

Canada's responsibility in advancing women's roles in peacebuilding and defending human rights in the Philippines

Long-standing economic and political crises continue to fuel internal armed conflict in the Philippines. As many as 40,000 people have been killed, mostly in the rural areas. In Mindanao, the price of war has included the death of more than 120,000 people, as well as the displacement of entire communities. Many children grow up believing that violence is an inescapable reality of life. Mothers helplessly watch their children die of preventable diseases¹.

Women suffer in multiple ways in these conflict situations. They can become sexual objects, forced to provide "comfort" to military and paramilitary men. Some are forced into the role of mistress or wife as a way for the military to become accepted in communities. This tactic has been long used in the government's counter-insurgency programs.

Women have been used as shields or taken as hostages during military operations. In communities where the military has had a presence over a long period of time, local women routinely experience various forms of sexual violence, from harassment to gang rapes. They have been victims of illegal arrests and arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, even political killings.

Poverty in the Philippines very often has a woman's face. When the government began offering incentives and tax breaks to attract multinational companies, the country became a haven for the extractive industry, particularly Canadian-based mining companies. One result was the conversion of agricultural and forest lands, mostly ancestral territories of Indigenous peoples, into open pit mines, with the accompanying destruction of food resources and contamination of watersheds.

Increased poverty has driven women in both rural and urban communities to economic activities which make them vulnerable not only to the market place, but to various forms of sexual exploitation. In desperate circumstances, some go into prostitution including *prosti-tuition* for students (prostitution for tuition fees); *palit-bigas* (sex for rice); *akyat-barko* (women selling their bodies to "service" docked ships). Prostitution is exacerbated by tourism programs and by joint U.S.-Philippine military exercises on Philippine territory.

The deepening poverty has driven more and more rural women into cities and towns seeking employment in factories, the food industry and as domestic workers. Some are in a position to secure work overseas as temporary foreign workers, leaving their children in the care of extended family members. Many may then find themselves in precarious situations in the receiving countries, isolated and marginalized. In Canada, 90% of women working as live-in caregivers are from the Philippines. More and more Filipina women are also seen working in farming communities and in shopping malls – in the fast food industry and janitorial services.

At the same time, women are organizing themselves into responsive organizations to defend their collective rights, their communities and food resources, including land and water. They stand side by side with other marginalized groups campaigning to end impunity and demanding government accountability. Women have assumed important roles in resisting armed conflict and in peacekeeping through membership in various organizations and participation in mass actions.

Indigenous women in the Cordilleras are promoting peacebuilding as a process that enables their communities to have control of their land and food sources, as they assert their right to self-determination. Local initiatives of

¹ Bolido, Linda in "The Lives of Women in Militarized Zones." Ocasiones Leny. Cebu City: University of San Carlos. 2009. At <http://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/pssr/article/viewFile/1269/1624>

Indigenous women in peacebuilding contribute to the wider initiatives in the Philippines to realize a just and lasting peace where national democracy and sovereignty are enjoyed.

In this context, KAIROS respectfully makes the following recommendations to the government of Canada:

- ✓ **Implementing UNSC1325** Internationally, Canada has an important role to play in promoting the application of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of peacebuilding as an effective strategy to resolve conflict and build lasting peace. With regard to the Philippines, Canada should assist in the implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security launched in Quezon City in March 2010. This is particularly important in the light of the Philippine government's counter insurgency program *Oplan Bayanihan*.
- ✓ **Supporting civil society** The Canadian government needs to increase financial support to women's human rights and civil society organizations working in zones of conflict in the Philippines. An integral part of this support is increased Canadian overseas development assistance to Philippine women's organizations and community-based human rights education and training programs for women.
- ✓ **Ending Impunity** Canada must work to end impunity for sexual violence in conflict in the Philippines by:
 - supporting, both politically and financially, international justice mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court;
 - supporting judicial and legal reform and the work of the Philippine Human Rights Commission as important strategies for promoting women's human rights and peace; and
 - making the Philippine government's human rights performance, including improved treatment of women, a condition of receiving bilateral aid and military assistance and other multilateral financial support.
- ✓ **Holding accountable the resource industry** The Canadian government must establish mechanisms to guarantee that Canadian resource extraction companies in the Philippines are not contributing to the perpetuation of human rights violations and sexual violence by committing itself to:
 - binding, legally enforceable and monitored standards for Canadian mining companies in the Philippines and ending Canadian taxpayer support if violence against women is abetted in their spheres of influence; and
 - supporting and promoting the "Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations 'Protect, Respect and Remedy' Framework" adopted by the UN process on Business and Human Rights and endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council.
- ✓ **Protecting the rights and welfare of workers under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program** The Canadian government must guarantee the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of temporary foreign workers, particularly women workers, in Canada under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program. The recent changes are not sufficient to protect workers from abusive employers, unscrupulous recruiters and wage theft. Canada should implement the recommendations in the June 2009 Report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration Canada which was based on Canada-wide consultations and participatory roundtables with migrant workers organizations, service providers and advocates held in 2007 and 2008.



KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives is a joint venture of eleven Canadian churches and religious organizations dedicated to ecological justice and human rights.



310 Dupont Street, Suite 200, Toronto, ON M5R 1V9 ♦ 1-877-403-8933 ♦ www.kairoscanada.org