

Women's Agency Against Guns

By Jasmin Nario-Galace



This article is the fifth of the six articles to be published by the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) during the six week *Gender & Militarism Campaign*. The Gender & Militarism Campaign advocates for awareness and action around the multi-layered connections between gender and militarism, and highlights gender-sensitive nonviolent action (people power) as a powerful alternative to address conflict.

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About Jasmin Nario-Galace

Jasmin Nario-Galace is Executive Director of the Center for Peace Education and a Professor with the College of International, Humanitarian and Development Studies at Miriam College. She is Co-Coordinator of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) Women's Network. She is in the Steering Committee of the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP). She is a member of the Women Peacemakers Program Network-Asia. She is National Coordinator of the Women Engaged in Action on 1325 (WE Act 1325), a national network of women in peace, human-rights and women's organizations that helps to implement the National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820. She is in the Steering Committee of the Philippine Action Network to Control Arms (PhilANCA) and the Sulong CARHRIHL, a third-party network that monitors the compliance of the Government and the National Democratic Front with their agreement to respect human rights and international humanitarian law. She is also a Member of the Board of the Philippine Council for Global and Peace Education.



Approximately 1,000 people die every day from gun violence, with people from the developing world being twice as likely to die from it as those from the industrialized world.(1) Each day, an estimated 3,000 people are left severely injured by guns, i.e. three for every person killed.(2) In the Philippines, from January to September 2009, there were 7,114 murder and homicide cases. If 78.8% of murders and homicides are committed with the aid of a gun, as the police roughly estimate, that would mean that 21 people are killed by guns in the Philippines on a daily basis.

The Philippines is awash in small arms. A Small Arms Survey puts civilian firearms holdings in the country at 4.2 million. The proliferation of weapons is intensifying and sustaining armed conflicts and other forms of violence, such as terrorism and organized crime. "Arms facilitate a vast spectrum of human rights violations, including killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, enforced disappearance, torture and forced recruitment of children by armed groups or forces."(3)

In the 2013 Global Peace Index, the Philippines was ranked among the least peaceful countries in the world, at number 129 out of 162 countries, one of the lowest in the Asia-Pacific region. The country's peace ranking was lower than that of its Southeast Asian neighbors Singapore (16th), Malaysia (29th), Laos (39th), Vietnam (41st), Timor-Leste (51st), Indonesia (54th) and Cambodia (115th). The ranking was attributed to the crime rate, to armed conflict and to the proliferation of weapons.

The reasons people in the Philippines procure guns vary. Many say that they purchase guns for security reasons and to protect their assets. They blame the police for not being able to provide the necessary protection for people. On the other hand, people also mention that gun ownership symbolizes power, the ability to control and to sow fear.(4) In a country where political dynasties abound, nurtured by a long military rule under the Marcos regime, guns are in the hands of political warlords and their private armies. Many of these groups perpetuate their power through bullets if they cannot do so through ballots.

An example that portrays the power of arms is the massacre in Maguindanao, on November 23, 2009. A political warlord had 57 people killed, 21 of them women, preventing them from registering another candidate for the mayor election. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported that results of police laboratory tests found traces of semen in five of the 21 slain women, providing evidence that they had been raped. The bodies of all five women had bruises or injuries in their genitals. A search of the houses of the alleged perpetrators yielded roughly 1,200 small arms and light weapons.

Indeed, it is often small arms and light weapons (SALW) that are used to facilitate and commit various forms of violence and crimes against women and men, both during and separate from armed conflict. Such violence takes many forms, including murder, intimidation, rape, torture, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, threats and humiliation, forced prostitution, and trafficking of women and girls.(5)

1 www.iansa.org/system/files/GlobalCrisis07.pdf (downloaded on April 16, 2014).

2 Ibid.

3 UN Sec. Gen. Ban Ki-moon, Report to the SC on the subject of small arms (S/2008/258)

4 From focus group discussions conducted by PhilANCA in 2008, validated in workshops on normalization conducted by WE Act 1325 in 2013 and 2014.

5 Presentations by the IANSA Women's Network during side events at various Biennial Meetings of States on the UN PoA on Small Arms and Light Weapons and State meetings on the Arms Trade Treaty.





The Women's Network (WNK) of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) reminds us that while the primary weapon holders, users, and traders may be men and that men may account for around 80-90% of homicide victims, women are affected in more invisible ways, including rape, threats, intimidation and domestic violence at gunpoint. (6) Women suffer as a consequence of the lack of controls on today's billion-dollar trade in arms. Because of their sex, women are particularly at risk of certain crimes, including violence in the home, on the streets and on the battlefield. (7) The WNK further underlines that although women and girls hardly ever fight the world's wars, they do suffer from wars, especially when sexual violence is deliberately used as a tactic of warfare. (8) For instance, between 20,000 and 50,000 women were raped during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped. 64,000 women and girls are estimated to have suffered war-related sexual violence in Sierra Leone's civil war between 1991 and 2002. (9) Testimonies of women explain how the assaults were endured at gunpoint. "They put their guns to our throats and stomachs to make sure that we followed their orders," one woman reported. (10)

Despite the ill consequences of the proliferation of weapons, countries continue to produce and purchase them. World military expenditure in 2012 is estimated to have been USD 1.756 trillion. (11) Sales of arms and services by companies in the SIPRI Top 100 totaled USD 410 billion in 2011. Two-thirds of those concerned deliveries to developing countries. The arms race drains government funds and increases a developing country's external debt. In 2005, for example, Indonesia spent eight times more on debt servicing than it did on education and healthcare. In addition, excessive weapons' spending impedes development or reverses development gains. Focus-group discussions conducted by the Philippine Action Network to Control Arms (PhilANCA) gathered reports that gun proliferation and violence reduces opportunities for tourism, direct foreign investment and local investment, reducing livelihood opportunities as a result. (12)

This is the situation that prodded the UN Secretary General to report that: "Armed violence can aggravate poverty, inhibit access to social services and divert energy and resources away from efforts to improve human development. Countries plagued by armed violence in situations of crime or conflict often perform poorly in terms of the MDGs. Moreover, armed violence forms a serious impediment to economic growth." (13)

The Center for Global Women's Leadership (CWGL) defines militarism as an ideology that creates a culture of fear and supports the use of violence, aggression, or military interventions for settling disputes and enforcing economic and political interests. Arms are a tool for militarism to thrive on. These are the reasons why many women have rallied against arms proliferation, together with its linkages to militarism, and have called for disarmament. (14)

Historically, women have played a major role in fighting militarism. Having seen how militarism manifested itself in arms proliferation and violence, leading to deaths and injuries, they have often rallied to protect their loved ones. This is illustrated in Argentina, for instance, where mothers at Plaza de Mayo protested against the "disappearance" of their children. Or in Liberia, where women put their lives on the line to stop the civil war. On the global level, the IANSA Women's Network members were among those who campaigned hard for strong language in the Arms Trade Treaty, including language for the prevention of arms transfers if there is likelihood that the arms will be used to commit gender-based violence.

In the Philippines, women activists have highlighted women's agency as contributors to the prevention of armed violence. Each time combatants threaten to leave the peace-negotiation table, women stand up to save the peace process. "War solves nothing," they tell the combatants. "Go back to the negotiation table!"

6 "Why the term 'gender-based violence' must be used" by Rebecca Jerome (IANSA Women's Network) and Vanessa Farr (WILPF), with input from Maria Butler (PeaceWomen/WILPF). attmonitor.blogspot.com/2012/07/why-term-gender-based-violence-must-be.html.

7 Presentations by the IANSA Women's Network during side events at various Biennial Meetings of States on the UN PoA on Small Arms and Light Weapons and state meetings on the Arms Trade Treaty.

8 Ibid.

9 From a powerpoint presentation on "UN SCR 1325 and other Women, Peace and Security Council Resolutions" by Mavic Cabrera Balleza, International Coordinator of the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders.

10 Ibid.

11 SIPRI 2013 Yearbook.

12 PhilANCA (2008) Voices from the Ground: Peoples' Consultations on the Arms Trade Treaty.

13 UNSG Report to the SC on the subject of small arms (S/2008/258).

14 www.now.org/news/blogs/index.php/sayit/2010/12/10/an-insidious-combination-militarism-and-gendered-violence (downloaded on April 16, 2014).





Knowing that arms-control laws and policies can reduce both violence within armed conflicts as well as in “peace” time, women have actively helped campaign for the passage of specific laws, such as the International Humanitarian Law and the Anti-Torture Law. They constantly remind the government of its international legal obligations provided in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the four Geneva Conventions, the CEDAW, UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 and other WPS resolutions. They have entered into conversations with the Philippine National Police, demanding stricter legislation on small-arms regulation, the active confiscation and destruction of loose firearms, and improved systems for the registration of arms—including legitimate neurological exams—and they have given seminars on human and women’s rights.

Women in the Philippines are also active on a local level to prevent arms proliferation and militarization. One of the members of the Women Engaged in Action on 1325 (WE Act 1325) network in the Philippines, the Mindanao Peoples Caucus, created an all-women peacekeeping team to monitor human-rights violations committed by armed combatants and to stop combatants from breaking ceasefire agreements. WE Act 1325 member COMIPPA provides a safe place for women who are being hunted by armed groups. Women in the Philippines also initiated the development of a National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 that mainstreamed the language of nonviolence and small-arms control. WE Act 1325 and the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders’ members have also dialogued with local government officials to ask them to legislate local laws on women’s protection. These efforts have actually led to the development of laws.

Awareness raising and capacity building for peace are also a large part of the efforts undertaken by women in the Philippines. Women have engaged in several awareness-raising initiatives on peace, such as the lobby for the integration of peace education in the curriculum. As a result, the Philippine government adopted Executive Order 570, mandating basic and tertiary education institutions to integrate peace education in the curriculum. On capacity building, women have recognized that enhancing the capacity of women on arms control is essential for the prevention of violence. After a training of WE Act 1325 within the Abra province—one of the most politically violent provinces in the country—women initiated a meeting with the political families. Together they pledged that they would not use guns and goons to coerce voters to elect them to office.

Women peace activists in the Philippines have engaged with a wide diversity of stakeholders to get their voices for peace heard, some of those stakeholders not being traditional allies. First of all, acknowledging the substantial role played by the media in disseminating information, women peace activists have been engaging with women in the media. Women from armed conflict zones have been able to narrate their stories to women in media. They are heart-rending stories of loss, of fear and of rising from the ashes. (15) Reporting such stories in national dailies helps in broadening the peace constituency in the country. Secondly, women peace activists have worked with parliamentarians and interfaith leaders. They managed, for instance, to have Muslim and Christian religious leaders support the campaign against gun violence. Catholic priests have even spoken about gun violence in their homilies. At a different venue, parliamentarians have delivered speeches about addressing gun violence.

Women in the Philippines also teach peaceful conflict-resolution skills, promote people-to-people processes and create opportunities for dialogue for intercultural understanding. Armed conflict can be fuelled by stereotypes and prejudices. To counter the negative stereotyping of each other by Muslims and Christians in the Philippines, the Center for Peace Education at Miriam College organized a twinning project in which students at Miriam College, a Catholic School, exchanged letters with students from Rajah Muda High School, a Muslim school. The project aimed to build bridges of friendship and understanding.

Last but not the least, women also include men in their goal of preventing violence. Women in the Philippines engage with members of the security sector, giving them training on conflict resolution, gender sensitivity and the women, peace and security resolutions. WE Act 1325, for example, has trained over 3,000 members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines prior to deployment in UN peace-keeping missions.

15 Examples are WE Act 1325 and Isis International’s initiative to bring selected women from conflict-affected areas to Manila to dialogue with women in media.





The campaign against militarism in general, and gun violence and proliferation in particular, is not a walk in the park for women. The work of women peace activists is challenging on multiple levels. They are continuously challenged by a culture of patriarchy that legitimizes aggression as a solution to conflicts. Women also face the reality that there are stakeholders—states, groups and individuals—that profit and benefit from militarism. Among these benefitters are ideological die-hards and fundamentalists who use violence to achieve their goals. Women are confronted with adherents of the traditional security paradigm, who believe security can be achieved through territorial integrity and a balance of power and hence, a race for arms. Finally, they face business companies that use guns to protect their economic strongholds.

The list of challenges goes on. However, women in the Philippines do not shy away from the obstacles and remain dedicated to achieving the peace and security they want. The nonviolent struggle for peace continues.

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