

NOREF Seminar Brief

Facilitating dialogue between Filipina and Colombian women

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Executive summary

Usually, when one hears about a “European tour”, one’s thoughts turn to rock bands in noisy, smelly buses. The Conciliation Resources European Tour is a somewhat different animal, consisting of women peace process actors rather than guitar players and disseminating a variety of experiences and lessons learned from two different peace processes. The mandate of Conciliation Resources (CR) is essentially to provide resources and act as a facilitator for actors working for solutions to violent conflict. Among its activities is the facilitation of dialogues and exchanges between actors with different experiences or working in different conflict scenarios.

Both in Colombia and the Philippines, CR has facilitated the coming together of women with diverse backgrounds with not much in common other than their gender and their involvement in peacebuilding activities. In 2011, CR organised an exchange between 10 women from each of

these two countries. The aim was to learn from their differing approaches to addressing conflict situations that have a number of similarities, and the women’s experiences of relative successes, failures and lessons learned. Now, four of these women make up the CR European Tour, speaking to interested audiences about their experiences as peacebuilders and of dialogue with other women peacebuilders with very different identities, statuses and priorities.

On May 16th 2012 PRIO hosted the Oslo leg of the CR European Tour, in co-operation with NOREF and the Forum for Women and Development (FOKUS). An audience composed of researchers, activists and practitioners in the field of peace and women’s rights listened to a self-reflective, nuanced and interesting set of accounts from the panel, and participated in a further exchange of views, arguments and experiences drawing on the vast expertise present in the room.

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Sharing experiences: the panellists' presentations

Three of the four panellists made presentations to the audience prior to opening the floor for comments, reflections and questions. The first speaker was Maria Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza, an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. Recognising how knowledge of the Philippine political context is limited globally, she sketched the main points of the conflict situation for the benefit of the audience. Simply put, two main conflicts and two corresponding peace processes dominate Philippine politics, namely the conflict between the government and a communist insurgency, and between the government and a Muslim insurgency. The two conflict situations, while not being strictly territorial in nature, still dominate different localities in the country. She said that the two peace processes in the country were narrowly focused on these two groups and their respective grievances, without addressing other actors involved in or affected by the conflicts.

Veneracion-Rallonza described Philippine civil society as very active in the peace processes, and remarked that the peace movement and the women's human rights movement previously tended to be involved in political turf wars when it came to their respective peace-related activities. However, to some extent the advent of should be: Resolution 1325 ameliorated this as it gave the women's movement a clear mandate in peacebuilding activities. In fact, the initiative to develop a national action plan for 1325 came from civil society, which was able to tap into government and security sector capacities to ground the action plan politically.

An important priority for Veneracion-Rallonza and her Filipina colleagues has been to evaluate the action plan and its impact in more depth. She observed that there is a tendency to evaluate by head count at the negotiating table rather than exploring whether there has been a real value added by the addition of women in the negotiations in terms of real benefits for women on the ground. Their evaluation exposed disillusionment and, not least, a strong interview fatigue on the ground,

which suggests that the policies were far from sufficiently locally grounded. This revelation has in turn led them to work to develop local as well as national action plans that would take the different needs and contexts on the ground into account, in an attempt to move away from a perspective where policy is to be translated into practice towards one where practice is translated into policy.

After Veneracion-Rallonza, Rosa Emilia Salamanca gave a presentation on the Colombian experience, highlighting the similarities as well as the differences that it had with the situation in the Philippines. Like the Philippines, Colombia experiences conflict on several fronts and with several actors, though the Colombian conflict actors are more intertwined and it is inaccurate to describe the different fronts of the conflict as actually being separate conflicts. The government is struggling to pacify two guerrilla movements, the FARC and the ELN, as well as paramilitary groups. All these actors are strongly involved in illicit economic activities related to narcotics and resource extraction, and the picture is further complicated as Colombia is increasingly becoming a site for transnational corporations interested in the country's many natural resources. Nevertheless, Salamanca described Colombia today as possessing a narrow window of opportunity for peacebuilding. The government has sent some positive signals in terms of actually acknowledging some realities of the conflict situation, particularly related to land rights, and the toll the conflict is taking on victims. At the same time, the guerrillas have released some hostages lately, which can also be seen as a signal that they are willing to make concessions. However, Salamanca was not very optimistic. She worried that Colombian society is too polarised between the right and the left, the urban and the rural, the poor and the well-off, and that this mistrust and lack of compassion and willingness to see the other with a basic level of humanity will hamper real efforts towards reconciliation.

In this context, the network of women's peacebuilding actors, Grupo Mujer Paz y Seguridad, may in fact serve as an analogy as well as a beacon of hope. The group, like that in the Philippines, is very diverse, and its members carry with them their biases and prejudices,

characterising Colombian society as a whole. Salamanca explained how they had to start out by having their own little peace process, to open up and move out of their individual comfort zones so that they could conduct a dialogue. As women, their mutual starting point was the victimisation of women in the conflict and the sense that women could bring something different to the political table. They experienced a lack of willingness from the government to implement Resolution 1325, and, while there are many women in the Colombian peace and human rights movements, women are struggling to be taken seriously and to have an impact in the political sphere. Making matters more difficult, the Colombian women came from very different socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and political backgrounds, and needed to find a way to bridge these divides if they were to arrive at strategies and solutions of which they could all feel ownership, based on their common identities as women.

All the panellists made this key observation: while the starting point for their dialogue was their shared involvement in peace processes at some level, they encountered their steepest learning curve in their attempt to find common ground among women with little in common beyond gender. Joeven Reyes, executive director of Sulong CARHRIHL, a citizens' network for human rights and international law in the Philippines, described the dialogues both among the Philippine women and between them and the Colombian group as a mini-peace process. Some came from grass-roots activist groups, others political backgrounds; some were business women, a number were academics and others had no further education; some identified themselves as feminists while others did not. These differences caused a lot of tension within the groups. They all stressed that they had to work hard in order to overcome their biases towards each other, and that this in itself was an important learning exercise and helped them gain new perspectives on their peacebuilding engagement.

Engaging the floor

The panellists' presentations triggered some interesting lines of discussion involving the majority of the audience at the seminar. Several

commentators picked up on the recurring point that doing head counts of women at the negotiating table, or otherwise involved in peacebuilding processes, is an insufficient measure of the extent to which women's concerns and needs are incorporated into the negotiated policies and solutions. While the panellists reflected on the challenges stemming from the significant internal differences in the groups, there seemed to be an underlying assumption that they, as women, would have common interests that ought to be articulated and form the basis of common strategies and goals. Some audience members challenged this assumption, asking what would happen if women's organisations were emerging that fundamentally disagreed with the priorities and goals of the established network. On the flipside of this challenge, other audience members were wondering about whether there was any point at all in focusing on women's participation in different processes as long as women's concerns were on the agenda and real change was happening on the ground.

The panellists acknowledged these perspectives, though they emphasised that a women's network does not have to be a feminist network. They had all experienced strong differences of opinion among themselves, and there was no consensus whether feminist theory and methodology formed the right, or even a relevant, foundation for their work. The point is not, Salamanca said, for all the different individuals and all the different and overlapping sub-groups to arrive at one common agenda and pool all their energy in an effort to focus exclusively on that. Rather, it is to respect and acknowledge all the different needs and wishes of the different sub-groups, which they will prioritise, while at the same time making the effort to identify the available space to work together on common interests as women.

Another set of interventions from the floor focused on the link between the efforts of these women's networks and other aspects of grass-roots engagement and organisation. One participant wanted to know whether the panellists' networks were engaged with the involvement of children and youth in peacebuilding and reconciliation activities, with the presupposition that youth often have a different and shorter road to reconciliation than adults. The panellists questioned the

overarching validity of that claim, though they were all concerned with securing the involvement of young women in their networks both for the benefit of cross-generational exchanges and for the purpose of securing the long-term vitality of their activities. They also spoke about their engagement for victims' rights, and the importance of working with victims of violence to fight impunity and ensure appropriate reparations and assistance. All panellists expressed the view that the common female experience of violent conflict can be found in victimhood, making it necessary for them to engage with this perspective.

Reflections and impressions

– The value of the exchange

Listening to the presentations of the panellists drives home the intrinsic value added of these types of open-ended dialogues and exchanges. Peacebuilding is a many-faceted, complicated and often painful process that, while healing, puts a strain on states, communities and individuals. Open-ended exchanges such as these allow individuals from very different backgrounds and with different takes on the causes of the conflict, as well as different experiences of suffering and victimisation, to communicate openly in search of an understanding of the 'Other' and some sense of common ground. The statements from the panellists all pointed towards this micro-level reconciliation and growth as perhaps the most rewarding but also among the most challenging aspects of their exchange.

Their expressed starting point – that their common identity as women gave them a common foundation for talking about conflict, victimisation and peacebuilding in a meaningful way in spite of significant socio-cultural and political differences – is controversial and may be perceived as essentialist. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the panellists were challenged from the floor on that point, leading to some interesting exchanges that could have expanded into a good discussion of principles had time allowed. The rather compelling argument made by the panel makes sense in terms of the underlying logic of Resolution 1325 and other expressions of the perceived gendered nature of armed conflict and its impact. The

foundation of these efforts is an understanding that women, as women, will always experience conflict, peacebuilding and post-conflict tensions in a way that is worthy of recognition as being different from the experiences of men solely because of gendered aspects of conflict and reconciliation. Accepting this premise, it must then logically follow that there will be commonalities in women's experiences of such conflicts across situational, social, political and ethnic divides. This is by no means an unproblematic conclusion, either empirically or politically, and the reflections and experiences of the Colombian and Filipina women in this network provide a valuable addition to this debate.

It is interesting that they start from the premise that they as women will have common interests and experiences in dealing with conflict and peacebuilding, and that they do not appear to have seriously reconsidered this basic starting point. They might have been expected to reconsider it, given that differences in locating common ground between women from very different ethnic, social and political backgrounds emerge as one of the most prominent lessons learned from their experiences in the network. Instead, they appear to have insisted on the intrinsic value of women collaborating on this topic and, through that ideological prism, to have searched and probed, sometimes painfully, for common ground.

– The main points and lessons emerging

What emerges from the discussion is a couple of key points that are worth taking to heart in the interest of furthering and improving the implementation of should be: Resolution 1325 and the subsequent resolutions on women, peace and security. The first point is the value added, as discussed above, from women actually coming together and discussing, in a critical fashion, their experiences with conflict and peacebuilding from a gendered perspective. Through such discussions, the international community's efforts to address women's specific needs, agency and contributions in the context of conflict can be challenged, and thus improved, through critical input from those who are considered its subjects.

Deriving from this, another interesting recurring

theme was the panellists' insistence that 1325 is not an end in itself, and that the prevailing priority of increased and improved implementation of the resolution could be looking at the issue from the wrong angle. Rather than moving from policy to practice, they said, we should aim to move from practice to policy when it comes to implementation. What this entails is particularly well illustrated by the experiences from the Philippines, where members of the network have been involved in efforts to map the impact of the different localised conflict scenarios on women in the various regions, as well as emphasising local needs and coping strategies when assisting in the development of so-called local action plans.

Rhetorically at least, this approach turns the logic of implementation on its head. Instead of using the resolution to identify relevant action points at a national (or local) level, they want to use local experiences to look critically at the resolution and choose the aspects that will be useful while discarding those that would be irrelevant or potentially disruptive. One take on this is that it is a rather dangerous approach, as the whole purpose of the resolution is to identify common areas of concern where states commit themselves to act in accordance with commonly agreed objectives. However, it is worth noting that, as the women on the panel experienced, it is overly simplistic to act as though there is one large, sweeping, common female experience of conflict and peacebuilding. While picking and choosing from the resolution may not be the right approach, there is certainly merit to the notion that implementation should be based on and adapted to local experiences and circumstances rather than precede any serious inquiry into the needs and specific challenges of any given situation. A more humble approach to implementation is likely to make the following activities much more effective and on-target. In that vein, states experiencing several different conflicts, or one overarching conflict that plays out differently in different localities, could do well to endeavour to develop local action plans tailored to the expressed experiences and needs of women in the respective locations.

Conclusion

The CR-facilitated dialogue networks and exchanges provide a space where women experiencing conflict and peacebuilding efforts in very different ways can come together and learn from one another, challenge one another and search for common ground. Additionally, by taking these dialogues on the road, as it were, and inviting participation from experts and practitioners outside the home countries of the network members, a valuable opportunity arises to critically examine one of the fundamental logics of Resolution 1325 and similar efforts. This underlying logic is the presumption that there is, at a more or less aggregate level, a distinct female experience of conflict and the aftermath of conflict. The tension between the urge to avoid essentialism and the desire to retain and develop a gendered perspective on conflict and peacebuilding is still largely unresolved in the international debate. It would greatly benefit the discourse if this could be honestly and openly addressed based on the experiences of a diverse set of women living in conflict situations. If the present dialogue seminar is anything to go by, it is fair to say that the dialogue exchanges facilitated by Conciliation Resources provide one piece of this narrative, and may serve as a model for further exchanges and explorations of gender, conflict and peacebuilding.