

Step by step: How a group of former women combatants are moving towards peace

A group of former women combatants in Lanao Del Sur are slowly transitioning and changing their reputation of being an armed group to becoming Women Peace Facilitator.

By Denise Rafaeli Cadorniga



Trust is one of the building blocks of a community and is an enabling factor that maximizes development. From combatants to woman peace facilitators, Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB) troops have enjoyed the trust of the community, which enables social services to thrive in the locale. BIWAB is an all-female armed wing of Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces now gradually transitioning into a civilian and community-based organization.

Since the intervention of the Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), BIWAB has been seen more in communities than in armed training camps. They have instead taken the chance to empower

and to capacitate themselves, not with arms but with psychosocial skills, which have enabled them to become channels in bringing government's social services toward the people. BIWAB has been going around in barangays to conduct Gender-based Violence and peacebuilding awareness-raising activities to encourage more women to learn their rights, as well as to be of assistance to the barangays they visit. In effect, the barangays and their respective officials not only view the BIWAB as frontliners but also as Women Peace Facilitator complementing the work and limited workforce of professional social workers at the community level. At times, the BIWAB is requested to visit communities weekly rather than only on fixed dates.

BIWAB members participate in barangay discussions so that they may contribute to the barangay's future plans in cooperation with NP. In some dire cases, BIWAB members inevitably function as listeners to psychosocial grievances, especially those who have been displaced by conflict. Furthermore, as the BIWAB's valuation of their skills and capacities grew, they started to walk the extra mile, rendering social services that exceeded expected outputs, such as being trusted with financial matters.

“Every program ng munisipyo, laging natatawag ang BIWAB. Mas kilalala na kami ngayon kumpara dati. Dati kasi, masasabi lang BIWAB pag pumunta ng kampo, ngayon every lakad namin, ‘Nandyang na naman ang mga BIWAB.’” *Every time the municipal government launches a program, BIWAB has consistently been tapped. We are more recognized now than before. BIWAB is limited to the training camp. Even when not in camps, people recognize us as BIWAB. ” Faidah S. Tamano, 26, shares how BIWAB perception has evolved.*

Through these efforts and BIWAB's impact in the community, they have become a trusted group. The BIWAB has strengthened the resilience of the community as they support smooth governmental transactions and reconciliation processes. The BIWAB's involvement in these peaceful processes diminished the perceived prejudice toward them, and they have consequently gained the community's solid trust and confidence. While they are still combatants—trained to bear arms, no less—they are increasingly being viewed as peacemakers. This positive change in reputation is slowly breaking the cycle of violence that has been going on for generations as the Bangsamoro fights for their right to self-determination.



The group of BIWAB enjoys walking around their community everyday as a women peace facilitators.

One of the major activities now of BIWAB in their participatory action research is to present to the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA)- Parliament the needs of certain communities and, in turn, gather the services of BARMM and introduce such services to the barangay level.

“Sinasabi namin sa mga participants na ito ang karapatan ninyo, na pwede kayong pumunta sa mga LGUs natin at sa mga frontliners . . .

Although sa Maranaw, hindi pwedeng pakialaman, at least nasasabi namin sa kanila.”

We educate our participants about their rights, that they can approach the LGUs or the frontliners... Although as Maranaws, we avoid interfering, at least we have informed them. ” Faida adds.

Indeed, the BIWAB's responsibilities have grown from simply militaristic to community-building. What was once a group avoided by most people is now being tapped by these very people to help them increase their skills and capacities. The mood of armed conflict is starting to fade as communities see more improvements in social services and fewer guns and marching troops. People are getting closer, and the air of doubt is slowly being replaced by communal concern. Children now see fewer adults engaged in arms, and so their ideas of community slowly equate to peace and mutual respect.



Nadja, one of the youngest BIWAB member shows off her uniform as a women peace facilitator.

In young women like Nadja H. S. Madid, the youngest BIWAB member, lies the hope that in the next generation, conflict will no longer be the center of their lives.

These women are among the beneficiaries who received trainings of the STEP Project funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in partnership with Nonviolent Peaceforce . STEP or Supporting Conflict Transformation Towards Effective Peacebuilding in the Bangsamoro Region is being implemented in North Cotabato, Maguindanao, and Lanao Del Sur to fortify reintegration efforts for former women combatants by empowering them to engage and support peacebuilding, promoting gender-responsive, inclusive, and culturally-sensitive legislation, policies and programmes, and building the resilience of communities in conflict hotspots through collaborative socio-economic activities and inclusive community-based reconciliation mechanisms

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