

12. Third Space Ecclesia: Women Promoting Justice and Peace in Conflict Zones

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Women in conflict zones have experienced multiple inequalities and vulnerabilities. They also experience unique security risks and even the threat of violence on account of their gender. However, they have generated positive social change despite their circumstances. This study examines illustrative cases of their involvement in the promotion of social justice and peace in their communities, particularly in the alleviation of gender-based violence, the provision of support services for Internally Displaced People (IDPs), and the utilization of proactive responses to foster security and a culture of peace. I analyze their lived experiences and challenges through the lens of intersectional feminism and offer theological reflections on how women's involvement and advocacy work as part of the promotion of social justice and peacebuilding in the Philippines constitutes a synodal "third space."

This chapter is based on descriptive, qualitative research. The data for this chapter was culled from prior research that I conducted in conflict zones in the southern Philippines. I obtained research ethics clearance prior to engaging in field work and data collection. In addition, I coordinated with duty bearers, such as the head of the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office in Zamboanga City, the director and staff of a non-government organization in Iligan City, and staff from the evacuation centers in both Zamboanga and Iligan, prior to collecting data. I obtained informed consent from the informants.

I conducted key informant interviews with sixty-four individuals from the cities of Zamboanga and Marawi. I also interviewed duty-bearers from

both locations; some informants were both IDPs and duty-bearers.¹ Moreover, I conducted focus group discussions with 344 IDPs, including 224 people (120 parents and 104 youth) at an evacuation center and at transitory sites in Zamboanga City, and 120 people (64 parents and 56 youth) at an evacuation center and in home-based evacuation communities near the Islamic City of Marawi.

I have utilized Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, which recognizes the interconnections between gender and other markers of difference, such as race and ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age, dis/ability, religion, and nationality.² These intersecting social locating factors shape the specific forms of marginalization, as well as privilege, that women experience.³ Intersectionality informs the patterns and nuances in women's lived experiences and vulnerabilities in conflict zones.⁴ Intersectional feminist theory can be used to identify gender- and culturally-sensitive, inclusive interventions about the promotion of the rights of women, as well as other gender minorities, who belong to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.⁵ Intersectional feminism informs how the women informants took part in social justice and peace initiatives in their

¹ Persons who provided services to IDPs, including employees, consultants, contractual staff, and volunteers.

² Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Unwin Hyman, 1990); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (South End Press, 2000); Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁴ Estelle Disch, ed., *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*, 5th ed. (McGraw-Hill, 2009); World Health Organization, "Violence Against Women," in *Beyond Borders: Thinking Critically about Global Issues*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (Worth, 2006), 120-127; Jill Radford and Elizabeth A. Stanko, "Violence Against Women and Children: The Contradictions of Crime Control Under Patriarchy," in *Women, Violence, and Male Power: Feminist Activism, Research, and Practice*, ed. Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly, and Jill Radford (Open University Press, 1996), 66-80.

⁵ Judy Root Aulette and Judith Wittner, *Gendered Worlds*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011).

communities and framed their engagements accordingly. I also utilized this lens in my theological reflections.

Contextualizing the Conflicts

Armed conflict remains a long-standing problem in certain regions in Mindanao, located in the southern Philippines. The past decades have witnessed violent attacks by armed rebel groups and/or militant Islamist groups, including: the 2013 Zamboanga Siege, perpetrated by a faction of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the 2017 Marawi Siege, involving the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Maute Group, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁶ The conflicts have led to the loss of lives, the destruction of property and infrastructure, and the displacement of numerous civilians, who are predominantly from racial, ethnic, and religious minorities in Philippine society.⁷

Before discussing the role of women in the promotion of justice and peace in conflict zones in the Philippines, it is necessary to discuss the underlying factors behind the long-standing ethnic and religious conflict in particular provinces in Mindanao. The conflict in Mindanao stems from complex historical, socio-economic, and political factors that led to the growth of the Muslim separatist movement, armed struggle, and

⁶ Amnesty International, "Philippines: 'Battle of Marawi' Leaves Trail of Death and Destruction," [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/philippines-battle-of-marawi-leaves-trail-of-death-and-destruction](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/philippines-battle-of-marawi-leaves-trail-of-death-and-destruction); Carmela Fonbuena, "Terror in Mindanao: The Mautes of Marawi," *Rappler*, June 26, 2017, [rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/terrorism-mindanao-maute-family-marawi-city](https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/terrorism-mindanao-maute-family-marawi-city).

⁷ Patty Paison, "Marawi Evacuees Undergo Stress Debriefing, Play Therapy," *Rappler*, June 8, 2017, [rappler.com/nation/172341-marawi-evacuees-stress-debriefing-play-therapy](https://www.rappler.com/nation/172341-marawi-evacuees-stress-debriefing-play-therapy); and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Philippines: Revision of the Zamboanga Action Plan," reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-zamboanga-action-plan-2014-revision.

extremism.⁸ The Moros⁹ have deep-seated grievances toward the colonial and postwar government administrations regarding the deprivation of their right to self-determination and equitable access to resources in their ancestral domain.¹⁰

Muslims comprise 5 percent of the Philippine population and are concentrated in Mindanao, where Islam was first introduced in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, until the advent of colonialism.¹¹ Muslims resisted Spanish conquest, but fell under American sovereignty.¹² When the United States made Mindanao part of an independent Philippines in 1946, the majority of Muslims felt betrayed, as they did not consider themselves Filipinos, and retained their distinct religious and cultural identity as the Bangsamoro.¹³ Hostilities between Muslims and

⁸ Randolph S. David, *Nation, Self, and Citizenship: An Invitation to Philippine Sociology* (Anvil, 2004); and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "The US, the War on Terror and Mindanao," in *The US and the War on Terror in the Philippines*, ed. Patricio N. Abinales and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo (Anvil, 2008), 1–12.

⁹ The Spaniards used the term "Moros," based on a Latin name for the inhabitants of the Roman province of Mauretania in North Africa, to refer to all Muslims, which gave rise to the term "Moors." It often had the connotation of "foreigner." Muslims in the Philippines reclaimed this label to refer to courageous, unconquered people; see Benedicto R. Bacani, *The Mindanao Peace Talks: Another Opportunity to Resolve the Moro Conflict in the Philippines* (US Institute of Peace, 2005).

¹⁰ Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (Anvil, 2005); Bacani, *The Mindanao Peace Talks*; and Eric Gutierrez and Saturnino Borrás, Jr., *The Moro Conflict: Landlessness and Misdirected State Policies* (East-West Center, 2004), files.ethz.ch/isn/26100/PS008.pdf.

¹¹ The Muslim community comprises about thirteen ethnolinguistic groups, distinguished on the basis of language, in the Philippines; see Asian Development Bank, "Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Minorities and Poverty Reduction: Philippines," adb.org/publications/series/indigenous-peoples-ethnic-minorities-and-poverty-reduction; Bacani, *Mindanao Peace Talks*.

¹² Bacani, *Mindanao Peace Talks*; and Cesar Adib Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines* (Mizan Press, 1985).

¹³ The Bangsamoro, which means "separate nation," includes Muslim ethnic groups that historically resisted colonization and considered themselves as a citizenry separate from but equal to Filipinos. Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines*; and R.J. May, "The Wild West in the South: A Recent Political History of Mindanao," in *Mindanao*:

Christians persisted due to the tendency of Filipino national leaders to disregard Muslims and their lands and to employ the same exploitative practices used by the Spanish and American authorities—a form of internal colonialism. This is reflected in the government-sponsored migration of Christian settlers to Mindanao, which displaced Muslims and indigenous people from their land. Events in the 1960s and 1970s further alienated the Muslim community, particularly: the 1968 Jabidah Massacre, wherein the military executed Muslim trainees on Corregidor Island after they allegedly launched a mutiny due to unpaid services while training for secret operations to invade Sabah; clashes between Muslims and Christians; and the loss of Muslim communal lands to Christian settlers.¹⁴

In the 1960s, a national separatist movement among Muslims emerged. Foremost in this struggle was the MNLF.¹⁵ Led by Nur Misuari, the organization initially fought for independence, but signed a peace agreement with the government in 1996 and settled for the autonomy of selected provinces in Mindanao.¹⁶ Militant breakaway factions emerged, such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), established in 1978 by

Land of Unfulfilled Promise, ed. Mark Turner, R. J. May, and Lulu R. Turner (New Day Publishers, 1992), 125–146.

¹⁴ Sylvia Concepcion, Larry Dical, Rufa Guiam, Romulo Dela Rosa, and Mara Stankovitch, *Breaking the Links Between Economics and Conflict in Mindanao* (International Alert, 2003); Glenda Gloria, “Jabidah and Merdeka: The Inside Story,” *Rappler*, March 18, 2018, rappler.com/newsbreak/jabidah-massacre-merdeka-sabah; HURIGHTS Osaka, “Mindanao Conflict: In Search of Peace and Human Rights,” *FOCUS* 54 (2008): 2-4; Christos Iacovou, “From MNLF to Abu Sayyaf: The Radicalization of Islam in the Philippines,” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, July 11, 2000, ict.org.il/Article.aspx?ID=133; and Jocelyn Uy, “Jabidah Massacre’s Survivor Would Rather Forget,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 19, 2008, newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20080319-125597/Jabidah-massacres-survivor-would-rather-forget.

¹⁵ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*; and May, “The Wild West in the South.”

¹⁶ Patricio N. Abinales, *The Joys of Dislocation: Mindanao, Nation, and Region* (Anvil, 2008); Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*; and Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (University of California Press, 1998).

Salamat Hashim, who favored independence rather than autonomy.¹⁷ Peace negotiations began in 1997, but got stalled.¹⁸ The final peace agreement between the government and the MILF was signed in March 2014.¹⁹ With the evolution of the separatist movement, divisions exist between organizations receptive or resistant to dialogue with the government.²⁰ This has led to the intensification of armed conflict in Mindanao. The Zamboanga Siege occurred on September 9, 2013, and continued for nearly a month, affecting coastal villages. Sources reveal that ISIS regarded Marawi City as a potential *wilaya* (province) as part of its plans to establish a caliphate.²¹ These conflicts displaced numerous civilians. In Zamboanga, many IDPs experienced prolonged stays in traditional evacuation centers, as well as in transitory sites or other temporary housing.²² As for IDPs from Marawi, who largely opted for home-based evacuation arrangements, they were not allowed to enter their homes for extended periods.²³ Gendered violence and lawlessness were

¹⁷ “Guide to the Philippines conflict,” *BBC News*, October 28, 2012, bbc.com/news/world-asia-17038024; HURIGHTS Osaka, “Mindanao Conflict.”

¹⁸ Bacani, *The Mindanao Peace Talks*; Jeo Angelo Chico Elamparo, “Gov’t–MILF Peace Talks Timeline,” *ABS-CBN News*, January 25, 2014, news.abs-cbn.com/focus/01/25/14/govt-milf-peace-talks-timeline-0.

¹⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, “The Philippines Case Study: Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/philippines; and Christian V. Esguerra and T.J. Burgonio, “Philippines, MILF Sign Peace Agreement,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 28, 2014, newsinfo.inquirer.net/589706/bangsamoro-rising.

²⁰ Banlaoi, “The Sources of the Abu Sayyaf’s Resilience in the Southern Philippines”; Iacovou, “From MNLF to Abu Sayyaf”; and McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels*.

²¹ Hincks, “ISIS in the Philippines.”

²² Rey-Luis Banagudos, “How Muslim Women Deal with Pain, Trauma 5 Years after Zamboanga Siege,” *Philippine News Agency*, September 11, 2018, pna.gov.ph/articles/1047654; Bong Garcia, “NHA Rushes Completion of Zamboanga Siege Victims’ Houses,” *Sun Star Philippines*, September 14, 2017, sunstar.com.ph/article/164123/Business/NHA-rushes-completion-of-Zamboanga-siege-victims-houses; and Bong Garcia, “Zamboanga City Commemorates 4th Anniversary of Siege,” *Sun Star Philippines*, September 8, 2017, sunstar.com.ph/article/163101/Business/Zamboanga-City-commemorates-4th-anniversary-of-siege.

²³ Ellie Aben, “‘We Want Our Homes Back’: Marawi Residents’ Plea to Philippines’ President Duterte,” *Arab News*, May 24, 2018, arabnews.com/node/1309161/; United Nations High

prevalent during conflict and post-conflict situations. These trends provide a frame for assessing the role of women in fostering justice and peace in conflict zones in Mindanao.

The Role of Women in the Promotion of Justice and Peace

In my research, women played instrumental roles in promoting social justice and peace during and after the conflict in Zamboanga and Marawi. Some informants contributed to the alleviation of gender-based violence and provided other support services for IDPs. Others responded to security concerns and served as agents of peace-building. Some duty-bearers promoted intercultural sensitivity and the empowerment of IDPs.

Alleviating Gender-Based Violence

Some women, despite the ordeal of armed conflict and displacement, extended assistance to fellow IDPs, particularly those who had experienced gender-based violence (GBV). The women played a crucial role in educating fellow IDPs about their rights and in alleviating GBV at the grassroots level.

Several women in Zamboanga demonstrated their commitment to ending gendered violence. One of them is Carmelita,²⁴ a middle-aged woman of Visayan and Waray descent, who served as a Peacekeeper before becoming a facilitator at the Women-Friendly Space (WFS) at the Grandstand,²⁵ as part of an initiative set up by the Department of Social

Commissioner for Refugees, “Marawi Update: The Last of the Evacuation Centers,” unhcr.org/ph/17719-feb2020-enews-marawi.html; and Ashley Westerman, “Over 120,000 People Remain Displaced 3 Years After Philippines’ Marawi Battle,” *NPR*, October 23, 2020, npr.org/2020/10/23/925316298/over-120-000-people-remain-displaced-3-years-after-philippines-marawi-battle.

²⁴ Names of informants have been changed to protect their privacy.

²⁵ The Grandstand is the monicker that locals use to refer to the Joaquin F. Enriquez Sports Complex in Zamboanga City. It was the major evacuation center and housed up to 118,000 IDPs for a time. See Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Philippines: Zamboanga Action Plan 2014 (Revision),” unocha.org/publications/report/philippines/philippines-zamboanga-action-plan-2014-revision.

Welfare and Development. When I first met her, she was in the midst of giving a lecture on the different types of abuse to women IDPs, who were predominantly from Muslim ethnic groups. I later learned that she herself was a survivor of GBV, until her separation from her estranged husband before the siege. She provided counseling for survivors, some of whom visited her tent late at night after yet another episode of abuse. She also helped investigate GBV cases at the Grandstand. She voiced her misgivings about how some survivors withdrew the charges once they learned that their partners would be put in jail, or returned to their abusers after all the interventions that she and other duty-bearers exerted. But she also respected their decision. Even after relocating to a faith-based transitory site, she occasionally visited the Grandstand to check on some survivors, who considered her a trusted confidante. Two of the GBV survivors I interviewed confirmed this and expressed their appreciation for the assistance she provided. Carmelita subsequently worked at the WFS of a government-funded transitory site for some time but discontinued this due to the long, expensive commute. At her new community, she was likewise part of the support system of other IDPs, some of whom had been used by the rebels as human shields during the siege and remained traumatized. She also served as an advocate for abused children and youth.

Another advocate is Faisah, a middle-aged Tausug woman and parent-leader at the Grandstand. Her drug-addicted brother-in-law abused his wife, who attempted suicide. Faisah recalled: "My sister-in-law drank poison. She poisoned herself because she was always being beaten up. It's like she just wanted it to end . . . Her mouth foamed over. Good thing she didn't drink much of it." Her sister-in-law was brought to the hospital and survived. She and other duty-bearers had already documented prior episodes of abuse and thus had her brother-in-law banned from the Grandstand. They assisted her sister-in-law in returning to her native Sulu.

Due diligence was also essential in determining the authenticity of claims regarding gendered violence. Hadja Mariam, a Tausug woman in her mid-40s and Peacekeeper at a transitory site for IDPs, demonstrated this. She and another Peacekeeper investigated a woman's allegations of

domestic violence and discovered that she abused her husband physically and verbally, but reported him as the aggressor when he retaliated.

The informants' narratives illustrate how women's empowerment is crucial. Rania, a middle-aged Sama-Badjao community leader and teacher at a school set up by a foundation for Sama-Badjao students, disclosed: "I'm convinced that whatever men can do, women can also do. Women have to be taught that." She added that some women were so dependent on their husbands for their financial and economic support, to the point of fearing separation despite being abused: "They're not empowered." She took it upon herself to remind women of their capabilities.

Empowerment gets translated to women's newfound awareness of their rights. Yasmin, a Tausug mother in her twenties, related the impact of attending seminars on gendered violence at the Grandstand: "I learned that we, as women, have rights after all. I didn't know that before." Some women thus moved from being a powerless victim to an agentic survivor. The experience of Salima, a Sama-Badjao community leader in her forties and a mother of five children, is a case in point. She had experienced physical violence, verbal abuse, and marital rape at the hands of her estranged husband when they resided at the Grandstand. She found the courage to separate from her husband, despite how her culture expected women to remain with abusive partners. Due to unequal divorce laws for Muslim women, only men could file for divorce. Salima demanded that her husband divorce her, lest she charge him with violating the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children law. This led her divorce to be granted. She claimed that she was the first woman—if not, one of the first women—in the Sama-Badjao community who divorced her abusive husband, and that she set a precedent for other women in her ethnic group who were trapped in and struggling with abusive marriages.

Providing Support Services for IDPs

Some informants, who were impacted by the Marawi siege in terms of losing their home and/or being displaced from their work, extended assistance to other displaced people. For instance, Parisa, a middle-aged

Maranao woman who worked as a guidance counselor, assisted in providing counseling and other mental health services for IDPs. When I met her, she had just accompanied a family to a hospital due to the nervous breakdown suffered by two sisters who were residing at an evacuation center. Parisa was also displaced and shared an apartment with many relatives, shouldering the bulk of their living expenses, as she was one of the few employed people in their household.

Due to the specific risks confronting Christians, Estella, a Visayan woman in her thirties and a faculty member at Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi, immediately evacuated from her dormitory to the nearby city of Iligan, where she rented a studio apartment with a friend. She and her roommate also shared their apartment with another displaced family and their domestic helpers during the siege. Despite the disruptions in her living and work situation, she volunteered with a mental health and psychosocial support group that was co-founded by her colleague and assisted in providing psycho-social services for students and professionals affected by the siege.

Amira, a Maranao woman in her mid-thirties and a faculty member and administrator at MSU, identified as economically displaced. She still taught using alternative arrangements and continued with her graduate studies at the state university's campus in Iligan City. She visited her displaced relatives at a nearby municipality and provided for their economic needs. She also assisted in providing stress debriefing for IDPs. Many other women informants, including other faculty members at MSU and/or students, had experienced the destruction of or damage to their homes and/or economic displacement but continued to volunteer with the aforementioned support group, which served at least five thousand people during the siege and has since become a non-government organization.

Responding to Security Concerns and Peace-Building Initiatives

Some women informants encountered and responded to multiple gendered security risks during the siege. Three sisters were held hostage and used as human shields by the MNLF rebels during the Zamboanga siege.

They encouraged their companions to stay calm until their life-threatening situation would pass. They also remained civil toward the rebels to avoid amplifying tensions.

Other informants, who were mothers, responded proactively to at-risk situations affecting their daughters. Carmelita and Marlina, a middle-aged Peacekeeper of Waray descent, accompanied their daughters to the public toilets at the Grandstand to protect them from sexual harassment. Carmelita also chased after a thief who broke into her tent, although she tripped during the scuffle and suffered bruises. Her daughter applied for a vaguely-defined job that required computer skills, shortly before the Marawi siege, and she instructed another daughter to tag along during the meeting with women recruiters. It turned out that the recruiters lived near Marawi and inquired about applicants' willingness to travel. Upon receiving a text message from her daughters, Carmelita grew alarmed. She suspected that the recruiters were Islamists. True to form, some informants who had been displaced by the Marawi siege confirmed that some Islamist women were fronts for the Maute group.

Some women from Marawi shared their vulnerability to gendered violence and militarism. They narrated multiple experiences of actual or attempted violence due to their gender or secondary violence due to their ties with family members or relatives. For instance, Maha, a middle-aged woman of Maranao and Visayan descent and a faculty member at MSU, was stopped by ISIS fighters at gunpoint while she was evacuating with her young children and had to recite Islamic teachings to avoid being shot. Despite being four months pregnant, she and her children were made to lie face-down on the ground, and she helped them calm down, even as one soldier was shot several feet from them. She experienced verbal abuse and harassment at gunpoint by Islamophobic military personnel, who were sent to rescue them from a gasoline station where she and others had hidden and who called attention to her "costume"—that is, her long, black dress, which she wore as a Muslimah who had completed *hajj*; she did not take his disparaging remarks lightly and called him out on expected military decorum toward civilians.

Other women informants were instrumental in protecting and ensuring the safety of their family members and other significant networks. Daria, a Maranao woman in her twenties, outwitted ISIS members by offering them socks and other provisions to ensure that her husband would not be taken and forced to fight with them. Asma, a single Maranao woman in her thirties, related how she ensured the safety of everyone in the Office of the Mayor, where she worked, when the Marawi Siege broke out; this included then-Mayor Majul Gandamra, a highly-valued target, and her pregnant sister. Some ISIS fighters stopped her while she was driving home the following day, but she stayed calm so as to get home safely and assist her other family members in preparing to evacuate; their home was immediately destroyed by airstrikes. Despite this, she volunteered with the same support group with which many other informants from MSU got involved.

Lanika, a middle-aged Maranao woman and faculty member and administrator at MSU, was stranded on campus, along with her husband, when the siege broke out. She instructed her daughters to hide her sons, whose gender and age made them prime targets for forced membership in ISIS. When she went to rescue her children and her elderly mother at their home in Marawi the following day, ISIS fighters were patrolling their street. She instructed her husband to remain in their vehicle and politely asked the fighters for permission to fetch her mother. She guarded her mother and her sons when they left their home, which was destroyed afterward.

The informants acknowledged and even exemplified the instrumental role of women in peace-building in their communities. Zainab, a Maranao woman in her thirties, mentioned that women in Muslim ethnic groups were relied upon to resolve conflict, such as animosities between warring families and clans. Their role in peace negotiations was framed as essential to prevent the escalation of violence through *rido* (clan feud), as it impacted Muslim ethnic groups in the Philippines. Other informants helped generate awareness about issues relating to peace and conflict. Estella once hosted a panel discussion about the root causes of armed

conflict and extremism in Mindanao and the contributions of academics. For her part, Lanika authored a book containing people's memoirs of the Marawi Siege. She also serves as the anchor in a radio program that addresses the issues of IDPs. She has written extensively about the root causes of armed conflict and extremism in Mindanao conflict and other peacebuilding issues in her newspaper column. As a development communication practitioner and educator, she trained students to use media and communication to raise awareness about vulnerable communities in Mindanao and to promote peace and development.

Some women demonstrated cultural sensitivity in their interactions with and services for IDPs. The executive director and program staff of a non-governmental organization, who were Visayan and thus affiliated with a predominantly Christian ethno-linguistic group, incorporated pertinent cultural and religious norms in their interventions for survivors of the Marawi siege, who were predominantly Muslims from the Maranao ethnic group. The executive director emphasized how they prioritized livelihood projects for displaced people, given the cultural propensity of Maranaos to engage in trade-related activities, regardless of socio-economic status and educational attainment. She claimed that this approach was more feasible than simply giving dole-outs to those in evacuation centers. The staff members who connected me to the communities they served and even accompanied me during my fieldwork also exemplified cultural sensitivity in their assessment of the necessary approaches in providing assistance to Maranao IDPs. Their rapport with their beneficiaries was noticeable, so much so that an employee of the Department of Social Welfare and observed that the IDPs in an evacuation center were eager upon hearing about the visits of the said organization but were more difficult to convene otherwise.

Tanya, a Visayan informant in her thirties, took her notion of cultural sensitivity a step further when she disclosed her close affinity with the Maranao community. While she acknowledged her upbringing in a predominantly Christian community and her exposure to the norms of her ethnolinguistic group, she asserted: "Culturally, I'm Maranao."

Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Women's Role in Conflict Resolution

Intersectionality theory—and indeed, intersectional feminist theory—highlights the links between gender and other social locating factors, such as race and ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age, dis/ability, religion, and nationality, in shaping people's experiences of oppression and privilege.²⁶ Analyzing the lived experiences of the informants illustrates how their intersecting identities shaped their vulnerabilities and even their access to safety nets and support systems in times of displacement. It was common for the informants in both Zamboanga and Marawi to experience the risk of gender-based victimization, coupled with Islamophobia and racism against ethnic groups affiliated with the Muslim community. In terms of their post-displacement living situation, their gender, ethnic group, religion, and social class impacted their options and the roles and expectations ascribed to them.

For IDPs from Zamboanga, who were low-income, informal settlers from predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, as well as some Christian ethnic groups that had often intermarried into the Muslim community, their only options were to stay at the Grandstand or to live with relatives willing to host them. For those displaced by the Marawi siege, Maranao cultural norms, such as *marbatabat* (honor, in the context of both individual honor and family or clan-based honor), prevented individuals from letting their relatives and other significant networks stay in evacuation centers. Despite their own experience of displacement, they often felt compelled to accommodate and support these relatives because it would have been seen as shameful for them to let their family members or kin endure the living conditions at evacuation centers, causing a strain on their living situation and resources. For others, having an alternative residence near Marawi was an invaluable resource during the siege but also

²⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins"; hooks, *Feminist Theory*; Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010).

led to the possibility that their networks would appropriate the same resource.

Intersectionality theory as well as intersectional feminist theory informs how the informants framed their involvement in social justice and peace initiatives in their communities. Some women informants invoked gendered roles, such as being a mother, a wife, a daughter, a niece, and so on, and relational considerations and dynamics, consistent with the traditional gender socialization of Filipina women, in describing how they handled multiple challenges and responsibilities in conflict-ridden environments. This illustrates how the women's survival strategies and coping mechanisms in times of displacement cannot be isolated from their relational roles in their families and communities. Others alluded to gender-specific concerns in religious and ethnic minority communities, such as the need to counter religious and cultural norms that normalize women's inequality and victimization. This has implications for interventions for minority women through the prism of intersectional feminism.

At the same time, there were women informants who highlighted not so much their gender as their ethnicity, religion, social class, and educational background, among others. This illustrates how gender as a marker of one's identity may be subsumed under other interrelated social locating factors, and how the articulation of concerns regarding women's empowerment invariably intersects with broader issues relating to social justice and peace-building.

Whether or not the informants explicitly identified with intersectional feminist concerns, their recognition of the underlying causes of armed conflict and extremism in Mindanao stands out. This is aligned with Juergensmeyer's (2017) cultural perspective on religious extremism, which highlights how contemporary acts of religious violence are often justified by the historical precedent of religion's violent past and stem from people's

cultural contexts and global social and political changes.²⁷ Distinctive world views and moral justifications of religious militant activists inform the ideas and communities of support behind acts of violence, rather than the so-called “terrorists” who commit them. This applies to the way some informants framed the motives and actions of the MNLF faction that perpetuated the Zamboanga siege and the Islamist militancy of the Maute Group, as well as the Abu Sayyaf Group, in perpetuating the Marawi siege. This can be used to examine the likelihood of sympathizing with armed opposition groups and religious militants in the Philippine context. The informants from both Zamboanga and Marawi were clear about the need to address this issue to avert the threat of another siege—and the risk of enabling a new generation of extremists.

Theological Underpinnings of Women as ‘Third Space Ecclesia’ in Conflict Zones

The lived experiences of my informants as much-needed instruments of justice and peace in conflict-ridden communities in Mindanao has implications for the role of women as “third space ecclesia” in conflict zones. In my theological reflections, I draw upon insights from different sources, such as biblical women and the lessons learned from their example, intersectional theology, synodal documents, and feminist theology on conflict resolution.

Lessons from Biblical Women

The narratives of the women in my research are aligned with the examples of wise, powerful women in the Old Testament of the Bible, such as Deborah, Judith, and Esther. These biblical women intervened in conflict situations and protected their people despite the considerable risks involved and the comparatively more dependent and/or disfranchised status of women during their time(s). This is a testament to women’s

²⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 4th ed. (University of California Press, 2017).

strength and agency in resisting oppression and promoting justice and peace despite the constraints of patriarchy and other overlapping inequalities.

Deborah, whose story is told in the Book of Judges, was a prophetess and judge during a conflict-ridden period in the history of Israel. She ruled with courage and decisiveness, and her leadership resulted in unity and peace in Israel for forty years. Judith, whose story is narrated in the Book of Judith, was a Jewish widow who lived in Israel post-exile, at a time when her people remained under the control of Persia. She was assertive in her dealings with the men who ruled the city and successfully outsmarted a general who was an adversary—and even beheaded him in the camp of the enemy forces.²⁸ Esther, whose story appears in the Book of Esther, was a queen, who was of Jewish descent and came from humble beginnings. She lived in an age when women experienced sheer objectification—even those in leadership positions—and could easily be deposed for defying their spouses, as was the case of Queen Vashti, who defied the orders of King Ahasuerus for her to appear and be “looked at”—a metaphor for being viewed naked—by his guests.²⁹ While Esther’s selection as the new queen was influenced by patriarchal structures and practices, this served as the means for her to save her people. She foiled a plot that would have resulted in the genocide of the Jews.³⁰ All these women challenged prevailing patriarchal views that favored men’s leadership and interests—and their involvement in aggression and violence.

A feminist theological reading of the stories of these women reveals the role of women as peacemakers, negotiators, and leaders in situations characterized by conflict and strife. This parallels the experiences of the

²⁸ Hanna Muldowney, “Judith: A Portrait of the Value of Women in the Church,” *St. John Vianney Lay Division*, September 13, 2019, sjvlaydivision.org/judith.

²⁹ Sidnie White Crawford, “Esther,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (John Knox Press, 2012).

³⁰ Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding from a Religious Perspective* (IRCE, 2021), kirkensnodhjelp.no/sites/default/files/2024-10/2942-112022a-a5-nca-rowipb-magazine-design-final-edited-13-feb.pdf.

women in my research, who engaged in creative problem-solving and agentic decision-making in the face of danger and conflict. In the biblical era as well as in contemporary society, women and girls remain largely oppressed. Their gender intersects with other social locating factors, such as their sexuality, their age, their social class, and their ethnicity, among others, to create specific forms of power and powerlessness, which influence their vulnerability to abuse but also their agency in the face of structural oppressions. A common theme in the narratives of these biblical women and the women in my research lies in the role of women as “third spaces” in conflict situations. This is a powerful testament of the synodal third space that the church is called—and challenged—to emulate.

Intersectional Theology and the Promotion of Justice and Peace

Intersectional theology recognizes interconnected structural inequalities relating to gender, race, social class, and other markers of difference. It also fleshes out the role of religion in perpetuating injustice.³¹ This has implications for the involvement of women in peace and justice causes in conflict zones in the Philippines, as well as for the assessment of the situation of IDPs, who are marginalized on multiple levels and have complex needs that should be understood through a gender and culturally sensitive lens.

Entrenched sexism, racism, classism, religious discrimination, and other forms of systemic marginalization have historically affected people’s socialization and corresponding world views.³² Social norms that perpetuate or resist these intersecting inequalities have been—deliberately or otherwise—historically incorporated in religious settings, as well as other institutions that influence and are influenced by religion. Gender and cultural dynamics, including those that normalize unequal relations and statuses, are likely to shape religious and cultural practices and manifestations thereof in social life, which are often normalized and

³¹ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Fortress Press, 2018).

³² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; hooks, *Feminist Theory*; Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*.

construed as part of personal and collective identities. Internalized oppression is another crucial issue, in that there are women and other gender minorities—particularly those who come from communities consisting of cultural and religious minorities—who either downplay or rationalize the experience of subordination, seeing themselves and/or their respective group or community as deserving of it.

Cultural norms and religious practices may either promote or constrain women’s involvement in social justice and peace-building initiatives in the Philippine context. Social and pastoral interventions for IDPs should incorporate intersectionality in their practices. A patronizing approach, built on the assumption of “Christians saving Muslims,” would intensify existing tensions, given the deep-seated grievances of Muslims due to their history of postwar oppression and forcible inclusion into the Philippines as a newly independent nation. Theological and pastoral responses to social justice and peace-building in conflict zones should incorporate interreligious engagement and gender and cultural sensitivity, to promote genuine reconciliation and healing.

Through the lens of intersectional feminist theology, one can grasp to what extent women’s contributions to justice and peacebuilding are undervalued in the Philippine context due to the country’s patriarchal structure as a result of colonialism—a far cry from the way precolonial society revered women’s (and women-identifying people, regardless of assigned sex at birth) sacred role as *babaylan* (priestess and shaman/healer). At the same time, the specific concerns and even the experiences of historical injustice of ethnic and religious minorities in the Philippines—which inform the context of women’s justice and peacebuilding initiatives in conflict zones—often receive limited attention. These are crucial concerns that need to be addressed and resolved, in the spirit of synodality. It is hoped that the effort to build a synodal church, which has focused on the theme of “Communion, Participation, and Mission,” would provide the space for the healing of age-old wounds and injustices. This healing is aligned with women’s involvement in social justice and peacebuilding activities in conflict zones in the Philippines.

Expanding the Reach of Synodality

Women’s involvement in justice and peace initiatives in conflict zones in the southern Philippines illustrates the extent to which they address crucial services and needs impacting people in underserved, at-risk communities—the same communities that the church should pay closer attention to as part of the goals of synodality. At times, their advocacies and ministries remain overlooked or seen as an extension of their other responsibilities—even if they practically do everything for others. Yet their work—be it visible or invisible—makes a profound difference in society and constitutes a synodal “third space” consisting of new approaches, stakeholders, and duty-bearers to solve persisting, age-old problems.

The 2024 Vatican Synod highlights the ongoing need to listen to multiple marginalized voices as part of deepening and amplifying the ministry and service of the Catholic Church. As mentioned in the *Vademecum*, which is intended to be a handbook to complement and to be utilized in conjunction with the *Preparatory Document* at the service of the synodal process: “Pope Francis is calling the Church to rediscover its deeply synodal nature. This rediscovery of the synodal roots of the Church will involve a process of humbly learning together how God is calling us to be as the Church in the third millennium.”³³ As such, the Synod on Synodality entails the promotion of inclusivity, listening to the “other” and the incorporation of perspectives of marginalized and underrepresented groups, including those represented by the women in this research, as well as the communities they serve.

The inter-continental synodal document titled “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” puts forth the metaphor of a tent to articulate the values of synodality. True to form, the document frames the synodal tent as “a space of *communion*, a place of *participation*, and a foundation for *mission*.”³⁴

³³ Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, 2021), no. 7, synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html.

³⁴ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” nos. 8, 21–22, synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf. Emphasis in original.

The synodal journey entails listening to the people of God and recommends salient approaches, including: the adoption of an inclusive, welcoming approach to the act of listening; dialogue with adherents of other religious and faith traditions; a participatory outlook; concrete practices that bring communion, participation, and mission to fruition; and incorporation of these ideals in liturgy. As stated: “The vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process.”³⁵ As numerous communities recognize that synodality presents invaluable opportunities to listen to diverse groups who feel alienated and excluded from the church, the document makes the case that: “In this journey, the Churches have realized that the path to greater inclusion—the enlarged tent—is a gradual one. It begins with listening and requires a broader and deeper conversion of attitudes and structures, as well as new approaches to pastoral accompaniment; it begins in a readiness to recognize that the peripheries can be the place where a call to conversion resounds along with the call to put the Gospel more decisively into practice.”³⁶

The women in my research embody these values and ideals in the promotion of justice and peace in conflict zones. In their involvement in initiatives to eradicate gender-based violence, promote security and ensure the well-being of IDPs despite their own vulnerabilities and to promote cultural and gender sensitivity, their praxis is a way of engaging in the mission of the church—regardless of whether or not they are Catholic or Christian. It even demonstrates the capacity to promote interfaith solidarity. This provides a much-needed safe, synodal third space. Through their advocacies and praxis, they exemplify new ways of being church, across the boundaries of gender and religion.

As a disclaimer, this reflection does not intend to promote essentialist gender stereotypes, such as men’s involvement in aggression and fighting

³⁵ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” no. 21.

³⁶ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” nos. 22, 24.

and women's promotion of relational concerns and peacebuilding. However, it is important that women in conflict zones in Mindanao convey powerful, inspiring messages in their justice and peace praxis. Instead of conforming to patriarchal stereotypes such as their passivity, helplessness, and subordination, the women in my research demonstrate agency—be it in a spiritual or relational sense—to bring healing to communities and regions characterized by animosity, hatred, and bloodshed, and to contribute to peace-building. They take a proactive stance towards the promotion of justice and peace in the sense of demanding accountability, rather than avoiding confrontation and/or sweeping deep-seated inequities under the rug.

The people of God form the heart of the church, beyond a structural or institutional sense—and indeed, beyond the place(s) of worship in a physical sense. Women's involvement in social justice and peace-building initiatives, where they bridge boundaries relating to social class, religious identity, race and ethnicity, political positions, and other social locating factors, plays a crucial role in building community and bringing peace and justice to conflict-ridden areas. This forms part of the journey of the people of God as they work together to proclaim Gospel values and build life-giving communities, which is at the heart of synodality. Women's peace-building and social justice initiatives in conflict zones reflect the essence of journeying together across different social backgrounds and positions. This concretely shows to what extent “walking together is the most effective way of manifesting and putting into practice the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God” (*Preparatory Document*, no. 1). The inclusion of women's perspectives in promoting social justice and peacebuilding in their communities contributes to the mission of the church in building a synodal third space for women, where minority perspectives and marginalized voices, in particular, can be heard and listened to, as part of recognizing their role and inclusion in the church.

Conclusion

Women in conflict zones have experienced multiple forms of inequality and victimization and remain vulnerable to violence. Yet their narratives show that they have demonstrated agency through their involvement in social justice and peace-building initiatives in their communities, such as the alleviation of gender-based violence, the provision of support services for IDPs, and the utilization of proactive responses to ensure security and foster a culture of peace.

The involvement of women in promoting peace and justice in conflict zones in the southern Philippines, where they exercise agency in the face of structural oppressions and inequities, is fulfilling the authentic mission of the church, thus serving as a third space ecclesia in the spirit of synodality. The narratives of my informants show that their justice and peacebuilding initiatives and advocacies as women—and indeed, their very presence in conflict-ridden communities—is enacting the mission of the church by simply being church, regardless of religious and faith traditions. They demonstrate the essence of being ecclesia as a synodal third space. In so doing, they serve as agents of liberation, rather than conforming to the gender stereotype of women being enslaved and subordinated. Women’s agency in building peace and justice in conflict zones is a realization of ecclesia as a synodal third space.

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