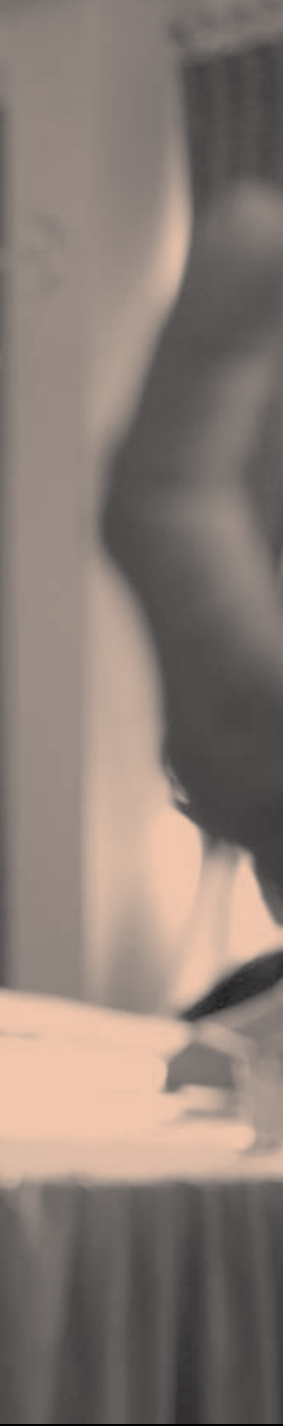


Strengthening Women's Participation in Peace Building

through feminist action
research, skills and
capacity building and multi
stakeholder dialogue

by Marilee Karl



Isis International launched its initiative to strengthen Women's Participation in Peace Building in 2009. Called "The Cultural Politics of Conflict, Peace and the UNSCR 1325: Strategising and Capacity Building", this initiative continues Isis International's commitment to strengthen women's participation in peace building through: feminist action research, skills and capacity building and multi stakeholder dialogue. It uses creative methodologies such as story telling and informal dialogues that allow women to surface their experiences in their homes and communities as they strive for a peaceful and sustainable life. To begin with, Isis International launched the initiative in Indonesia and the Philippines. Its partner organisations in these countries are: Centre Studies of Indonesia Eastern Region, Indonesia and BALAI Rehabilitation Centre Inc., Philippines.

In the Philippines, the use of storytelling as a methodology for gathering data has proven to be an important mode of exchange of information and support for women. Through their stories women have been able to share how they find peace in their everyday lives through the creative ways they negotiate for their participation and bridge understanding, despite cultural and religious diversity within and outside of their homes.

In Indonesia, women's stories reflected their participation in community and public life after the experience of conflict. Women's efforts of becoming peace agents began as early as 1997 where their homes and the market place served as a venue to share informally their values of peace building.

Creatively crafting messages for peace building
Capacity building in both countries, in the form of development communication arts, strengthened women's confidence and communication skills, enhancing their capacities as leaders and peace agents in their respective communities.

In the Philippines, a five-day session on Women Crafting Messages for Peace Building facilitated women's creativity in telling their stories of strengths and challenges in peace building work. The use of theatre and visual arts and community radio allowed them to share their stories of peaceful negotiation and conflict handling, acceptance of diversity and calls for the

strengthening of women's participation in peace and development work in the community.

In Indonesia, different media, such as local dance, radio drama and songs, shared women's stories of maximising the market place and their homes as sites for peace. These media allowed women to exhibit their creativity in arts and in daily life as they turned the loss of their loved ones to strength to stand for the rest of their families, and continue to find spaces in their communities to share peace.



Dialogue

The dialogues with peace advocates in both countries strengthened women's participation in peace building, making this a shared agenda for stakeholders.

In the Philippines, the dialogues were held with local government units on ways towards making gender responsiveness part of good governance and government services. This also encouraged local government officials to ensure two seats for women on the village council.

In Indonesia, community leaders had the opportunity to speak with media practitioners and local government. Using this opportunity, women were able to talk about their everyday participation, and correct misconceptions that women are merely victims in these situations. This provided the holistic viewing of women, recognising their everyday contribution and, at the same time, calling attention to their immediate needs of livelihood.

Feminist action research

The feminist action research took careful note of the use of creative methodologies to surface women's stories and shared the results of the research with the women so that they could discuss this and use this themselves

In the Philippines, the storytelling in groups and the deeper conversations with the women provided the space for them to discuss the most intimate parts of their lives, their dreams for their families, struggles with partners, and the simple ways they are present for their friends and neighbours that form part of the way they live a peaceful life. These spaces were much appreciated by women as these were novel to them even if they were used to sharing within capacity building spaces and psychosocial intervention. The women described the focus group discussions as "emotional band-aid" because of the relief they felt in being able to share and hear about each other's joys and pains, while acknowledging the learning they gain from each other.

In Indonesia, women acknowledged how the conflict affected their lives in many ways. They



shared the pain and grief they felt as they lost their loved ones to the conflict, and shared the struggles they went through in picking up their lives. They acknowledged how the conflict has allowed them to participate in community and public life, a new way to contribute that they have come to value. The conflict also allowed the women the space to move out of their otherwise constricted gender roles.

Creative capacity building

Capacity building sessions integrated theatre arts to strengthen women's leadership skills in communications, articulation of their visions for participation and equality, as well as practical knowledge of international policies and frameworks that acknowledge women's role in various aspects of their lives.

In the Philippines, the workshop on Women Crafting Messages for Peace Building, not only

enhanced the women's creative expression but in many ways also released tension. As the women went through creative exercises in theatre and in poetry they recalled times of conflict and fleeing their homes. They were able to touch base with feelings of fear for their lives, but took comfort in being able to acknowledge the reality of their situation and appreciate where they are now. The theatre pieces, posters and radio spots they produced allowed them to communicate the value of women's everyday participation in peace building to other peace and development stakeholders in a non-threatening way. Thus, the call to gender responsiveness was not seen as a threat but rather a shared agenda by all.



In Indonesia, the capacity building space was a first for the women in a number of ways. It was a first for them to engage with other peace and development stakeholders and be acknowledged as part of this circle. It was also the first formal capacity building space for the women where: 1) the results of the research were shared, 2) they were able to participate in discussions on international policies supportive of women's rights and participation, 3) alternative frames such as Engendered Peace Journalism were shared with them and with media practitioners as an important part of peace and development work; and 4) skills were shared with them on the use of radio to produce short spots, and talk shows to discuss women's issues in peace building.

Learning about the Landmark United Nations Resolution on Women, Peace and Security

The United Nations Security Council adopted resolution (S/RES/1325) on women and peace and security on 31 October 2000. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. It also calls

on all parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. The resolution provides a number of important operational mandates, with implications for Member States and the entities of the United Nations system. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>

The Isis International initiative also aims to strengthen women's use of the UNSCR 1325. This was the first time the women had learned about it, including women community leaders involved in peace building work, despite the 10 years since its approval by member states. The session on understanding UNSCR 1325, falls under the principle of feminist knowledge sharing to which both country teams are committed.

In the Philippines, even before the women knew about the resolution, they had already taken part in many efforts to restore life and peace in their communities. Still the women affirmed the need to know about such resolutions, since they continue to hold strong hopes for policies that support women's rights and participation, provided the women know it and are able to access it. They noted local policies like the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children Act that were effective in preventing domestic violence in the community because information was shared. Most of them noted that, if the same effort in information dissemination on the UNSCR 1325 were taken seriously, the policy would take its effect for women's rights.

The same was also noted in Indonesia when the women heard about UNSCR 1325 for the first time. Women took a certain pride in the informal ways they have contributed to peace building within their families and daily work. The Indonesia team took pains in developing sessions that made women more aware of the international policies that could also be taken up at a local level.

Sensitising media and the community

An important aspect of the initiative was to sensitise the media on women's role in conflict resolution and peace building, particularly in

Gender Based Violence on the Peace Building Agenda

In its work of strengthening women's participation in peace building, Isis International found resistance to women's participation and to putting the issue of gender-based violence on the peace building agenda.

Male leaders questioned the need for women's participation in governance even when the ratio of representation stands 1/10.

Male leaders questioned women's capacity in leading within conflict.

Women peace advocates questioned whether violence against women should be addressed at this time; they feel this is still an experience of the minority and expressed fears that to take the issue of violence at this time may be divisive.

Faced with this resistance to gender, Isis International felt it necessary to continue acknowledging women's experiences and facilitate a way in which the women could communicate their experiences. This led to the Cheekah Sessions.

Cheekah Sessions as Safe Space

Cheeka is a colloquial term for idle talk or gossip, and the Cheekah sessions became a safe space for women to share and acknowledge their experience. Women appreciated the space to discuss their concerns and they called these sessions "emotional band-aid sessions" as they shared very intimate details and events. These sessions provided the women the space to freely talk about their lives, challenges and strengths. These sessions provided them the space to acknowledge their hurts and experience healing and affirmation within a safe space.

The sessions were designed creatively as flowing conversations within small groups of women in Pikit, North Cotabato, Philippines as well as with some community and civil society representatives

Different faces of violence

Jenalyn was one of the few women who took part in village council meetings. Trying to maintain her assertive attitude and always allowing herself to speak her mind, she would find herself at odds with their male leader who did not appreciate this attitude from her. In a heated discussion they had over how to plan for and budget for a women's activity, one of the village officials became very angry at her and threatened to pull out his gun, while reminding her not to be too smug, as her life was only worth about a few pesos.

how women are portrayed. In the Philippines, community systems like the family, organisations, friends and linkages with local government and non-governmental organisations were the women's major sources of information and value sharing. The dialogues held in the Philippines expanded beyond a dialogue with media to include local peace and development stakeholders that could also respond to strengthening and supporting women's participation. At the multi-stakeholder dialogues women creatively communicated their needs in the everyday commitment to peace building, while local governments and nongovernmental organisations exchanged ways to approach gender, peace and development work.

Ultimately concrete commitments to ensure women's participation in local governance, and more gender responsive programmes that address women's immediate needs in conflict situations were developed. Women's participation in the development communications workshop and dialogue allowed the women to reflect on the need for community media that could take up awareness raising on the importance of women's participation and their unique contribution in peace building.

In Indonesia, women community leaders held a dialogue with other stakeholders. The dialogues were attended by media practitioners, and the women took the opportunity to engage with them for the first time. In an effort to balance women's portrayal in media, the women community leaders shared the challenges they faced in the situation as well as their contributions. The women's sharing called attention to the urgency of media attention on women in situations of armed conflict together with other pressing issues such as displacement brought about by floods.

The narratives of women that came out of the research in the Philippines and Indonesia speak of women's strength and resilience and picking up their lives after conflict - everyday strengths that in most times goes unrecognised. Bringing this into the public space as an area of dialogue among stakeholders is also very timely as the provisions of the UNSCR 1325 of participation, representation and protection of women's rights are not only to be viewed as problems by women or the states but



rather an agenda of which stakeholders in peace and development need to be very mindful.

The project teams have become more mindful of how states take up the implementation of the UNSCR 1325, as well as how local stakeholders can be more committed to its successful implementation, as in the Philippines, where the UNSCR 1325 Implementation Plan has recently been developed.

In the experience of the Philippines, where women have contributed to a strong local peace movement that has committed to many efforts in building cultures of peace and strengthened community life, the UNSCR 1325 Implementation Plan needs to take on a stronger gender perspective to be conscious of women's inclusion and participation in various spaces for peace building.

In Indonesia, the project teams noted that it will take a longer time for their state to act on the development and implementation of a national action plan for the UNSCR 1325, but women have taken this initial opportunity to speak of their need for programme and policy support for women's participation.

Producing our own media - Claiming our space

Given the commitment of all partner organisations for media and information work as part of attaining holistic and sustainable peace, the women became more aware of



Jenalyn's difficulties are not only with so called male leaders but with men in the community. Known to be approachable, women often come to her about their domestic troubles. In playing a role as an advocate against gender violence, she has experienced threats when she tried to stand up for a neighbour who was being beaten up by her husband. On one occasion while attempting to secure this neighbour, she faced the angry husband in her home. The husband pointed a gun at her threatening to shoot if she did not stop meddling in their affairs. Together with some members of the community she was able to mediate with the husband.

Violence in the Home

Nena is a 40 year-old Maguindanaoan married to a Christian and was working as a farmer. In the Cheekah session, she shared the challenges of supporting her family almost by herself as her husband was a drunkard and would engage only in odd jobs. It was this challenge that would drive her to tears as she told stories of how her husband, when he was drunk would yell at her and the children and even threaten to hit them. But it was her experience of local community leadership that enhanced her skills in conflict management even within her home. She observed how family and community disputes were settled in the barangay (village) through dialogue and agreements. This exposure gifted her with the experience of how she could resolve this conflict in her own home through a written agreement. She came up with what others coined as "Nena's declaration of peace within her home". This agreement stipulated that her husband should conduct himself calmly even when he was drunk; he was not allowed to hurt or harm her or the children, and if he did she would make sure the barangay would intervene and take him away. Nena had this agreement signed by her husband and witnessed by her husband's brother and another community leader.

Sexual Violence and Shame in the Community

In an attempt to also understand the context of the women leaders in Pikit, the Isis International team also interviewed representatives from government, church and peace organisations in Pikit. They were able to share the achievements and challenges faced in peace building efforts. Vic-vic, one of the interviewees, was part of a peace and development organisation that operated in a city near Pikit. She shared that she had been asked to talk to survivors of sexual violence, and a particular story she shared was of a young woman who was raped by a military man. As she was asked to provide initial intervention, she was able to talk to the survivor and her family. They told her that they did not wish to file a case, as making the rape public would put the family and the clan in shame. Vic-vic also shared with us that this is not a one-off case of sexual violence that she encountered. There were a few others who also refused to file cases using mechanisms that are currently available. A common story to all of these women is that

their families could not stand being dragged into shame because of this, and as much as they were thankful for Vic-vic's intervention they could not push it further as they tried to preserve the dignity of their family.

Space, confidence and skills to participate in dialogue

Isis has found that stakeholders from government, civil society, communities and the media can continue to make efforts to contribute to an environment that supports and strengthens women. However, while the National Action Plan advocates "Cultures of Peace" and provided women with the spaces to reflect on concepts of diversity as part of a "tri-people" community of Muslims, Lumads and Christians, these sessions are not able to take up issues of gender and gender based violence, as these are not integrated in the components of the peace training sessions. It is also very difficult to raise issues of gender and gender-based-violence even among peace advocates as some of them felt that these issues would be divisive.

While peace training sessions allow women in the community to question "negative" notions of each other and provides them with the opportunity to celebrate each other's traditions, these sessions are not able to accommodate gender sensitivity sessions, or how violence against women is also an issue of peace and an experience of violence.

Isis International found that women are more than capable and willing to share their thoughts on what happens in the community. The knowledge and what they can talk about ranges from challenges faced in the home, disrupted lives because of war, and ways to manage the evacuation centre. Yet the space to talk is not always readily granted and at times even contested.

The male leaders and representatives in Pikit who had expressed discomfort in talking about women's participation and gender, were given the opportunity to interact with other Gender and Development Practitioners in Davao. They heard about the experiences of men and women representing several agencies in Davao and how they included gender as part of responsible and accountable governance. This kind of dialogue exposed the men to different kinds of thinking and challenged their misgivings as to why women should be allowed to participate in peace-building.

Women need to continue to be able to address and share their experiences of violence in the community, the home and in conflict areas. Isis International, together with the women community leaders and communication practitioners, was able to create non-threatening spaces for women to express themselves through the use of multi-media that included; poetry, visuals and street-theatre where they staged a short play at the end of the dialogue. By using multi-media forms, Isis was able to develop capacity and a space that served as a safe space for emotional and physical release as well as allowing the women to take part in multi-stakeholder dialogues with confidence, and to take centre stage to talk and creatively share their messages through vignettes, monologues and dance. ■

message development and maintaining relations with media. In the Philippines, the exposure to development communications has opened up their dreams for community media that would help sustain their peace and development work and they have gained confidence in producing media forms that speak of their needs and situation. In Indonesia, it has inspired women to think of their own stories as newsworthy and be willing to share these with various media. It has also inspired some of them to produce women and peace building themes in various radio formats.

For the women, the confidence they gained in their everyday contributions has inspired them to speak about these and encourage other women and men to take part in peace and community building. They have affirmed the value of organising that provides immediate assistance in times of need as well as awareness in communicating effectively in numbers.

Despite encountering male dominance in leadership in local and community organisations, women have and will continue claiming spaces in the G7 Farmers organisation in Pikit, Philippines or taking advantage of the marketplace in Sulawesi, Indonesia, as spaces to share values for peace. The capacities in communication that they gained have also inspired them to develop and disseminate their peace messages in various forms. Women of Pikit appreciated the use of theatre and radio and now seek the development of community media in their place. Women leaders of the Sulawesi Islands gained the confidence to speak with stakeholders like themselves and were inspired to produce various radio materials.

Calling for commitments

Peace and development stakeholders in the Sulawesi Islands in Indonesia and Pikit North Cotabato in the Philippines were called to be more responsive to the needs of women in these contexts. The women leaders in Sulawesi Islands called for women's basic needs for education as part of acknowledging their basic rights and commitments to strengthening their capacities.

Other commitment areas were to look into strengthening women's participation in local and

national government; and the role media can play in disseminating the peace messages that women produce. In Indonesia, these are initial commitments that may lead to strengthened partnerships in favour of women.

In the Philippines, concrete commitments towards strengthened participation of women in local governance were achieved despite very evident male dominance in leadership in various organisations in Pikit, achieved through creative and nonviolent communication. The local leadership in Pikit acknowledged that the local council could benefit from having two women representatives in the local council. Another commitment area was for inter-government support on gender responsiveness as part of good governance (even in conflict situations) that involves network building for local governments in Pikit, North Cotabato and Davao. This commitment is directly in support of the Pikit municipal council's commitment to gender and good governance in their programmes and policies that is meant to benefit women in Pikit.

Lessons learned

In Indonesia and the Philippines this initiative affirmed the need to continue to work with national and local government and media as strategic partners in strengthening women's participation and in achieving holistic, sustainable and lasting peace.

Given Isis International's existing programmes such as the Isis International Activist School, the organisation continues capacity building support for the women leaders in both countries in the use of various development communications tools to sustain women as leaders and their efforts in peace and development work.

The initiative has also shed light on continued work needed with different types of media: mainstream, alternative and community media in terms of strengthening skills and commitment of strategic stakeholders in peace and development work. The frames of engendered peace journalism can continue to form part of theoretical and practical ways media can contribute to a true portrayal of women's situation in conflict.

It can also play a crucial role in disseminating information on the UNSCR 1325 so that greater awareness on the policy can be shared in various countries. Mainstream, alternative and community media can all play a role in monitoring the implementation of this resolution, be it in the form of monitoring of women's portrayal in the media, or on how states have taken its commitment to implementing the resolution.

The results of this initiative have been utilised in the other peace initiatives in which Isis International has been involved, including the "Women Making Airwaves for Peace" community radio training workshop for women in Southeast Asia and the Pacific and in community radio training in South and Central Asia. The results of this initiative also stirred the interest of government agencies in the Philippines, including the National Committee on Women and Office of Presidential Advisor on Peace Processes, as well as civil society organisations on further collaboration in implementing and monitoring the national action plan on UNSCR 1325, which was launched in April 2010.

While Isis International joins women and peace advocates all over the world in acknowledging milestones in women, peace and development work, such as the approval of the UNSCR 1325; and as countries commit and draft their National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security, we also continue to be mindful about its full and effective implementation. As we reflect on the experiences of women and peace advocates amidst an environment that continues to question women's needs and participation, we find that efforts in policy development need to be accompanied by, as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) says, ways to "modify social and cultural patterns" based on gender discrimination or stereotypes. ■

About the Author

Marilee Karl co-founded Isis International in 1974, and served as its coordinator for its first 20 years. She is currently Honorary Chairperson of Isis International and continues her activism in the international women's movement and other social justice movements.