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Women, Peace and (Human) Security Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: Women's Agency in Empowering Other Women

Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza, Ph.D.

Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

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Women, Peace and (Human) Security Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Women's Agency in Empowering Other Women

Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza*

Abstract

This study identifies the patterns of women's empowerment experiences amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws from the insights of civil society groups working with women from different sectors of Philippine society --- Women Engage in Action on UNSCR 1325 (women in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao), Gaston Z Ortigas Peace Institute (women in peacebuilding), Sulong CARHRIHL/Peace (indigenous women) ---- on how peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance is possible despite the crisis. From this backdrop, it seeks to unravel the salience of networking as an operationalization of women's empowerment, particularly, in advancing Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in the country.

Key words: empowerment; women, peace and security; networking

* Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza, Ateneo de Manila University (mrallonza@ateneo.edu)

1. Introduction

Year 2020 saw COVID-19 sweep throughout the globe, leaving no country unaffected, no population left unscathed. Day in and day out more and more COVID-19 cases --- active ones, deaths, and recoveries. The global pandemic has become a human security issue in itself. Year 2020 was also the 20th year commemoration of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325) marking two decades of the women, peace and security (WPS) global agenda advancing the salience of women and women's human rights in international peace and security. When linked to human security,

...in calling for human security that is people-centric and a gendered lens, the resolution and the agenda that has developed does convey the paradigm shift needed in understanding and tackling contemporary global peace and security issues. The issues that are so often called for by the WPS community are profoundly relevant to this pandemic too (Anderlini 2020),

this essentially means that the global crisis has placed us in a situation of emergency --- where the pandemic intersects with other disaster situations, including that of armed conflict. As such, WPS converges with human security in a way that operationalizes the gender analysis of crisis situations and the actors involved therewith, monitors the continuing conflicts amidst the pandemic, and identifies who participates in critical decision making (Anderlini 2020).

WPS being overtaken by Pandemic

WPS, as a global agenda, advocates women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, for the protection of their human rights, and for the prevention of violence against them. It was a pioneering resolution emanating from the UN Security Council (UNSC) that finally recognized the differential impact of armed conflict on women and was thus a matter for international peace and security.

Encompassing the rights of women and girls in all stages of conflict, the breadth of the WPS agenda allows for tremendous scope in its inflection points. The agenda covers human rights violations, gender-specific humanitarian concerns, prevention of conflict, protection and assistance during conflict, accountability for crimes committed during war, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction. (Taylor 2019, 67)

Discursively, it has two trajectories: (1) agency and participation; and (2) vulnerability and victimization. The former is the focus of UNSCRs 1325 (2000), 1889 (2009), 2122 (2013), and 2493 (2019) while the latter is the main idea of UNSCRs 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2242 (2015), and 2467 (2019). In practice, more attention has been given to women's vulnerability rather than women as change agents (O'Reilly 2019, 195). And of these Resolutions, only 2242 (2015) mentions the "global nature of pandemics" as relevant to the "changing context of peace and security" and in this regard, "warrants increased attention as part of WPS, and thereby a critical aspect of COVID-19 responses" (Swaine 2020, 3).

In a study by the Gender Institute for Women, Peace and Security and the PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security, an area of inquiry was that of what the "status of women reveals about a nation's pandemic preparedness and response." They found that States "that are more willing and able to boost the status of women --- as reflected in WPS Index scores --- may be more likely to care about disadvantaged groups and inequality, and therefore more likely to invest in policies and institutions that better prepare for an epidemic outbreak;" at the same time, "countries most at risk of an epidemic-related humanitarian crisis that would overwhelm national response capacity are those where the status and well-being of women is weak" (Dahl, Klugman, and Zou 2020, 8).

Related to WPS, one of the things that affected this agenda has been that of the efforts at peacebuilding and participation in peace processes. As claimed by Rahmaty and Jaghab (2020, 2),

The logistics challenges posed by the pandemic have exacerbated (this) exclusion. The emergency response strategies of some states are also threatening to the work of individuals and organizations advocating for women's rights.

Pandemic peacebuilding, though a challenge, should continue to be advanced in the context of responses to the pandemic. As recommended by Rahmaty and Jagrab (2020, 1), WPS should focus on the following to off-set the obstacles in pushing for it during the pandemic: “(1) state leadership on WPS in multilateral fora; (2) women's participation in formal peace processes; (3) protection and security of women peacebuilders; (4) financing for women peacebuilders; and (5) ensuring data driven responses.” These recommendations are partial to women's agency over vulnerability and victimization.

As mentioned, the year 2020 was the 20th year of UNSCR 1325 that ushered in the global agenda of WPS. According to Rahmaty and Jaghab (2020, 1), what could have been an opportunity to take stock of two decades of WPS was instead “upended by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dominated the international community's attention and put the recent gains to WPS at risk.” In the same light, Yayboke and Abdullah (2020, 2) claim that COVID-19 possibly side swiped gains in gender equality and women's human rights as other humanitarian emergencies have shown. Crisis situations tend to unravel socio-economic inequalities as well as imbalances in power relations. For example, during the Ebola virus epidemic in Liberia, women who make up most of those selling in marketplaces were forced to close down, thus affecting their livelihood and economic security (UN Women 2020a). In the case of Nigeria, fifty five percent (55%) of Ebola cases were women largely because of their care giving roles in society (Fawole et al. 2016). The

Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone also saw a 75% increase in maternal mortality (Davies and Bennett 2016). In all these cases, women have been affected because of their occupational and social roles in society. As related to COVID-19, the threat of back-sliding on gender equality and women's human rights is more real for "264 million women and girls who live in conflict and fragile settings, where pre-existing gender inequalities and patriarchal social norms are being exacerbated, and women are further sidelined from all areas of decision-making" (Yayboke and Abdullah 2020, 2).

According to UN Women, the first 100 days of COVID-19 in the Asia Pacific Region has already shown that the patterns of gender inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic (UN Women 2020b, 6). These are:

- Most healthcare workers are women, and they are at the forefront of the pandemic health response;
- Loss of jobs and income of women domestic and migrant workers in the manufacturing sector (especially in textile and garments), and in hospitality and tourism, and those in informal work such as the self-employed, domestic workers, and daily wage earners;
- Violence against women, such as domestic violence as the shadow pandemic.

2. Gender Dynamics of COVID 19 in the Philippines

Just like in other countries, many Filipino women who have suffered domestic abuse have been trapped in their own homes, with their abusers. Data from government offices vary. On the one hand, information from the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) showed an increase in inquiries on violence against women (VAW) received from email, phone-in and social media accounts during the beginning of community quarantine in March 2020, compared to those of January to March 2019. On the other, data from the Philippine National Police (PNP) showed a decrease in reported gender-based violence from March to October 2020. For the PCW (2020),

... this may not be the reality on the ground. The decrease in reported cases may be attributed to the restricted movement in the communities, suspension of public transportation, victims being locked down with their perpetrators, lack of communication channels, and lack of information on where/how to report.

As noted by UN Women, for the entire Asia Pacific Region there were also women who lost their jobs as workplaces closed down. Women in the informal economy also had to close their small businesses since they no longer had clients. Thus, the economic insecurity of women was exacerbated primarily because of pre-existing social and gender inequalities. Furthermore, unpaid care work also deepened women multiple burdens at home (UN Women 2020a).

News of sexual harassment, 'sex-for-pass,' and even rape by state security forces surfaced. There was even a rape case where the victim who sought police protection was gunned down by the alleged perpetrators. Indeed, the pandemic affected women and men differently --- with the former being more vulnerable than the latter. Needless to say, ever since the current government took office, misogyny and gender stereotyping has been institutionalized with no less a person than the President of the country himself hurling insults at female leaders, among others.

The pandemic added to difficulties in conflict affected/vulnerable areas. As it exacerbated social inequalities, it also had the potential to deepen pre-existing social cleavages. Discrimination and stigmatizing of those affected by COVID-19 likewise had a tendency to materialize into hate speeches. While in the case of internally displaced peoples (IDPs), most of whom are women and children, the delivery of supplies and services became more difficult. This had previously been the case with State force against terrorists such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the clan wars that have been active in the Bangsamoro region, displacing many communities and endangering many others. Quite interestingly, despite the numerous laws and

policies in protecting women's human rights in the Philippines, the State seemed to be reneging on its duty to protect women and girls as vulnerable group in this crisis.

As with many countries, the Philippines was supposedly caught flat-footed when the COVID-19 pandemic hit home. Not heeding early warnings of a humanitarian/health disaster, the Philippine response was militarized when it finally did. To contain the virus, the government instituted one of the more rigid and longest lockdowns in pandemic response history. The language of response was very masculine --- that of 'fighting' an unseen and dangerous enemy and waging 'war' against the virus. Police/military checkpoints were installed along the borders between cities --- with personnel armed and in full battle gear. Metro Manila, with the highest cases of COVID-19, was then transformed into a 'war zone' in a battle against the unseen. Those that called the shots were mostly retired military officials who now occupy civilian posts. Interestingly, the Philippines is not the only country that has securitized the pandemic. According to Sears (2020), "an issue (that) is framed as an existential threat to some referent object... justifies extraordinary measures for protection."

People are not allowed to leave home except for procuring supplies, including the financial and food assistance given to citizens in particular, the poor. Those who did not follow quarantine protocols were arrested and detained for a time. Both formal and informal economy suffered. In the midst of all these impacts, an Anti-Terrorism Law was passed by Congress. Then there was the 'red-tagging' of activists, journalists, and grassroots community leaders. Even showbusiness personalities were tagged in some sort of witch hunt. The Philippines was transformed into a pseudo-police state and militarized as a matter of policy. And COVID-19 continued to rise, fluctuated, and then rose again. By April 2021, over a million Filipinos had become sick through COVID-19; several millions more had lost their jobs; and the incidence of poverty also increased. The data for 9 July 2021 listed 1,461, 455 total cases (94.7% recovered), with 3.6% active cases,

and 1.76% deaths (Department of Health 2021). Needless to say, the country still has armed conflict-vulnerable and affected areas with both horizontal and vertical conflicts impacting on many peoples' lives.

3. Pre-Pandemic WPS in the Philippines

WPS was once a big thing in the Philippines. In 2010, through collaborative work between State and CSOs, the country launched its National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2010-2016 --- the very first Asian country to do so. There was even a special inter-agency committee -- the National Steering Committee on Women, Peace and Security (NSC WPS) --- that was established and mandated in Executive Order 865 during 2010.

Parallel to this State initiative was that of civil society --- the launch of a loose network of human rights and atrocity prevention, peace, and women's groups from all over the country known as the "Women Engaged in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325" (WE Act 1325). These groups are from grassroots, local and national spaces that have been involved in "advocacy work, education and training, community-based involvement, networking, lobbying for legislation, research, and multi-sectoral/actor dialogues" (Veneracion-Rallonza 2013, 76-77). Four years later, largely through the work of national government agencies (NGAs), the NAP WPS was amended to streamline action points and indicators. At the same time, implementing NGAs underwent capacity building programs on how they could implement the NAP.

In March 2017, a new NAP WPS 2017-2022 was adopted. It draws its mandate from international instruments such as the various United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) on WPS, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation 30, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); at the national level, it anchors itself on the Magna Carta of Women and the Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022.

As the NAP WPS-implementing NGAs were drafting their Agency Strategic Action Plans (ASAP) WPS, the Marawi Siege broke out in May 2017. A few months later, the NSC WPS adopted a resolution on the protection of women, prevention of violence against them, and ensuring their participation in resolving the conflict in Marawi. At the local level, the Regional Commission on Bangsamoro Women (RCBW) had its own Regional Action Plan (RAP) WPS and during the Marawi Siege, they concretized it through the provision of humanitarian assistance for women and girls.

Interestingly, what used to be collaborative politics (Veneracion-Rallonza 2013) between State and CSOs was not as active as before. In fact, each seemed to have gone their own separate ways in so far as implementing the NAP WPS was concerned. After the end of the Marawi Siege and towards the beginning and unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic, not much was heard on the NAP WPS from the side of national government. Even the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), the Chair of the NSC WPS and main implementer of the NAP WPS, was transformed into a pandemic response agency.

In contrast, at the local level, the WPS continued to gain traction and was not ‘left behind’ when there was a transition from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to BARMM. In fact, the Bangsamoro Women’s Commission (BWC) of the BARMM crafted its own Bangsamoro RAP WPS. And in the context of the pandemic, the commitment was to protect women and to protect their human rights (Karon as quoted in UN Women 2020a). At least in the Bangsamoro, WPS occupies a place in policy and practice in contrast with the national articulation.

Human Security from WPS Empowerment Lens

The Philippine NAP WPS has four (4) pillars: (1) empowerment and participation; (2) protection and prevention; (3) promotion and mainstreaming; and (4) monitoring and evaluation. The first

two (2) are substantive and issue pillars while the last two (2) are support pillars for implementation. In comparison with the first and second generation of the NAP WPS, the current one claims to highlight women’s various roles in different peace spaces.

In this regard, it highlights women’s agency --- both as leaders and participants --- in the peace process of the country. It seeks to continue the best practice of women’s presence in formal peace tables as well as in other informal spaces (i.e. civil society and grassroots participation). It also aims to support various initiatives where women empower other women, recognize the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and religion, and build a stronger constituency for peace and conflict transformation where women are involved in the front, back, and center of the process. Additionally, it also pays attention to women’s empowerment in light of their economic rights” (Philippine NAP WPS 2017, 9).

The empowerment pillar seeks to realize that “Women and girls, through meaningful participation and leadership, are active change agents in conflict transformation and post-conflict development” (Philippine NAP WPS 2017, 12). As linked to human security, it aims to advance the role and contribution of women and girls in attaining and sustaining peace. It also reflects the goal of strengthening women and girls’ capabilities, access and control over decision making spaces and over resources. Table 1 lists the Action Points for the empowerment and participation pillar.

Table 1. Philippine National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security – Empowerment and Participation Pillar

Action Point	Indicators
Action Point 1, Gender perspective integrated in Track 1/formal peace process.	1.1 Women occupy leadership positions in peace panels, peace agreement implementation, and other peace mechanisms. 1.2 Gender and women’s political and economic empowerment provisions are explicitly included in peace agreements, blueprints, and mechanisms for implementation.

	1.3 The NSC WPS serving as the advisory body to oversee the integration of gender in the peace negotiations, agreements, blueprints and mechanisms for implementation.
Action Point 2, Women's participation and leadership in Tracks 2 and 3 peace process.	2.1 Peace process supported by civil society and grassroots women's constituency. 2.2 Women from conflict-affected/vulnerable communities with capacity for peace, human rights, governance, and economic empowerment.
Action Point 3, Actively engaged with peace, human rights, and women CSOs and grassroots women.	3.1 Awareness raising initiatives of CSOs with regard to women, peace and security (WPS), CEDAW General Recommendation 30, NAP WPS, Magna Carta of Women (specific to armed conflict and peace and economic and political empowerment in post-conflict reconstruction supported. 3.2 Practice of regular dialogue, consultation with, and feedback from CSOs and grassroots women institutionalized.
Action Point 4, Addresses gender inequality in productive and reproductive labor as well as in land and property rights to enable women to actively participate during post-conflict reconstruction.	4.1 Supported grassroots women's economic empowerment initiatives. 4.2 Awareness raising on women's economic rights conducted at the grassroots level.
Action Point 5, Improves the role and status of women in the security sector.	5.1 Policy and comprehensive programmatic design formulated for the recruitment, training, deployment, and career-pathing of women in the military and the police. 5.2 Enabling institutional mechanisms for the strategic maximization of women's contribution in the security sector created. 5.3 Increased the number of women in decision-making positions in the military and the police. 5.4 Increased the number of women in leadership positions specific to in civil-military operations (CMO) and community-police relations (CPR). 5.5 Increased number of women participating in international committees and inter-state initiatives (e.g. UN Peacekeeping, ASEANAPOL, INTERPOL etc.) related to gender, conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and human trafficking, and WPS.

NAP WPS and Pandemic Response: Re-Writing Gender In

At the onset, the connection might not have been clear. However, countries with on-going conflict situations that have national action plans on WPS can use this as a guide for crisis response. For

example, in the case of the Philippines, the NAP WPS 2017-2022 Action Point 14 on “mainstreaming of NAP WPS in existing relevant national and local mechanisms,” specifically sub-action point 14.4, provides for the “integration of the NAP WPS framework in humanitarian/natural disaster and complex emergency plans.” Unfortunately, no one bothered to refer back to the NAP WPS 2017-2022 during the pandemic response in conflict-affected/vulnerable areas.

Under the current government in the Philippines, gender does not seem to occupy a prominent part of in the pandemic response. From decision-makers to policies, what has been institutionalized and operationalized are male-centric responses. Hopefully this would change should the unified bill filed by the seven (7) women senators on “Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Pandemic Act of 2021” be adopted. Though not specific to WPS, it does include conflict in its definition of an ‘emergency’ and internally displaced women (IWs) as ‘at risk individual and groups.’

4. Civil Society Organizations on Women, Peace and Human Security

The three (3) CSOs chosen for this study, one way or another, have been involved in advancing WPS in the country. First, GZOPI is a non-government organization (NGO) that works for “just and lasting peace” in the Philippines. It has been involved in lobbying and advocacy, networking, and capacity building and training and its areas of interest are on gender, human security, dialogue and mediation, and peace education. Second, Sulong CARHRIHL was a non-government organization borne out of the peace process between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army-National Democratic Front of the Philippines (CPP-NPA-NDFP). Part of its organization mission was to monitor the Comprehensive Agreement on the Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL) between the GPH and CPP-NPA-NDFP. Further on, it became more involved

in governance and peacebuilding work using a gender perspective. More recently, Sulong CARHRIHL has been renamed Sulong Peace. And lastly, WE Act 1325 is a national network of women, peace, and human rights CSOs that seek to advance the implementation of WPS. It was established in November 2010, the same year that the NAP WPS 2010-2016 was launched. Currently, it has 35 member organizations from Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. These groups have been involved in “advocacy work, education and training, community-based involvement, networking, lobbying for legislation, research, and multi-sectoral/actor dialogues” (Veneracion-Rallonza 2013, 77-78). In the case of advancing WPS, they have been referred to as ‘domestic norm entrepreneurs’ (Veneracion-Rallonza 2013).

In an attempt to unravel women’s agency, the following questions were asked:

1. **Pre-pandemic**, what did your organization do for women in conflict-affected/vulnerable communities?
2. What kind of assistance did you give to women during the **earlier stage** (March to July 2020) and **middle stage** (Aug to Dec 2020) of the pandemic considering the armed conflict situation in this/these area/s?
3. **During the pandemic period**, what has been your assessment with regard to the armed conflict situation in the area/s you work in? What has been the participation and role of women in this assessment?
4. Who are the other stakeholders in your assessment and what has been their participation and role?
5. Based on your experience in the **last 11 months of the pandemic**, what have been the similarities and differences in the way that you now implement the pillars of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) (protection, participation, conflict prevention, relief and recovery)?

GZOPI

GZOPI was involved in several projects before the pandemic lockdown. First was a project on women in normalization in the Bangsamoro that basically involved advocacy and training, second was consultation on the Bangsamoro transition as linked with the work of the Third Party Monitoring Team, and third, through the Global Partnership on the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), a working group collaborating on the Government of the Philippines and National Democratic Front of the Philippines peace process was set up.

At the early stages of the pandemic, GZOPI added to their work relief and responses for grassroots women through local women partner organizations: WoRMD in Maguindanao, Al Mujadilah Development Foundation, Inc (AMDF) in Lanao, Nisa Ul Haqq Fi Bangsamoro in Zamboanga, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Consultations with women continued and relief packs were given to those who participated. In Maguindanao, GZOPI supported a special project on mask-making and distributed them to communities.

Since GZOPI was not able to travel to Mindanao due to the lockdown in Metro Manila, they relied heavily on their local partners to conduct various activities. In the middle of the year, consultations continued but these were conducted by the local partners. In this regard, these local partners shaped the substance and approach of workshops and consultation activities; it was also the local partners that distributed relief packs to the women attendees.

In assessing the situation of conflict-affected areas they worked in, GZOPI ensured the participation of women local partners. Other partners of GZOPI are UN Women and UNODC; they also continued to engage with NGAs such as the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), albeit on a limited degree. And based on the assessment of GZOPI, the situation in the Bangsamoro was worsening during the on-going pandemic period: rido or clan wars

continue and there were more incidents of the killing of indigenous peoples (IPs).

With regard to advancing WPS, GZOPI said they continued to contribute to the protection and prevention pillar through advocacy and to participation through consultations on peace and normalization. However, all of these works relied heavily on local partners that had a direct hand in implementing GZOPI projects and in re-shaping the conduct of workshops that grassroots women participated in.

For GZOPI, seeking stronger networking and maximizing what exists has been their key strategy in trying to survive and advance their work in the middle of the pandemic. Their local partners have been instrumental in their survival. WPS was also more difficult to advance during the pandemic as both CSOs and government's attention are divided. It has been more difficult to advocate for the protection and prevention aspect of WPS. Nonetheless, creative approaches --- such as workshop/consultations + relief operations --- were necessary.

Sulong CARHRIHL/Peace

Prior to the pandemic lockdown Sulong was actively implementing a project with indigenous women (IW) in the provinces of Quezon (GUPAD-LN), North Cotabato (NALKATI), Agusan del Sur (PASAKK), and Bukidnon (KMMKM). They were involved in a capacity building program on governance and peace from a gender and human rights perspective that was aimed at strengthening IW's participation in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. Specifically, IWs were trained in local advocacy, the conduct of dialogues with local leaders, and the development of livelihood endeavors. They were about to start the same engagement with IW from Rizal and Davao Region when the lockdown was declared.

During the lockdown, enough communication continued with local IW partner organizations for

them to feel that the project was proceeding as planned. Continuing the project amidst the pandemic lockdown also enabled them to pick-up on activities (i.e. data gathering) despite the fact that Sulong --- which is based in Metro Manila --- was not with them. At the same time, previous mechanisms such as the Monitoring and Action Response (MAR) team in various areas, continued with local monitoring and documentation of human rights violations simultaneously with COVID-19 incidents and verification. Sulong relied on these reports to craft their assessment and subsequent actions.

Armed conflict continued in the places that Sulong worked with. Incidents of human rights violations increased, recruitment of children for armed groups continued, and red-tagging was unabated. This is the result of Sulong's assessment with input from the IW. Apart from partner IWs, Sulong strengthened their relationship with the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), the Human Rights Office of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (HRO AFP) and the Human Rights Office of the Philippine National Police (HRO PNP). Engagement with the CHR was in light of coordinating with the regional offices of the Commission while relating with security forces and was a strategy to bridge to ground forces.

For Sulong, coordination with various stakeholders --- particularly government --- contributes to advancing protection and prevention of violence against IW. Their leadership capacity building programs also include provisions for early warning, early response, psychosocial support, and paralegal training. IW women directly participate in the monitoring and validation of human rights cases as well as in the control of armed conflict situations in their respective areas. According to Sulong, they are able to do their work because of reliable local partners as well as engagement with various stakeholders.

WE Act 1325

Before the pandemic lockdown, WE Act 1325 was busy with several projects and activities. They were involved in talks with peace table actors such as the NDFP to return to peace negotiations; legislative advocacy concerning the Bangsamoro Organic law and campaign for the plebiscite; and conducting humanitarian assistance in evacuation camps during the Marawi Siege.

During the pandemic lockdown, WE Act 1325 realized that they needed to recast and realign their funds to assist conflict-affected women who were also impacted by the pandemic. One of these realignments was the delivery of *iftar* during Ramadan as well as the delivery of food packs to women FGD participants from North Upi, North Cotabato, Lanao del Sur, and Zamboanga. They also did the same for armed conflict widows who needed immediate relief assistance. In other words, their actions were consultation + humanitarian assistance rolled into one. Additionally, WE Act 1325 also engaged in advocacy against red-tagging.

As regards the assessment of conflict in the areas they were working with, the WE Act 1325 relies on local female partners and their partnerships with various conflict affected communities. To a large extent, the physical presence of WE Act 1325 is through their local partners. Through them, WE Act 1325 is able to touch base with grassroots women who also had insights on their situation. Apart from local partners and grassroots women, WE Act 1325 also engaged with BARMM government entities such as the BWC. Unfortunately, when the pandemic hit, WE Act 1325 were no longer able to engage with NGAs such as OPAPP as they did before. They continue to network with other CSOs.

The niche of WE Act 1325 is women's participation and representation. They have a positive track record on policy advocacy and networking. They have also been strong in preparing women leaders for political and economic participation such as what they have been doing with the

Bangsamoro women. Because of this, WE Act 1325 is optimistic that Bangsamoro women will play a significant role in the Bangsamoro transition process. They have been hearing about possibilities from local partners --- women's political party, IW party, and/or IP party with women representatives. Despite the pandemic, no matter how challenging things have been, WE Act 1325 believes that they can still get things done. Learning from experience, WE Act 1325 trusts the 'bottom-up' approach as well as relying on local partners to see their advocacy through.

5. Weaving Women's Agency into a Pandemic and Implications for Women, Peace and Human Security

First and foremost, CSOs maximized what already existed. To a large extent, this has been the gain from networking. During the pandemic lockdown, CSOs banded together and worked with one another. Second, there was heavy reliance on local partners who have also been members of a national network of CSOs. In this light, prior working relationships as well being integrated in the network itself made it easier for the national organization to connect with grassroots organizations. At the same time, local partners also were given the greater decision-making tasks in the administration of work in the field. Of course, networking is nothing new as most CSOs around the world are linked with each other in the form of relations or structures. With multi-level (global, regional, national, local) interactions taking place, a web of connective action is not hard to come by. In the case of national networks, engaging the state --- both collaboratively and critically --- involves interactions between agents. The pandemic may have complicated the situation but by various means, CSOs did not give up. For example,

...the COVID-19 pandemic comes on top of existing challenges facing the implementation of the WPS agenda, including a global pushback against multilateral cooperation. But at the same time, the pandemic has demonstrated the prescience of this agenda, revealing the importance of gender analysis and gender-sensitive responses and the value of women's leadership, including that of local women peacebuilders, in times

of crisis (Rahmaty and Jaghag 2020, 2).

And third, listening to ground realities has been an important facet of the work of the CSO. It is no longer about parachuting in and jumping out but now includes the relationship of national with local and grassroots and this has proven to be an aspect of women's meaningful participation. Before the pandemic is over, we will see more of this.

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