement, and because of that Nepal has seen a change in terms of politics, social change and changes in every way. We should take these changes as our achievements and be proud of them. I would like to appeal to everyone to be active in politics and lead positive lives and be progressive because we have brought about a different context, and unless we do that, we will face nothing but loss. I think we should develop a positive mentality and understanding of ourselves and take society forward in a positive direction.

*“Thank you very much for the time we spent together in this interview. You have an amazing story. Hopefully, this can provide a lesson for our friends in other countries who are still in conflict so they can learn from your determination, enthusiasm and struggle. My hope is also, like you, that there will be no more conflict. I wish you a prosperous life.”*

# TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (Philippines)
CEDAC	<i>Centre d'Encadrement et de Développement des Anciens Combattants</i> , Centre for Training and Development of Ex-Combatants (Burundi)
CNDD-FDD	<i>Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie–Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie</i> , National Council for the Defense of Democracy–Forces for the Defense of Democracy (Burundi)
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
FNL	<i>Forces Nationales de Libération</i> , The National Forces of Liberation (Burundi)
GAM	<i>Gerakan Aceh Merdeka</i> , Free Aceh Movement
GIZ	<i>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH</i> , German Development Agency
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front (Philippines)
MP	Member of Parliament
PALIPEHUTU	<i>Parti pour la Libération du Peuple Hutu</i> , Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People (Burundi)
PLA	People's Liberation Army (Nepal)
TNI	<i>Tentara Nasional Indonesia</i> , Indonesian National Armed Forces
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
Bangsamoro	Refers to BARMM and the Moro people, several Muslim peoples of Mindanao, Palawan, the Sulu Archipelago and other Southern islands of the Philippines
Bethi	Forced labour in Nepal
Cut Nyak Dien	Acehnese female national hero (1848-1908), Aceh's most famous woman fighter who physically led the guerrilla war, particularly after her husband died against the Dutch, often mentioned by GAM and Acehnese to characterize Acehnese women as courageous and fighters
Inong Balee	Translated from Acehnese 'Women Widows', all women's battalion in GAM
Panchayat	Political System in Nepal from 1960 to 1990, giving the monarch autocratic control over multi-tiered system of local bodies or councils



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