



## Yasmin Busran-Lao: Peacebuilding from the grassroots to the peace table and back

**YASMIN BUSRAN-LAO** began her journey as a peace-builder in a non-governmental organization where, as head of the *Al Mujadilah* Development Foundation in Marawi City and *Nisa Ul Haqq Fi Bangsamoro* in Zamboanga, she integrated Islam and women's human rights in her pursuit of peace. Through her involvement with other organizations and networks, such as the PILIPINA, Gaston Z. Ortigas Peace Institute, and the Women Engaged in Action on UNSCR 1325, she got involved in crafting the Gender and Development Code of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and the advocacy campaigns for the drafting of the Philippine National Action Plan (NAP) on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security, and the passage of the Magna Carta for Women.

In all these mechanisms and fora, Yasmin made sure she included the concerns of Moro women who, she believes, must surface from the margins. Internationally, she was part of the team that drafted the Philippines NGO Shadow Report in 2006 for the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that included a section on the rights of Moro women and indigenous women.

In 2010, she entered a completely new and rather alien terrain when she ran for the senate in the national elections under the Liberal Party ticket. Although she knew that she would not win, she used the campaign as an opportunity to talk about what is happening in Mindanao. As she explained:

"I knew *hindi ako mananalo* (I wasn't going to win). But the thought of being able to go all over the country (that I wasn't able to do in my NGO work) was very encouraging. In the campaign sorties, even the only one or two given to you to speak was enough to explain that in a peaceful Mindanao, everyone benefits.

When the appointment ban for non-winners in the elections was lifted after one year, she was invited to be an observer of the Government of the Philippines (GPH) panel in the talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). When a negotiator position for the GPH panel opened March 2012, she was invited to fill the post.

### The appointment

According to Yasmin, Secretary Teresita 'Ging' Deles, was very clear about wanting to put more women in the panel. At this time, Prof. Miriam Coronel-Ferrer was the only woman in the GPH panel. So, for the vacancy, the logical and appropriate choice was another woman negotiator.

Deles' decision to endorse to the President Yasmin's appointment to the GPH panel was grounded on her previous position as observer which gave her an insider's view of the processes and dynamics of the negotiation. At the same time, her identity, roots and experience in peacebuilding and women's rights prepared her to negotiate as a Moro, a Mindanaoan, and as a woman.

As Yasmin passionately expressed, "all these things mattered because we are very clear that in any agreement, there has to be a gender lens...that gender should be an important factor." She links her journey as a peace builder with the importance of gender mainstreaming in peace agreements and the involvement of women in peace processes.

"You talk about gender at the grassroots, then policy at the national level, and even at the international level, like involvement in CEDAW, to include the status and rights of Moro and indigenous women in Mindanao. Then (you relate the practices) at the international level back to the national level and then (you conduct) peacebuilding at the grassroots."

## The gender agenda

Such principled belief is reflective of the spirit of the women, peace and security norm embodied in UNSCR 1325 and the NAP which call for the participation of women in various spaces for peace building, including peace negotiations. Having women at peace tables enables them to share their perspectives and experiences, and in the process, contribute to more expansive thinking.

Although the Philippine government has signed peace agreements with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF, 1996) *Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa-Pilipinas/Revolutionary Proletarian Army/Alex Boncayao Brigade (RPM-P/RPA/ABB) Tabara-Paduan Group and Nilo dela Cruz Groups (2000)*; the Cordillera Bodong Administration-Cordillera Peoples Liberation Army (CBA-CPLA, 2011), and the MILF (Framework Agreement on the *Bangsamoro [FAB]* in 2012), only the FAB has gender sensitive provisions. Found in the section on Basic Rights are:

“(g) Right of women to meaningful political participation, and protection from all forms of violence;”

“(i) Right to equal opportunity and non-discrimination in social and economic activity and the public service, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender and ethnicity”

The debate on the inclusion of gender provisions in the FAB text was heated but it went more smoothly than Yasmin thought it would. It was, however, her being a Moro woman in the Government panel that was somehow harder for the MILF to acknowledge. There was the question of loyalty and sincerity which the MILF made a remark about on her first day as government negotiator. Yasmin did not let it pass unanswered:

“I just want to clarify that I am here for the peace and the Bangsamoro, for this country. I mean for the country, it is really a peace for all Filipinos. Whether I am part of government or not, this is my position. But being part of government does not undermine my identity as a Moro. I am as much a Muslim and a Moro than I was before I became part of the government panel, and I don't think I am as much or less a Muslim as you are as you sit in this table.”

### Holding her ground

Eventually, the peace process had to be brought back to its constituents and stakeholders. The people had to own the process and be part of it through various mechanisms made available to them. Accordingly, the 15-member Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) was established



With former GPH panel chair and current Supreme Court Associate Justice Dean Marvic Leonen.

on 25 February 2012 to lay the groundwork for the creation of the Bangsamoro entity.

Initial appointees to the BTC on the GPH side were three women out of the seven members (Atty. Johaira Wahab, Froilyn Mendoza, and Fatmawati Salapuddin); on the MILF side, out of eight members, only one was a woman (Atty. Raisa Jajurie).

On the ground, it was also important to bring in women and to concretize what ‘meaningful’ political participation is all about. This was completely new and uncharted territory; previous agreements did not have this component. Being part of the external review of the 1996 Peace Agreement between the GPH and the MNLF, she observed that the people who made decisions were all men.

She concluded with characteristic passion:

“The goal of women’s participation is to attain durable peace. One aspect of the peace agreement that women should focus into is the Normalization where arms are going to be put beyond use. We cannot afford to have another displaced woman or a child who cannot finish schooling, whose future will be destroyed because she/he cannot live peacefully. The things that we see in the evacuation centers, their impact on women – lack of access to reproductive health, getting pregnant or giving birth in very deplorable situations, having abortions in that situation, an adolescent girl in an evacuation center or in a conflict situation vulnerable to all other forms of violence including sexual violence – never again! And that this will only happen if we work together in whatever level of the process – be it at the grassroots level or at the negotiating table. Our thoughts and actions on this must be in synch. Otherwise we may lose everything.”

- Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza ♀