

LET OUR LIFE BE OUR MESSAGE

The war in Mindanao is more than four decades old. The human cost is enormous: 120,000 people dead for the duration of the conflict; economic loss of 20 billion pesos on a daily basis; 982,000 people displaced from the all out war in 2000 alone. The armed conflict has also led to the disruption of children's schooling; trauma, insecurity and fear; the loss of livelihood or economic dislocation; and multiple burdens for women, among others. Women bear the pain and the brunt of keeping a family when men in the family are in the battlefield or have died in armed conflict. Women suffer from lack of facilities such as health and sanitation facilities when in evacuation centers. Women have also reportedly suffered from sexual harassment. An account from Kalinaw Mindanao, for example, told of armed men who had raped and sexually violated women, "groped their breasts while allegedly searching for grenades". Women and their communities are normally reluctant to report rape and other cases of sex and gender-based violence (SGBV) out of fear and "because it was taboo to 'dishonour' the family."

Hence, war in Mindanao and everywhere else must be put to an end.

This is the reason why we, at the Center for Peace Education-Miriam College and Pax Christi Pilipinas, have ardently supported the peace process in Mindanao. The peace process is a nonviolent approach to ending the war that has caused misery to many.

What are the strengths of this nonviolent approach? One, it has allowed the participation of many to collaboratively look at the prospects of ending a war- the negotiating parties, the civil society, the academe, the religious leaders, people in the community directly affected by armed conflict and the international community, among others. The CPE, for example, led many consultations among women in the conflict-affected communities; asked them of what they wanted to see in the Bangsamoro Basic Law meant to establish the political entity and structure of government of the Bangsamoro people. These perspectives we submitted to those in charge of drafting and adopting the law. Hence, this peace process has given that space for those in the margins to be heard. Additionally, this nonviolent conflict resolution approach is both an ethical and a practical choice. The ceasefire that is in effect gave the people a chance to experience a situation of "no

war,” a respite from the running and hiding caused by air strikes when armed conflict was still raging.

This peace process has given a space to the majority of the Filipinos to know who the Bangsamoro people are- a people whose narrative is almost absent from Philippine history textbooks. The peace process has presented to us an opportunity to transform mindsets replete with stereotypes, and attitudes that are intolerant. It has given hope to many that soon, they will be leading a life of normalcy and stability. For the women we spoke with, this process has given them the hope that doors will open for them to meaningfully participate in the public space particularly in political affairs. It gave them a chance to dream. “Our children will soon be able to go to school uninterrupted. “We will soon have gainful employment and have the ability to provide for the needs of the family” ”The episode of running for our lives will now come to an end”. The peace process has also paved the way to the birth of bustling socio-economic activities and the development of infrastructure in this region which is the poorest in the country. Most importantly, it presents the opportunity to correct a historical injustice committed against the Bangsamoro people. Correcting such injustice can help pave the way for healing and reconciliation.

As a Catholic community, there is a need to highlight that our faith tradition has always motivated us to embrace nonviolence as a pathway to peace. We can invest our energy in interfaith education, in supporting and accompanying peace processes around the world, in efforts to challenge deeply-held biases against minorities, and in building bridges of friendship and understanding amongst people of differing faiths and cultures. To move towards a wider practice, we can all help popularize the Catholic social teachings related to peace and nonviolence. We can continue to organize and join nonviolent initiatives and campaigns in spaces where we are. We can write and publish stories or make video documentation of nonviolence experienced by our members worldwide. Most importantly, as members of the Pax Christi community, we must bring to light that nonviolence is not only a political tool for change but a philosophy to be lived. It is when we live it that we can convince others that there is no other way to peace but peace. As Gandhi had put it, let our life be our message.

-Jasmin Nario-Galace, Pax Christi-Pilipinas

