

**One Woman's Life, One Thousand Women's Voices**

**A Narrative of the Life and Work of  
Mary Ann Arnado  
of the Philippines**

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## **Acronyms**

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
IID	Initiatives for International Dialogue
LMT	Local Monitoring Team
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MIPC	Mindanao Interfaith Peoples Caucus
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MPC	Mindanao Peoples Caucus
MSU	Mindanao State University
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NPA	New People's Army
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference
SOMA	Suspension of Offensive Military Actions
TPA	Tripoli Peace Agreement

## **“Women Cannot Cry Anymore”**

The sound of the bombs was unlike anything she had ever heard. Mary Ann thought her heart would literally explode, as fast and as loud as it beat. She was in the middle of bombing raids in the 2003 Buliok War between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the raids which uprooted thousands of Bangsamoro civilians from their fishing communities.

After the people fled to the nearest small town, Pikit, Mary Ann and her colleagues at the Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID) helped set up and manage relief programs in the evacuation camps. On her initial visit to these centers, she stepped into the appalling conditions, but quickly stepped back out—the stench of thousands of people packed into the rooms in 100 degree tropical heat overwhelming her. There was no running water, and for the families surviving in schools, sports halls, warehouses, and makeshift tents, food was only available through international relief agencies.

A short while later, back in her office in Davao City, Mary Ann received a phone call from Father Bert, the parish priest of Pikit and chairman of the Mindanao Peoples Caucus (MPC). He told her to come quickly—the mayor of Pikit had ordered the evacuees to return to their communities or face the bulldozers that were on their way to destroy the camps. By the time Mary Ann made the four-hour drive, the bulldozers were already in place; many of the people had started the long walk home to their villages along the Ligawasan Marsh.

Father Bert and Mary Ann accompanied the people on their trek home. As they approached one community, Mary Ann noticed something on the ground, covered by a white sheet, lying on a mat next to an expressionless woman. Under the sheet was a dead baby—a boy, nearly a year old. Sitting quietly next to the mother were several other women, also seemingly

without emotion. Mary Ann, overcome by shock and grief, embraced the mother. But she was also incredulous; she could not understand why she was the only woman able to weep openly.

I cried and cried until I realized that no one was crying. The mother was just sitting there. I felt like I was the mother, but then I realized that the situation is really like that. Women cannot cry anymore—they just lose that kind of spontaneity. Their emotions can even just stop.<sup>1</sup>

Staring at the infant and consoling the mother, Mary Ann was no longer the lawyer or the theorist and student of abstract theories of peace and conflict, of feminism. She had come face to face with the violent reality of armed conflict and its impact on women.

It was about the general situation of women. I was exposed more to their vulnerability and the brunt of the violence itself. In that moment, it was an encounter with the violence and the impositions made on the lives of women. I mean that as women, we tend to just accept or we are just at the receiving end of what men are doing to the world. That is how I see our situation: things happen to us because of the decisions that men make. So, for me, that is a very big violation, and when you see women like the woman who lost her child, you really see how helpless they are in that situation. For me, that was the really moving thing which prompted a conclusive transformation in my advocacy—to make it advocacy for women, for mothers.

### **“Let There Be Peace on Earth”**

There it was, exactly on time as always, her father’s familiar whistle. “Oh no, not again,” thought a huffy Mary Ann. “Just as we’re getting to the good part.” Taking a last look at the television screen, she and her sisters popped up from their seats, said a quick “thank you” to the neighbor, and ran home.

It was eight o’clock in the evening, time to recite the Rosary, Mary Ann’s least favorite time in her childhood. A devout Catholic, her mother gathered Mary Ann and her four siblings in the *sala*, or lounge, of the home for the sacred ritual. The children would sometimes mumble

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations not cited in the text or part of dialogue sequences are taken from interviews with Mary Ann Arnado between September 29 and November 18, 2005.

their words or say them too quickly, prompting a sharp pinch on the leg or a good scolding. “No, no!” their mother shrieked. “It’s nine ‘Hail Marys.’ You should recite these verses the best you can because now you are talking to God. Repeat after me: ‘Hail Mary, full of grace . . .’”

Mary Ann’s father, a tall, quiet, bespectacled man, joined in his wife’s rituals—anything to keep the peace. There was an unspoken rule in their home: if you want to keep the peace, respect the word of Mrs. Arnado.

Although she was born in another town, Mary Ann grew up in Cagayan de Oro, a small town in northern Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. The Arnado family home encompassed the ground floor of an old rented house in a working-class neighborhood and consisted of two bedrooms, one for Mary Ann and her sisters, one for her parents and two younger brothers. The bathroom, constructed from cinder blocks, was in the backyard where soft green moss thrived because of the humidity on the island.

The owner of the house was raising pigs, so beside the bathroom sometimes it would really smell. Beside the pig pen there was a small building where the owner would also bottle shark oil and sell it. Our bedroom window opened up over this building and the smell would be really awful, like the smell of rubber. All these smells were terrible.

The austere surroundings paralleled both Mary Ann’s disciplined childhood and the political climate in the country. In 1972, two years after Mary Ann was born, President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law throughout the Philippines, imposing a strict nine o’clock curfew every night, severely restricting civil and political rights, closing down newspapers, and using the television as a tool of state propaganda. But, Mary Ann’s parents were typical Christian settlers,<sup>2</sup> “living in their own world” in Mindanao. During the Marcos reign, communities on the

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<sup>2</sup> The earliest resettlements of Christians from the northern Philippines to Mindanao began in the early twentieth century when the country was under the colonial administration of the United States.

island—Christian settlers, indigenous peoples, and Bangsamoro Muslims—were polarized, each with their own distinct traditions and customs with little interaction among them. Mary Ann’s mother, a public school teacher, and her father, a government employee at the National Food Authority, were not concerned with politics, and the policies of Marcos were rarely discussed in the house.

My mother is the embodiment of all the teachings of the Spanish friars—her life reflecting her faith.<sup>3</sup> She believes that one should sacrifice now in order to be rewarded later. She is an obedient citizen who would never revolt against anyone. From God to Marcos, she always follows rules.

Mrs. Arnado would dress in traditional costume and gather to sing and dance with other teachers at the local airport whenever Marcos and his wife, Imelda, arrived on the island for a visit.

Though Marcos’ reign was marked by corruption, Mary Ann’s father could not tolerate bribery or corruption and taught this value to Mary Ann. When a businessman approached him with gifts—an expensive watch or a tray of eggs—he politely refused and asked him to make an appointment at his office if in need of something.

Along with her three sisters, Mary Ann shared the household duties. As *Nana* and *Ate* were cleaning and preparing to cook meals,<sup>4</sup> Mary Ann went to the market to buy food. “I would buy fish, rice, vegetables, spices, and anything else we might need, with twenty pesos. When I got home, I would have to sit down and record everything carefully before I gave the change back to my mother.” Though the family always had enough money for food and schooling for the children, there was no money for luxuries.

Each Christmas season, however, the young girl had a chance to make a little money for herself. A midnight mass on December 16 marked the beginning of *Misa de Gallo*, a nine-day period of pre-dawn masses leading up to Christmas Day. But Mary Ann’s mind was on more

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<sup>3</sup> Prior to colonization by the U.S., the Philippines was a Spanish colony.

<sup>4</sup> *Nana* and *Ate* are respectful nicknames for sisters in the Tagalog language, Mary Ann’s mother tongue.

earthly things. She dreamt of the Mountain Dew soda and *siapao* she would purchase with the money she would get caroling throughout the following few days. For her school lunch, she would relish the sweet soda and steamed bun, rather than suffer through the U.S.-provided nutribun. “That nutribun was made of old flour, aid flour. It smelled really old even after it was cooked. Sometimes you could find cooked cockroach legs in it.” During the following days after the initial midnight mass, Mary Ann hopped from house to house singing the opening lines to her favorite hymn, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.”

### **Noise Barrage**

In 1983, the political climate in Mindanao began to change noticeably as Mary Ann entered her first year of high school at a Catholic girls’ school. Martial law had been lifted two years previously, but it was not until the assassination of exiled opposition leader Senator Benigno Aquino upon his return to the country that the effects were felt in the south. With this “wake-up call for Filipinos” to take a stand against the repressive Marcos regime, Mary Ann began noticing the political shift in her community and school. Synchronized actions took place all over the country, including in Catholic schools. Every Friday, the bells of the school would ring out at an appointed time, declaring the nuns’ support for the anti-Marcos movement.

It was called the Noise Barrage. Initially, it was an adventure, pure and simple—lots of young women having the opportunity to make lots of noise. But it also started some awareness, both in me and in the other pupils, that the people were not happy with the government. Even our teachers were not happy. Our teacher explained that poor Catholic communities were protesting against the government, so our Noise Barrage was a way of standing in solidarity with them.

In the next few years, Marcos became more and more repressive—assassinating or arresting thousands of political activists—while the Filipino people became more and more empowered to remove him from office. Though her family still did not discuss politics in the home, Mary Ann

continued her participation in the Noise Barrage at school and even attended a rally of the opposition. The movement to overthrow Marcos would culminate in 1986 with the People Power Revolution, when millions of Filipinos nonviolently took to the streets after Marcos tried to rig presidential elections. Corazon Aquino, the widow of Benigno, was inaugurated as president in late February. As the country began coming out of the despotic and corrupt era of Marcos, Mary Ann began her own journey to political awareness.

### **History Anew**

Mindanao State University (MSU) in the 1970s and 1980s bred activists and dissenters. During the 1970s, four students from the school hijacked a Philippine Airlines aircraft, allegedly to fly to China to study communism. When Mary Ann entered the university in 1987, students were still swept up in the momentum of the People Power Revolution, pressuring President Aquino to implement substantial changes in the country. The students at MSU stood in solidarity with workers, organized youth to work with them on issues of agrarian reform, and campaigned against the continuing presence of U.S. military bases in the Philippines.

She had intended to study political science at MSU, a good grounding for law, the career path she wanted to follow after watching her father open his own law practice when she was still a child in Cagayan de Oro. But when Mary Ann arrived at the university, older students advised against political science, telling her, “You shouldn’t apply for that subject. Most of the students never finish. You will become a full-time activist and never get your degree.” She enrolled instead in the international relations program, part of the King Faisal Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies. The course of study focused on Southeast Asia and the Middle East, a course that

would take Mary Ann on a path to discovering an unknown history of her own island of Mindanao.

As Mary Ann attended classes on campus in the town of Marawi, situated high on a mountain away from urban centers, she learned a different history from what was taught at her Catholic girls' school. For Christian Filipinos, history begins on March 16, 1521, when the Spanish conquistador Ferdinand Magellan landed in the Philippines, initiating the colonization of the area. But for the Bangsamoro, the Islamized indigenous people of Mindanao, history began long before, and the sixteenth century only marks the beginning of their struggle for self-determination. Lapu Lapu, an indigenous fighter who killed Magellan and epitomized the “savage native” in the eyes of Christian Filipinos, is considered a hero by the Bangsamoro, who believe he was defending the Philippines from a foreign invader.

Each morning at MSU, Mary Ann woke to the Muslim call to prayer, hearing the devout recite “*Allahu Akbar*,”<sup>5</sup> and to mist shrouding the mountains around the campus. Traditionally, the lands of Lanao, where Marawi is located, belong to the Maranao tribe, one of the largest tribes of the Bangsamoro people. Her professors—both Muslim activists and progressive Christian intellectuals—taught Mary Ann not only the history of the island, but also about the revolution. The densely-forested mountains near Marawi provided shelter to the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the National Democratic Front—the communist party in the Philippines—who was fighting an insurgency against the government. In addition, since the 1970s, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) had been waging a bloody war against the government for self-determination in Mindanao. They viewed the island as the Muslim homeland in the Philippines and wanted the right to govern themselves. A peace agreement, the Tripoli Agreement of 1976, had been signed between the government and the MNLF, granting

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<sup>5</sup> “God is great.”

autonomy to thirteen provinces and nine cities in Muslim Mindanao, but disagreements over implementation of the agreement were not resolved and fighting continued. While Mary Ann was growing up on the island and hearing only of the dark era of martial law and the people's movement against Marcos, there was a very different conflict taking place. At the university, she was gaining "historical awareness of what really happened in Mindanao."

Mary Ann became actively involved in the student movement that was aligned with the insurgents in the mountains, though she never officially joined the party or any political organization. But it was Mary Ann's relationship with a Muslim student that further exposed her to the Bangsamoro struggle in Mindanao. She fell in love with Khaleed, a student four years her senior from the Tausug tribe, a legendary warrior tribe of the Bangsamoro. The "finest warriors of Mindanao" had resisted both the Spanish and U.S. invasions. Legend has it that the Americans found it impossible to fell a Tausug, and had to invent the 45-caliber gun in order to finally kill one. While Mary Ann and Khaleed were at MSU, the Tausugs were leading the MNLF insurgency under the leadership of Chairman Nur Misuari. Khaleed and Mary Ann would stroll through campus every evening sharing their ideals and hopes for the future. He lobbied for Mary Ann when she launched a campaign as the first woman to run for president of the student council, and, as a Tausug "warrior," acted as her "bodyguard" if Maranaon students tried to intimidate her. When her mother discovered Mary Ann was dating a Muslim, she was furious, reciting the stereotypes held by some Christian Filipinos that Muslims are violent and unclean. Mary Ann's father, however, let the relationship pass, believing it was just young infatuation.

When Mary Ann returned to school for her final year, however, it was without Khaleed. He had graduated the previous spring and Mary Ann had gone home for the summer. But as she settled back in to Marawi for her senior year, a friend came to her room, informing her Khaleed

was now married. According to Tausug tradition, once a man completes his education, a wife is found for him and a new phase of life begins.

“Maybe out of my frustration, to take my mind off my terrible heartbreak, I just became very political.” She developed an acute political consciousness and held strongly that only the people themselves could change the structures and institutions, and truly reform the country.

### **Indigenous Exposure**

While spending the following summer after graduation in Cagayan de Oro, Mary Ann received a job offer from the Mindanao Interfaith Peoples Caucus (MIPC) in the city of Davao, the main urban center on the island. A friend in Marawi had suggested her to the organization, a solidarity group looking for an international relations graduate with a heart for the national cause.

At the MIPC, Mary Ann began her advocacy work, primarily on behalf of the indigenous peoples of Mindanao. Distinguished from the Bangsamoro (indigenous tribes who converted to Islam), the indigenous communities retained their original cultural practices. Part of Mary Ann’s position at the MIPC involved facilitating exposure programs for internationals who wanted to visit these indigenous communities on the island. During the Marcos years, many European nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had spoken out against the dictatorship and, with the arrival of Aquino and then Fidel Ramos,<sup>6</sup> wanted to observe the situation for themselves. The programs were also learning experiences for Mary Ann—they were her first involvement with the indigenous cultural system, the lifestyle deeply tied to the land and the heritage desperately trying to survive in the face of conflict in Mindanao. The communities were defending their lands from multinational corporations, one of which was attempting to turn Mount Apo, sacred

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<sup>6</sup> Ramos was president from 1992-1998.

indigenous land, into a thermal energy plant. Mary Ann took her foreign visitors to Mount Apo, the home of Manaobo tribal gods, to let them witness the energy company “drilling holes into the sacred mountain.”

Mary Ann still wanted to become a lawyer, and her deepening understanding of the plight of the marginalized indigenous communities only reinforced that desire.

### **Redefining Feminism**

It was no great love story. They both worked at MIPC. They married in 1994 and then quit the organization and enrolled as law students. While studying, Mary Ann became pregnant and gave birth to a girl, Ihip. Studying and working to pay bills took priority over maintaining their relationship and building a family.

“I did not really have any idea of separate gender roles within the family.” Her parents always exemplified an egalitarian relationship: They shared the work both outside and inside the home with the children. Mary Ann’s father prepared milk and woke up in the night if the babies were crying. When she married, Mary Ann never felt “unequal” to her husband, just as she never felt she had different responsibilities from her male colleagues in the student movement or the MIPC. But still,

I realized during the early years of my marriage that as a woman we have a lot of burdens. If you get pregnant, of course, your husband is still there, but the child is really yours. That is the reality from day one of pregnancy up until the rest of that child’s life. I began to wonder, ‘Where is the equality here?’

I went into the marriage as an equal; we both assumed that was the arrangement. But the strange thing was that when I questioned the roles that we fell into, other people around me would say, ‘Well, what did you expect?’ ‘This is how it should be.’ ‘This is how it is.’ Or, ‘That’s how the world goes, so what is your issue?’

By 1998, Mary Ann and her husband were both lawyers. He moved to a different town and took up a position in a governmental department that handled mining applications from foreign companies wanting to invest and work in Mindanao. Mary Ann, on the other hand, began defending, among other groups, indigenous communities trying to keep those same foreign companies out of their homelands, or who were demanding labor rights while working for the multinational corporations. Mining became a personal issue for Mary Ann—she would visit the communities and travel down to the mines to witness the conditions the miners worked in. Mary Ann’s husband spoke critically of her work, using sarcasm to mock those she was representing. The verbal abuse, at times, became physical.

In the Philippines, “‘feminist’ is used in a negative, stereotypical way to describe the type of woman who would usually end up with a broken marriage.” Divorce is not common in the Christian Filipino community; it is generally not accepted. It was difficult and painful for Mary Ann to take advice from friends who were judgmental both about her being a feminist and her contemplation of divorcing her husband. She had recently given birth to her second daughter, Isa, and only Mary Ann knew of the abuse taking place in the marriage. After a particularly violent attack in 1999, she packed up her things and those of her two daughters and left her husband for good.

Mary Ann, refusing to expose her daughters to violence in the home, began a new life in a small apartment near her office in Davao. Though it was a rough transition, she eventually managed work and single parenthood with a new strength and confidence, and taught those traits to her children as well. One afternoon at a fast food restaurant, she sat down while one of her daughters tested her fortitude and waited in line to order. When it was her turn, the man standing behind spoke over her head to the cashier. Mary Ann jumped up to intervene: “There is a child in

front of you. You should wait your turn.” As a single mother of two girls, she was becoming more and more protective of them.

I felt angry because he was bigger than her, so he felt he had more right. These are things I choose not to ignore as a single parent. I am training my children to fight back, even if this means getting physical, because I think women should develop the instinct for defending ourselves, rather than just to get help. So, I tell my daughters that if someone hits them at school, fight back—at the end of the day, it is about being able to protect oneself.

In her choice to leave her husband and raise two strong daughters, Mary Ann redefined the Filipino stereotype of a feminist. For the mother and advocate, feminism is “being kind to women, standing in solidarity, supporting each other, and supporting every woman to develop her full potential. It is not about fighting men or seeing men as the enemy, but more about changing our culture and changing patriarchy so that we work together to change.”

### **Dialogue During All-Out War**

With her renewed confidence and capabilities, Mary Ann fought for changes at the organization she began working with shortly after she became a lawyer, the Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID). The NGO was focused on “south-south” solidarity campaigns: disseminating information about conflicts and building support among nations in the Asia-Pacific region, including Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, East Timor, and the Philippines. But increasingly, she began asking why IID, though based in Davao, was not working in solidarity with the people in Mindanao. When Mary Ann suggested to her supervisor and the board of trustees that working with communities on the island was a matter of being “consistent with their mandate and values as an organization,” they replied that there were plenty of NGOs in Mindanao already, and that the mandate of IID was to work internationally, not locally.

But the political situation in the south made Mary Ann's proposal more urgent. In 1998, the movie actor Joseph Estrada, popularly known as *Erap*, meaning "pal" or "buddy" in Tagalog, became president. "Our election was a popularity contest. It was memory recall. Everyone just supported him because he was our cinematic legend, he represents the masses." Estrada had been type-cast in all his films as the Robin Hood-like character, taking from the rich and giving to the poor.

He was already a mayor and had voted against the extension of the U.S. military bases, so actually, many comrades were with him. In fact, most of the left actually supported him. If there were poor people who were having a rally, he would go and eat with them and eat with his bare hands as they do. He really showed himself to be a man of the people.

Mary Ann, however, was disgusted with his macho and womanizing behavior and even more sickened when he arrived in Mindanao in "full military uniform" to declare war against the Bangsamoro.

Officially, the war between the government and the MNLF was over. Under President Ramos in 1996, the government signed a peace agreement with the rebels, but a breakaway group, the MILF—which had emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s—refused to recognize the deal. The MILF, with Hashim Salamat as their leader, had a more overt religious agenda and began building up its army and supporters while the government was concerned with the MNLF. Despite the group's rejection of the government-MNLF deal and their battles with the AFP, Ramos engaged the MILF as well during his presidency; between 1996 and 2000, there were numerous resolutions and ceasefires as initial steps to peace.

But the large-scale fighting was re-ignited with the presidency of Estrada, who initiated an "all-out war" policy. In July 2000, the president and his AFP forces overtook the main stronghold of the MILF, Camp Abu Bakar, and drove into the area with "trucks loaded with beer

and roasted *lechon* and had a party.<sup>7</sup> Imagine going into a Muslim community with alcohol and pork. It was shocking. We were appalled. His acts really rubbed humiliation in the faces of the Bangsamoro people.”

As another component of his war policy, Estrada re-mobilized a vigilante group that had been prolific during the Marcos regime—the *Ilaga*. The “Rats,” a Christian group that terrorized and massacred Muslims under Marcos, began a deliberate “hate campaign” to turn the tri-peoples of Mindanao against each other.<sup>8</sup> With the escalation of violent conflict, Mary Ann and sympathetic colleagues at IID made a final push to the board to begin work in Mindanao. She explained how the work of IID would be categorically different than what was being done by other organizations in the vibrant civil society on the island. Prior to Estrada, President Ramos had focused on the economic development of the Philippines as the key to success and superiority in Southeast Asia. His blueprint for development, “Vision 2000,” led to a “mushrooming of NGOs” implementing sustainable development projects in the area. However, no organizations were engaged in dialogue or conflict resolution. Mary Ann called on IID to become pioneers in bringing the tri-peoples together with the intent of de-escalating the violence in Mindanao. The board agreed.

Similar to her work with MIPC, Mary Ann had previously taken internationals to evacuation centers to allow them to witness what was happening to the displaced Bangsamoro and indigenous communities. During these trips, she met traditional leaders and parish priests working with the evacuees. Armed with these contacts and relationships, Mary Ann created a

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<sup>7</sup> *Lechon* is the Tagalog word for whole pig roasted over a barbeque. In the Islamic tradition, consuming alcohol and eating pork are prohibited.

<sup>8</sup> “Tri-peoples” refers to the three communities on the island mentioned previously: Bangsamoro, the indigenous peoples, and Christian settlers. The majority of literature on Mindanao lists thirteen Bangsamoro tribes and up to twenty-five indigenous tribes.

team of representatives of the tri-peoples of Mindanao—a group that would later be known as the Mindanao Peoples Caucus (MPC).

Mary Ann endorsed the notion that dialogue is a process and strategy intended to end isolation. If people from different communities have not engaged with each other in a significant amount of time, stereotypes about the “other” community are created and can be exploited by outsiders—as Estrada and the vigilantes had attempted. Dialogue combats this by breaking down barriers and creating transparency. For Mary Ann, it was a “grassroots, democratic way of solving problems.” Furthermore, it was the primary vehicle for forging relationships for the peaceful settlement of the conflict. MPC was founded on these relational principles. The dialogue sessions of the caucus became “laboratories” revolutionizing how the tri-peoples deal with the issues that face them as communities affected by war, how they can respect each other, and how they can work together to develop consensus on key priorities in building peace.

Mary Ann was unprepared for her first initiation into a dialogue with the tri-peoples. Each dialogue had to take place in a neutral setting: oftentimes a local municipal hall or on the grounds of a third-party tribal community whose *Datu*, or chieftain, offered to host the meeting. Both women and men participated, though if it was held outside the town, Mary Ann had to encourage the *Datu* to bring women with him. Tagalog was normally the chosen language, though the Bangsamoro and indigenous peoples also used Cebuano to communicate with each other. But there were other forms of communication which were essential to the process.

There are a lot of cultural processes to a dialogue. Sometimes they will not even discuss anything for the first day. Instead, there will be rituals, prayers, and offerings. On the second day, or that evening perhaps, they may begin talking, but they never, ever, go straight into a discussion.

When they take part in dialogues, they go back to the time of oral traditions. They recall their history. This is what I really enjoy about my work with indigenous peoples—their approach. It took me some time to really understand it. Sometimes

I felt they were avoiding the issues or talking indirectly, but this is just their culture. Incredibly, it can be just one or two sentences at the end of the ritual that settles the conflict.

The relationship between the communities is deeply rooted in history. For Mary Ann, this was most apparent in their particularly emotional dialogue on the issue of ancestral domain: which peoples have prior rights to the lands of Mindanao.

‘What did you do when the colonizers came?’ began the Moro.<sup>9</sup> ‘And now, you want to participate in the discourses?’ OK, brother, this is a heart-to-heart discussion, so I will be very frank with you about what I feel as a Moro. We have been weakened through centuries of fighting. We are so weak now that if we have to fight, it will be our last. Now, it is about survival. But what did you do all this time? You ran from the colonizers. I know you want to participate in the peace process and you are claiming your ancestral domain, but for us, this is the final stage. We have paid in blood for every gain we have made to get where we are now.’

The indigenous person sat quietly and listened. Then, he gave his response. ‘You know, in Mindanao there were two brothers, Mamalu and Tabunaway. These two brothers lived in Mindanao and shared everything until a foreigner came. The foreigner that came brought a new faith, Islam. One of these brothers chose to embrace this foreign religion, but before he did that, the brothers entered into a peace pact. Even if one brother will embrace a new faith, they will not forget their brotherhood. When there is conflict, they will protect each other. There are rules in brotherhood as the Datu has outlined. And so, we are here today because we would like to remember that brotherhood.’

The work of Mary Ann and the MPC is a form of “horizontal peace,” as distinguished from the official peace processes that the government traditionally assumes has a trickle-down effect to the citizens on the ground. But without respect and tolerance among the tri-peoples, especially over contentious issues like ancestral domain, there cannot be a lasting peace in Mindanao. By creating space for dialogue on the grassroots level, the MPC can include the

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<sup>9</sup> A Moro is an individual from the Bangsamoro peoples. The words are sometimes used interchangeably.

citizens' voices in the process,<sup>10</sup> leading to the more successful implementation of any peace agreement and increasing the chances for a credible and sustainable peace in the Philippines.

### **The Third of the Tri-Peoples: The Church and Christian Settlers**

“Because of the hierarchy in the church, I am probably just an altar boy in front of all these bishops,” Mary Ann began her presentation at an international Catholic conference on peacebuilding in Mindanao. As a member of the MPC and an umbrella network of advocates known as the Peaceweavers, she was asked to present on civil society’s peace advocacy efforts. She addressed priests, nuns, and bishops from all over the world, but was uncomfortable when asked to emphasize what was “essentially Catholic” about her work. She was torn about what to say.

Mary Ann’s ambivalence about the role of the Roman Catholic Church became apparent. She knew the considerable influence the church has had on Filipinos and the government: It actively encouraged the People Power revolution that deposed Marcos. Furthermore, Mary Ann was enormously grateful for and respectful of her peace colleagues who are parish priests, nuns, and laypeople. However, the church has a two-fold role in Mindanao. It is a facilitator of the peace process, but it is also a wealthy, private party to the conflict, with significant and valuable real-estate investments in the lands that constitute Mindanao. Some members do indeed support dialogue between Christians and Muslims, while others “behave like modern-day friars with vast land holdings. Some are involved in real estate development in Mindanao.” She had been disappointed by Cardinal Jaime Sin, the religious leader who had been instrumental in the People Power revolution.

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<sup>10</sup> At Mary Ann’s instigation, two established groups—the Bangsamoro Youth and the Federation of Indigenous Peoples (PANAGTAGBO)—joined MPC in order to push for greater representation in the peace process.

He can talk about everything under the sun, from abortion to the environment to advertising, but when the war was going on in Mindanao, I was hoping he would say something. But he didn't say anything at all. He was just quiet. This behavior represents the attitude of the church in Mindanao.

In front of her Christian audience, however, Mary Ann opted to describe the partnerships that IID, MPC, and the Peaceweavers have with church organizations, and to emphasize that several of those Catholic organizations fund some of her work.

But realizing her platform and opportunity at the conference, she went a little further. She told the crowd that defining the role of the church in Mindanao was "very, very challenging.

In the year 2000 when the all-out war was continuing with Estrada and the MILF, the priests took a vote on the war and only two or three were actually against the war. They supported it. They thought that perhaps it was high time the whole issue was finished.

She was dismayed by the vote, believing it showed how little the church had moved from its historical role as crusader.

She reminded the conference audience that peace advocacy was not merely a case of reconciliation and healing, but that it was, moreover, a political issue that could not be teased out of the multilayered fabric of peace.

As a political issue, we need to take positions on the causes and the conditions that create the conflict. The church advocates forgiveness as a value of peacebuilding, but many of the people affected by the conflict are wondering, 'Where is the justice?'

Mary Ann had been working in indigenous communities for several years by then and was attempting to bring their voices to the ears of the Catholic audience. They had questioned Mary Ann on several occasions, asking why Christian religious leaders were so focused on healing. The indigenous people were concerned with pressing, practical matters. "Where is my place on this land? Do you want me just to float around on this land? Where is the justice there? Where is my land, my life, my culture, my justice?" Mary Ann urged her fellow peace advocates to focus

on the examination of the truth; forgiveness and reconciliation would simply follow. She called on the conference delegates to “return the land you have acquired in Mindanao over the years to the indigenous people.”

The Bishop of Mindanao was unimpressed with Mary Ann’s presentation, calling it “a bit dishonest.” But her argument was echoed by a nun who also spoke at the conference. She said to her listeners, “In the year 2000, our year of Jubilee, Pope John Paul II asked for forgiveness for all the things we did against the native people in the colonial period. But before we are granted forgiveness, should we not return the lands?”<sup>11</sup> Several visiting clergy and bishops from Africa approached Mary Ann after her presentation to express their support for her words. It had taken an “altar boy” to challenge the bishops.

### ***Bantay Ceasefire***

In late 2000, Estrada, the president who had declared all-out war in Mindanao, was impeached for corruption and the plunder of government resources. He was ultimately ousted in a peaceful revolt by citizens, dubbed “People Power II,” and replaced by his former vice president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Arroyo immediately declared an “all-out” peace policy and initiated exploratory talks with the MILF, the first round of which was held in Tripoli, Libya in July 2001. A framework for the talks, the Tripoli Peace Agreement (TPA), was signed, and shortly after, the Implementing Guidelines of the Security Aspect of the TPA provided for local ceasefire monitoring teams (LMTs) to be constituted of people on the ground deemed knowledgeable about military operations, namely, local battalion commanders from the MILF,

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<sup>11</sup> The nun was referring to the Pope’s remarks at the Catholic Church’s Day of Forgiveness in March of 2000.

government leaders, and international monitors from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).<sup>12</sup> By September 2002, the LMTs were being assembled.

Mary Ann and the MPC saw the security guidelines as an opportunity to include the conflict-affected communities, particularly women, in formal peace processes.

Who better to be a ceasefire monitor than someone who is going to be directly affected by a violation of it? We wanted to participate in the ceasefire committee to help ensure that the ceasefire agreement would be implemented on the ground, right into our own communities. The best way to do that was to get to know what was going on and effectively assess the security situation by sitting in the ceasefire meetings. To have representation there, we literally lobbied in lobbies, going from one hotel to another where the committee was holding meetings.

The military generals and the MILF leadership, however, argued that civilians would not know anything about how to monitor a ceasefire.

The members [of the committee], who were mostly field commanders, simply laughed at us. ‘You do not know anything about what we are discussing here. We are talking about military terms, military language, and situations which are far beyond your comprehension as women. This is not your place.’

Not resigned to being entirely left out of the official process and determined to do something to “silence the guns in Mindanao,” Mary Ann and the MPC created an independent, community-based, ceasefire-monitoring group, known as *Bantay* Ceasefire, or Ceasefire Watch.

We were and still are continuing to raise awareness about the provisions of the ceasefire agreement. We are trying to instill this in the combatants so they know that there is a ceasefire and it should not be violated. We believe any violation of such will be condemned by the community and this will also act as a deterrent. Without a mandate from either the government or the MILF, *Bantay* Ceasefire can claim independence and impartiality in all our undertakings.

The work of *Bantay* Ceasefire signaled the evolution of the MPC into a respected “bridge”: a unique organization connecting horizontal peace work to the more official, “vertical” peace processes between the MILF and the government.

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<sup>12</sup> The OIC is composed of fifty-seven states and has had a key role in the peace process.

They began preparations for their first mission in October 2002, an assessment of the situation in the area of Maguindanao, where more serious violations of the ceasefire were reportedly being carried out. The team needed safe conduct passes to access affected areas and interview both civilians and soldiers. By letter, they requested the passes from both the AFP and the MILF, but also sent letters to the Peace Panel—the official negotiators of the peace process—and the official Ceasefire Committee, informing them of their intended mission. They told all parties involved that a comprehensive report of their findings would be submitted to all actors in the conflict. The team was granted the passes, carrying out their first mission in January 2003. It was primarily the women of the MPC, with their “natural ability to connect and communicate with the soldiers and civilians alike,” who performed interviews to find out the extent of their knowledge of the ceasefire provisions and investigate the violations.

In the final week of January, Bantay Ceasefire presented the findings of their inaugural mission to the conflict parties. During the meeting with the AFP commanders, several members of international donor communities were also present. Memen Lauzon of IID began presenting her section of the report, but after three minutes she was cut off and asked by one of the top commanders if the report was merely an indictment of the army: “Will this be the flow of the presentation?” The team persuaded the men to let her finish and then they could draw their own conclusions about the report. Memen continued, outlining the team’s specific recommendations for an international monitoring team to be formed, as specified in the ceasefire agreement; the granting of a higher rank to the commander of the ceasefire committee; the education of soldiers and rebels in the provisions of the ceasefire; and the implementation of sanctions against any soldier who violates the ceasefire. At the end of the presentation, the generals conceded it was a

fair report. The Bantay Ceasefire representatives left the meeting confident that all parties understood the potential danger if the ceasefire collapsed.

### **Buliok War**

“The Pandora’s Box of violence was opened” not long after their trip to the capital. Early in February, as the MPC delegation was returning home from their meetings in Manila, AFP troop movements were already noticeable. Sources throughout Mindanao began sending text messages to Mary Ann and her colleagues, detailing that truckloads of soldiers were moving through the area. People were beginning to leave their homes as tensions were high; no one knew what to expect.

We relayed everything to our contact in the cabinet, who was also at that time a senior presidential advisor in the peace process. We sent text messages to the peace networks to inform them. For two days people continued to evacuate and the evacuation centers were already starting to get congested. Once again we warned Manila of the conditions on the ground and implored them to act, as not even the government agencies were prepared to provide relief for the evacuees. Everyone had been informed of the heightened atmosphere: the cabinet, the ceasefire committee, and the generals. We also reminded them that the next day was *Aidil Adha*, a holy day. Fighting on that day would be like bombing the Christians on Christmas Day.

The MPC, with the help of other peace advocates and two allies in the cabinet, put in a direct request to President Arroyo asking her to stop the bombings, which she did, issuing an order to halt the bombings in observance of *Aidil Adha*. The generals were reluctant to listen.

They said, ‘You know, it is difficult at this point to implement an order for our troops to retreat because they are already in an eyeball to eyeball situation. When you are eyeball to eyeball, the only possible outcome is for the shooting to start. Even with an order to stop the fighting, it is difficult to physically get out to the soldiers in the field and tell them to retreat; furthermore, this would not necessarily stop the shooting, as the MILF rebels could pursue them anyway.’

On February 11, when the Bangsamoro should have been commemorating a holy day, they were leaving their homes, and Mary Ann and the MPC were hunkered down in the midst of the first bombing raids by the AFP. The Islamic center where MILF Chairman Hashim Salamat was based in Buliok was attacked by government forces. The MILF, in turn, declared a *jihad* against the government.

When the bombing began, Mary Ann thought back to the MPC meeting in Manila; it seemed the plan was already in place when they presented their report: “How the generals must have been laughing at us.” The same delegation that had stood in the commanders’ office now stood on a bridge over the Pulangi River—below them, families living in the Ligawasan Marsh fled in small *bancas*, traditional wooden boats. Mary Ann watched Bapa Joe, a strong Bangsamoro elder and council member, silently give in to his grief, tears streaming down his face.

### *Bakwit Sa Syudad*<sup>13</sup>

By March and April, the displaced population, now numbering in the hundreds of thousands, was fed up with the fighting and wanted a ceasefire—and wanted those in power to hear them. The MPC agreed they would do the logistical arrangements for the evacuees who wanted to present their appeal to the president. The group sent a letter to Arroyo requesting an audience, and the MPC began arranging for the trip.

The delegates would be arriving in Manila by ferry from Mindanao. Mary Ann had heard of the bomb at the wharf in Davao two days before, April 3, the day they were supposed to leave. Though the bomb killed sixteen people and injured over fifty, the evacuees boarded the ten o’clock ferry that night for their two-day trip to the capital.

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase translates “Evacuees in the City.”

During the ferry trip, the fifteen evacuees—men and women, between fifteen and sixty-five years old—were trained by Mary Ann’s colleague, Lyndee Prieto, “IID’s resident *babaylan*,” or healer, as she is fondly called, and an experienced peace educator. They performed role plays and practiced their public speaking skills to prepare them for an intensive lobby mission. As they greeted partner NGOs upon their arrival in Manila, they marveled at the sprawling metropolis; they had never been to the capital before, Davao being the largest city most had seen. “At home, we have a big river and no bridges. Why do they have bridges where there is no water?” they inquired, referring to the concrete overpasses over highways.

When the “Bakwit Sa Syudad” delegation arrived at the presidential palace, known as the Malacanang, in their blue jeans, cotton shirts, and slippers, the protocol officer told them they were dressed inappropriately for their meeting with the president. Mary Ann erupted, “What did you expect, for them to come in gowns and tuxedos? These people are evacuees from central Mindanao. There is a war out there—this is the best of what they have left.” The MPC had two contacts in the cabinet who managed to get the delegation past the protocol officer and in to see Arroyo.

Baba Umbai, a sixty-five-year-old woman, sat opposite the president and began her story. “You know, Madam President, I am very tired of evacuation. When I was a little girl, I was already running. When I became a mother, I was running with my children. And now, with my grandchildren, I am still running. Even in the evacuation center, I am still running. One night there was such a heavy rain; my grandchildren and I had to go out of the evacuation center and move to higher ground because the center was completely flooded. I want the war to stop, I want to have peace. Please, can you help us search for this peace?”

The president just looked at her and said, “*Nahirapan pala kayo*” [“So, you had a difficult time”].

Mary Ann was infuriated.

Did she really not know this woman was having a difficult time? Does she really think people affected by the conflict are having a picnic? I found the president’s statement so depressing and pathetic, but it shows that once you get to that high level in politics, people just become numbers—it becomes impossible to relate to them on a personal level. Imagine a woman was telling her life story, characterized by evacuations, and that was her only response.

After the evacuees had pleaded their case, Arroyo had one more response. She challenged the MPC and the displaced to ask the MILF for a ceasefire: “You should not only be asking us. You should also ask Hashim Salamat. It takes two to tango.”

Their next meeting in the capital was with one of the generals, the architect of the 2000 all-out war under Estrada. As the evacuees entered Camp Aguinaldo, the nerve center of AFP military operations, they became visibly unsettled. Some of the men in the group had previously fought alongside the rebels; to be in the headquarters of the military they had battled against and who had caused their displacement was unnerving. Several of the evacuees remained completely silent throughout the meeting with the leaders, including the head of the southern command stationed in Mindanao.

The women addressed the military men. Muslima, fifteen years old, began. She told them she had planted watermelons along the Ligawasan Marsh, hoping to sell them to earn enough money for her college fees. But because of the war, she had to evacuate with the rest of her community. She feared her hopes for furthering her education were dashed. “I left the watermelon at home,” she explained to the generals. “Even now, I keep thinking about what happened. They should have ripened already. All my plans for school are back there—with the watermelon.”

The top commander dismissed her story, saying she was obviously “still traumatized” by the war. “Next question.”

“But sir,” she responded, “what would you think if this was your own daughter telling you this story, who is telling you that she cannot go to school because of the situation? How would you feel if this was happening to your own family?”

“Next question.”

But Mary Ann was sure, despite his dismissal, that the general was moved by Muslima’s story. “It was very powerful. It gave him a face in front of him telling him about the impact of his orders. I could see it was something he could not handle.”

Bae Magda, a traditional leader in her community, launched into a tirade at the general. It was the first time she had come face to face with the perpetrators of the suffering in her community. She spoke with the “full force” of an empowered community leader, “scolding the generals as though they were young people in her community.”

“You! You just order your men in the field; you have no idea of the impact of your decisions. Do you know what you are doing there? You are killing people, you are destroying their communities. We are just trying to survive, we are trying to promote peace and dialogue, but you, you do not respect our leadership in the community as indigenous peoples. We are the leaders there; you should recognize us. This is our domain. When you enter our communities, you should respect this, not just start shooting.”

The top commander asked her, “So, if you were the president of the Philippines, what would you do? Or if I were the president, what would you tell me to do?”

Bae Magda shouted at them, incensed: “Just stop the war! Remove all the military from our communities. Just stop the war, that is what we want. We have been talking here for several minutes and still you do not understand. Stop the war!”

Silence hovered in the room for a minute. Finally, Bae Magda asked calmly, “What will we tell the evacuees when we go home?”

The commander’s response was, unsurprisingly, the same as Arroyo’s. Take the same message to the MILF and then the government and military will consider their position.

Before leaving the capital, the evacuees toured Catholic parishes around the city. The MPC had coordinated with peace groups and NGOs in Manila, who, in turn, organized with local priests to allow the Bangsamoro and indigenous evacuees to speak during Mass to explain why they had come.

For the parishioners, it was the first time that many of them had heard first-hand about the conditions in Mindanao. They had a difficult time with the use of the word “gyera,” or “war,” being used to describe a contemporary event in their own country. “Gyera? Is there really gyera? Maybe we should call it ‘*kaharasan*,’” or “violence.”

“No,” the evacuees persisted, “it is gyera.”

There was a special collection taken in each church where they spoke. They returned to Mindanao with sacks of relief items, including clothes, medicine, and even some money.

### **A Visible Woman**

Upon their homecoming, the evacuees released a statement about their experiences and hopes, thanking Arroyo and the military leaders, but also affirming that they expected a “bolder initiative from the government to show its willingness to tread the path of peace,” rather than

countering with a “two to tango” metaphor. Immediately, Mary Ann began making contact with leads she hoped would take her directly to the MILF to deliver the message from the evacuees and Manila in person.

After three or four days of searching, Mary Ann was given an appointment with a top central committee leader of the MILF. The group of leaders from MPC and IID—Mary Ann being the only woman—trekked through marshland and rural areas to reach the MILF base.

Mary Ann, as a representative of civil society, had previously met MILF leaders during a round of formal talks in Malaysia, when the government and MILF signed a ceasefire agreement. “There, they all wore their suits and all of us shared extravagant ten-course meals prepared by our Malaysian hosts. This was the first time for me to see them with guns. They had guards with them and they themselves were fully armed. This was totally different and quite a surprise.” Mary Ann put herself at ease when she recalled one of their conversations in Kuala Lumpur. She had asked the MILF leaders why they did not have a woman on the peace panel. Their explanation was that they “could not find one.”

“Can you imagine? They could not find one? The population in Mindanao is approximately twenty million and they could not find a single woman?” She thought of all the invisible women she was speaking for and delivered both the request of the evacuees and the message from the presidential palace. “We are here for peace. I know that it is a very difficult request—to ask for a ceasefire at a time when you are running for your lives, while you are the ones who are under attack—but, we still came because of the humanitarian crisis. This is an appeal from the people who are in the affected communities. The civilians are asking for a ceasefire.”

Ghadzali Jaafar, Vice Chairman for Political Affairs, listened quietly, but then described the events in the Ligawasan Marsh back in February, and how they had been attacked and betrayed while they were supposed to be engaged in peace talks. “You were there in Malaysia when we signed the ceasefire agreement—you were there,” he addressed Mary Ann. “But then they attacked our communities, our camps. What do you expect us to do now? We cannot call for a ceasefire because our duty is to defend our communities. If we declare a ceasefire, we will be finished as an organization.”

At a loss for words for she knew he was right in some respects, Mary Ann felt she still had to leave the camp with a chance for peace. “There must be a way to stop the fighting. If it is you who stops fighting first, I think you will be on higher ground than the government, and you will certainly put yourself on higher ground with the communities. It is your own people who will benefit from the ceasefire.” She encouraged them to think about this action more broadly. “You will also be heeding the calls for peace from the international business community and the bishops.”

Something she said struck a chord with him. He was silent for a moment and then responded, “We will not commit, but we will relay this to the central committee to discuss.”

On May 28, the MILF released a statement: “The Moro Islamic Liberation Front has declared a ten-day ‘Suspension of Offensive Military Actions’ (SOMA) starting from June 2 in response to the earnest call of the various peace and religious groups in Mindanao and the need to restart the normal course of the peace process.”<sup>14</sup> The excitement was palpable in the evacuation centers.

We were calling people, texts were circulating widely. The evacuees were stunned and extremely happy, for the first time they realized that they had made

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<sup>14</sup> “MILF declares unilateral ceasefire.” *Philippines Headline News Online*.  
<http://www.newsflash.org/2003/05/hlframe.htm>

this happen. The high this gave them was extremely contagious and empowered us all. We all really believed that we had the power to make this happen.

Now they needed to convince the government to reciprocate.

### ***Bakwit Power***

It was June; school was due to start. The evacuee women wanted their children to be able to enroll in school. They were tired of relying on the humanitarian aid agencies in the camps, stating that if there was a full ceasefire, “then we will not have to suffer the indignity of begging for food and waiting for relief assistance.” They were frustrated by the responses of Arroyo and the generals. “Since Manila is so fond of ‘People Power,’ we will give it to them,” they thought. On the morning of June 24, 2003, more than 10,000 women, children, and men walked out of their evacuation camps and “marched out onto the highway with their placards,” proclaiming simply, “we want to go home.”

The two-day demonstration of Bakwit Power, also labeled the “Peoples’ Exodus to Peace,” was a historic event, the first political act by the evacuees—those usually seen as collateral damage by armed parties. Standing under the hot sun and warm rain that soaked through their only clothes, the evacuees did not move from the highway. Speeding military trucks and other traffic passed them, beeping their horns to intimidate the people from the road. On the second day, a man suggested that the women should take shelter under the trees as the rain continued, but the women were determined. An old man pointed at passing buses and the faces therein, staring back at the evacuees; he spoke to Mary Ann in a local language. A friend interpreted for her as the old man continued: “We should stop what we are doing. Look. Look at those Christians. They are just laughing at us. They think we are crazy just standing out in the rain like this.”

Mary Ann responded that she, too, was a Christian, yet she was standing together with him to fulfill their dreams for Mindanao. “There are Christians, Muslims, and indigenous peoples who are also suffering the brunt of the war. Our biggest strength that we are showing here today is our unity.” The old man’s eyes brightened as he flashed Mary Ann “a genuine smile.”

“Allah will repay you,” he blessed her.

Before they had taken to the highway, the evacuees drafted a six-point “Manifesto of Evacuees in Central Mindanao,” calling for the government and MILF to declare “a bilateral and unconditional ceasefire,” to resume peace talks, to facilitate the secure and permanent return of the displaced, to stay away from civilian-inhabited areas, for the government to continue humanitarian assistance, and to continue the reconstruction of infrastructure damaged by the war. After their two days lining the road, their message was heard in Manila. Arroyo sent her cabinet secretary to receive the manifesto and bring it back to the capital.

When the SOMA was released by the MILF, the MPC immediately contacted General Reyes, head of the AFP. As he said, “It takes two to tango,” so if there was already a unilateral ceasefire declared by the MILF, the military was bound to reciprocate. However, one of the military commanders commented that if the AFP agreed to a ceasefire, “*paranga nababakla na kami*” [“we would appear like homosexuals in this whole fight”]—implying they would appear “soft.” Mary Ann was infuriated with this statement; it clearly showed how the military perceived the war as a macho game of attrition, all at the expense of innocent women and children.

She and her colleagues protested, reminding the generals that the MPC had done what was asked of them—they went to the MILF—and that it was now time for the government and the military to act in kind. The general told them that though he would not make an official

statement, he would start repositioning his troops slowly and quietly, which would help lead to a ceasefire.

By the middle of June, the original ten-day SOMA and an extension by the MILF were set to expire, but still the government had not yet reciprocated. Mary Ann spoke by telephone with the MILF leader she had previously met with and thanked him for the unilateral ceasefire and the positive impact it was having on the morale of the displaced; she also encouraged him to extend it while they were all waiting on a formal statement from the president. He voiced his concerns to Mary Ann that it would be difficult to convince some hardliners in the central committee to extend the SOMA, so he advised her to continue the campaign and focus on using the media. The MPC called upon all the peace networks throughout Mindanao and the country and asked them to write statements expressing their appreciation of the unilateral ceasefire declared by the MILF and imploring the government to reciprocate.

There were statements in the print media, addresses to the MILF over the radio, and we even asked international NGOs and several bishops to add their written support, which they did gladly. The bishops wrote letters to Chairman Salamat convincing him to sustain the ceasefire.

Finally, by the middle of July, both the government and the MILF declared a formal ceasefire, and the Philippines witnessed the success of a new kind of peoples' movement, Bakwit Power.

### **Divisions and Complications**

After the signing of the official ceasefire in 2003, negotiations continued. Apart from the official framework of the peace process, Mary Ann underlines several fundamental issues that must be addressed before a true peace will take hold on the island. At the grassroots level, serious efforts must be made to unify the Bangsamoro peoples, whose loyalties are split between the MILF and the MNLF. The MNLF's peace agreement with the government in 1996 is still in

effect on paper, meaning that any future settlement by the government with the MILF will have to either incorporate the conditions from the MNLF agreement, or provide a new blueprint that comprehensively addresses the grievances of both groups and the Bangsamoro people as a whole. The MPC is uniquely placed on the ground to facilitate this unification: Through their work with Bantay Ceasefire and tri-peoples' dialogue, the group has proven their impartiality and independence, as well as their commitment to creating peace and security in Mindanao. In addition, they continue to hold focus group discussions among the Bangsamoro and indigenous communities in order to reach consensus on issues of ancestral domain, another issue intricately linked to the grievances of both communities.

Aggravating and complicating factors to the peace process is the situation on the island of Sulu, the global “war on terror,” and the role of the United States. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department, is based in Sulu, a part of the Mindanao archipelago, southwest of the main island. The group was originally a splinter group of the MNLF, who is also based in Sulu, but the ASG uses more extreme methods, such as kidnapping, extortion, and banditry, to pursue its objective of an Islamic fundamentalist state in Mindanao. In 2003, MILF Chairman Salamat denied all ties with terrorist groups and distanced the MILF from the ASG.

The U.S. is providing military assistance and counter-terrorism training to the Philippines to defeat the ASG and other militants with possible ties to worldwide terrorist networks, but the presence of the U.S. military in Mindanao has historically been, and remains, highly controversial. Under the Philippine constitution, the U.S. military is not allowed to engage in combat on its territory, and the behavior of American military personnel—including the alleged

gang rape of a twenty-two-year-old Mindanaoan woman by six Marines—has destroyed relations with many civilians on the ground.

Furthermore, the tendency of the government of the Philippines to conflate the Bangsamoro grievances with those of the ASG, as well as the increasing absorption of the conflict in Mindanao into the international “war on terror,” is frustrating to Mary Ann and other peacebuilders. “The conflict in Mindanao is an issue of decolonization, self-determination, ethnicity. If it gets transformed into the fight against terrorism, then, well, we don’t have a formula for that.”

Counter-terrorist offensives by the AFP have led to mass displacements on Sulu. In 2005, Bantay Ceasefire conducted an investigation into the situation of civilians on the island, which required interviewing both the AFP and the MNLF, who had engaged in armed confrontations earlier that year. When they arrived at the pier at Jolo, they were met by the military who insisted on accompanying the group wherever they went. Mary Ann protested, “We are Bantay Ceasefire. We are independent. How can we interview the MNLF if you are there?” The commander responded that as long as they were in Sulu, their security was the responsibility of the AFP. The ceasefire monitors, therefore, pretended to go sight-seeing, taking photographs and acting like tourists while also interviewing whoever they could. The women of the group covered their heads and faces with scarves in order to blend in with the community around them and gain access to the MNLF and civilians who may be intimidated by the presence of the military. Two of the women had very light skin, their faces sticking out beneath their black veils; several of the soldiers seemed to know they were trying to lose their armed escorts—the troops laughed good-naturedly and for the most part, let them conduct their business.

Bantay Ceasefire has also intervened during other displacements of the Bangsamoro and indigenous communities. When Mary Ann was facilitating a two-day return home for evacuees to harvest their crops, an AFP general at first halted her, telling her they were interrupting an important U.S. military operation. She reminded him that the U.S. is not allowed to engage in combat on the island, and that surely with a spy plane overhead and a significant number of troops on the ground, a brief cessation of hostilities would not impair their mission. The general reluctantly guaranteed their safe passage—the crops were nearly overripe when the evacuees were able to harvest them.

Mary Ann believes the U.S. could play a positive role in the resolution of the conflict if it now uses its leverage to “fast-track” the peace process, rather than allow the government and military of the Philippines to “put its hands into the counter-terrorism money box and guarantee more funds for its own arms and hardware,” which could then potentially be used against the MILF, rather than terrorists.

Complicated issues like these continue to hamper official negotiations, but Mary Ann’s work continues to keep her on the ground with the communities who experience the reality of the armed conflict.

### **When the Violence Stops**

As the official, formal peace process between the government and the MILF occurs elsewhere, the effects of the conflict and the numerous brutal displacements did not end with the ceasefire in 2003. This is especially true for women. “In Mindanao, the women in the conflict areas are invisible, not because of our own magic powers, but because we have been erased from the statistics and in the entire peace and security process.” But Mary Ann could not ignore the

women she encountered every day in Mindanao. Like the woman who could no longer cry after her infant son had died, another appalling and tragic story Mary Ann learned of was that of Jamaliah, a Bangsamoro woman who has lived in the conflict-affected areas her entire life. She has spent her years growing subsistence crops, raising ten children, and repeatedly running from the war—a “life wasted in the endless escape to the evacuation centers.” As the months and years passed, exhaustion and fear began to destroy Jamaliah; her neighbors noticed she would panic at the sight of anyone in a military uniform, even if no operation was being carried out. In her darkest moments, she contemplated suicide, but did not want to leave her two youngest children behind—if she was not there, no one would help them to the evacuation center during the next bombing raid.

It was a rainy afternoon when the trauma of war finally overcame Jamaliah. She stabbed her two youngest children while they were sleeping, killing them instantly. She then took the knife to her own stomach and both her wrists—but survived. In October 2003, Mary Ann went to visit the tiny graves of the children. When she went to see Jamaliah, she found her searching for her two dead children.

### **Women for the Future**

There are painful, desperate stories like Jamaliah’s and others; but Mary Ann carries stories of determined and inspirational women as well, who are not merely victims, but actors and healers. During the Buliok War in 2003 and throughout other displacements and fighting, women were the “poorest of the poor,” but they still planted and harvested their rice, earning enough money to clothe and sustain their children. Furthermore, in terms of needs assessment and war damage, “women are clearly the best accountants of what is lost in war.” In a dialogue

between the women of a displaced community and the local military and government leaders, the women requested that the AFP leave their homes untouched when they come into an area. Lani Panggol, a *barangay* secretary and a second-generation Christian settler living in a conflict-affected community,<sup>15</sup> challenged the AFP general: “If you are fighting the rebels, go after them—leave our homes untouched.” She went on to describe how when the women returned to their torched or destroyed homes, all their essential possessions were lost. “When we go back, we can never find our *malongs*, our ladles, our plates, our chickens. Where are our goats? Why are you attacking our goats when your problem is the MILF? Please, at the very least, tell your troops not to touch our ladles.”

The women left the meeting and went straight to the military camp to collect their ladles. “When we got inside and informed them of this, the soldiers could not contain their amusement. They were all laughing as if we had just told them the funniest joke of their lives.” The women’s concerns were treated as insignificant.

But how can they not see that the ladle is not the issue at all? It is about the whole madness of war, which gives women the biggest blow. The ladle is a symbol of a woman. It represents her role as the giver of life, the nurturer, and the hand that feeds everyone.

A short time after the ceasefire in July 2003, Mary Ann was in the community of Baba Umbai, the grandmother who told President Arroyo her story of running all her life. The older woman approached Mary Ann with a huge smile, telling her how ashamed she had been when she was in the evacuation center—that she had so little she could not even offer Mary Ann coffee. “Now, I have grown my vegetables and I hope that you will come to my home to share a meal with me.”

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<sup>15</sup> *Barangay* is translated “neighborhood,” but it is also the smallest unit of local government, below a municipality.

Hospitality like that of Baba Umbai, the strength of people like Lani, and the “goodness in the communities” forces Mary Ann to “constantly reflect on my own life. I keep wondering how they get to be like that. How can they still have the courage to go on?”

But with these models of endurance and courage, Mary Ann continues her work as a peacemaker, using the voice she has honed through years of practicing law and advocating for the rights of Mindanaoans fighting for a just resolution of the conflict. While still practicing law,<sup>16</sup> she envisions moving away from the hierarchical bureaucracy associated with an organization and doing more “hands-on” work that would give her more time with her “all-women family”—her two daughters, Ihip and Isa. “Motherhood is something I could do over and over again. I am just overwhelmed with the joy and the love my children give me everyday.”

As the resolution of the conflict and the conclusion of the peace process take shape in Mindanao, Mary Ann is crafting the sanctuary for women she would like to create in Mindanao:

It is a center, well, more of a home. It is a house made of bamboo—I have the design already. I will grow herbs and spices. I will ask my indigenous women friends to bring herbs when they come. I want to plant herbs because herbs are part of our connection to our natural healing capacity as women. Since the world has become so dependent on pharmaceuticals, we have lost our contact to our healing powers. That is why I want to go back to our herbs and then make a huge inventory of them and learn how to use them to heal.

I will invite all of my friends who need to rest or who need to write, or perhaps even have space for rest and reflection. It could also be used as a place where women can meet and talk. Women who go there will have to treat it as their home. They will have to clean it, but they are also welcome to add plants, books, paintings—just to treat it as their place. It is a women’s ‘Casa de la Something.’<sup>17</sup> It is simple and it is just for my women friends, because sometimes women like us are so giving, but we hardly take anything for ourselves.

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<sup>16</sup> Most of the cases Mary Ann takes are *pro bono*. She does not identify with the title “lawyer” as much as she does “feminist, peace advocate, human rights advocate, mother, sister, Mindanaoan.” She describes that since a lawyer “is not who I am” at her core, she has a “healthy disrespect for the law”: “I know the law, and you can use it to promote justice and you can also use it to dispossess, to oppress, and to exploit people. I don’t have an illusion that law is about justice or equality. Maybe that would be my quarrel with most other lawyers and others who work in the justice system—their mindset, which really lacks critical awareness of how the law should be applied.”

<sup>17</sup> This is in reference to the “Casa de la Paz,” Mary Ann’s home during her residency as a 2005 Woman PeaceMaker at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

## **Afterword**

Mary Ann does not claim this piece as “her” story; rather, she describes it as a “product of the sacrifices and risks that many grassroots leaders in Mindanao have taken to improve the situation in Mindanao.” By telling this story, Mary Ann does not want to take personal credit for the achievements in an unfinished journey, although she says she will take responsibility for the mistakes. Instead, she would like to give thanks and honor to the thousands of voiceless and faceless women in Mindanao who continue to struggle every day, not for any reward other than to improve the lives of their children and future generations.

“I am not extraordinary. It is what people can do together that makes the difference. We all have the ability to be peacemakers.”