

Conflict and Displacement: Implications for the Protection of Women's Rights¹

Ruth Lusterio-Rico²

This paper aims to: (1) identify the consequences of displacement; (2) discuss how displacement affects women; and (3) raise questions on the implications of displacement for the protection of women's rights as well as for further research. The paper focuses on the case of the Philippines, as the issue continues to increase in importance in the country especially since it has been cited by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) as having significant displacement in the past two years (IDMC 2009). Currently, the number of internally displaced persons in the country is estimated at around 330,000 to 400,000.

The Consequences of Displacement

The displacement or forced migration of peoples is usually the result of: (1) the experience of natural disaster or calamity; (2) the introduction of a development project in a local community such as the building of dam or a mining project; and (3) armed conflict. Evidently, displacement impacts on communities as people are uprooted from their places of residence. When people are displaced or are forced to migrate, their rights are affected (Perez 2008:29). People lose their livelihood, their homes, their everyday lives. Thus, displacement results not only in impoverishment but in the general deterioration of people's lives.

In their analysis of the experience of communities displaced by mining projects in India, Ahmad and Lahiri-Dutt noted that: "displacement has an undermining influence on social bonds and cultural roots of the entire community, with devastating and disrupting effects on the lives of women living at the subsistence level" (2006:314). The following have been identified as the consequences of displacement, specifically for women: (1) homelessness; (2) loss of livelihood; (3) marginalization and food insecurity; (4) deterioration of health and illnesses for women and children; (5) psychological trauma, mental stress and pressure; and (6) social and cultural risks as people are uprooted from their communities (Ahmad and Lahiri-Dutt 2006).

Furthermore, it has been asserted that the effects of displacement are not gender-neutral (Perez 2008; Ahmad and Lahiri-Dutt 2006). This is because of the fact that in many communities, women are oftentimes relied upon to take care of their families' subsistence and livelihood as well as the well-being of their family members.

¹ Presented at the 3rd Non-Traditional Security-Asia Convention, Marina Mandarin Hotel, Singapore, 3-4 November 2009.

² Fellow, Institute for Strategic and Development Studies (ISDS) Philippines and Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines.

The experience of the Philippines

The displacement of peoples had been experienced in the Philippines mostly by those living in the southern island of Mindanao as a result of many years of armed conflict between government forces and Muslim groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Some scholars have argued that the conflict in Mindanao has been rooted in the region's underdevelopment. They cite the inequitable distribution of wealth and the economic and political marginalization of the Muslims in a largely Roman Catholic country (IDMC 2009: 8). Indeed, the conflict in Mindanao has become too complex such that solutions to it had been difficult to arrive at. Several peace talks between the government and Muslim groups have been launched but have yet to successfully cease the fighting. In the meantime, large numbers of women and children are severely affected by the impact of such conflict.

In recent years, the number of displaced persons in the country has increased significantly. This is largely because of the intensification of the armed conflict between the military and Muslim groups, specifically the MILF. Just over a year ago, the hostilities between these forces have once again become stronger as the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) had been restrained by the Supreme Court. Such agreement could have given broader political and economic powers to Muslim leaders and widened the territories of the existing Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) (Sarmiento 2009)³.

A recent report entitled, *Cycle of Conflict and Neglect: Mindanao's Displacement and Protection Crisis* (2009) produced by the IDMC noted the huge challenge in determining reliable figures on the number of internally displaced persons in Mindanao. This is because of two reasons: (1) the displacement in Mindanao is characterised by tremendous fluidity with frequent population movements; and (2) there is incomplete collection of information, with some groups not included in the government data. In May 2009, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) reported that more than 750,000 people have been displaced during the previous nine months. An additional 150,000 to 200,000 people are believed to have subsequently been displaced between May and July 2009, which puts the total number of displaced people since August 2008 close to a million (IDMC 2009).

A total of ten provinces in the island of Mindanao have IDPs. The table below shows the latest data from the DSWD on the number of IDPs in Mindanao from August 2008 to May 2009.

³ In July 2008, the government and the MILF, by now the largest Muslim rebel group with an armed wing numbering between 11,000 and 12,000 combatants⁴, announced a breakthrough in negotiations with a memorandum of agreement (MoA) on the issue of an autonomous Moro homeland known as the "Bangsamoro Judicial Entity" reflecting the Moro peoples' "ancestral domain". Under the agreement, more than 700 villages in Mindanao would vote in 2009 on whether to become part of ARMM. However, the MoA, which would have represented a major step towards the finalisation of the long peace process, attracted strong public criticism, and it was suspended and later declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. In August 2008, MILF combatants responded by launching attacks on Christian communities in Cotabato Province and later in Lanao del Norte Province. Ensuing fighting with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) led to the displacement in the following weeks of hundreds of thousands of people in several provinces of Mindanao. By the end of the year it was estimated that more than 600,000 people had been displaced; at least half of them have since been unable to return (IDMC 2009).

Internally Displaced Persons in Mindanao, by Province

Provinces	Total Displaced*	Currently Displaced**
Maguindanao	264,695	178,648
Lanao del Norte	148,852	4,933
Lanao del Sur	116,401	39,250
Cotabato	115,082	17,352
Basilan	36,346	8,125
Saranggani	21,715	0
Sultan Kudarat	16,365	1,435
Misamis Occidental	11,310	0
Sulu	7,555	7,555
South Cotabato	6,685	0
TOTAL	745,006	257,258

Source: Department of Social Welfare and Development, 2009 cited in IDMC 2009.

*Cumulative figures since August 2008

**As of 15 May 2009

Based on the data shown above as well as various sources of the IDMC, IDPs in Mindanao mostly come from the province of Maguindanao. Furthermore, the data indicate the concentration of IDPs from the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) which consists of the following provinces: Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi.

How Women Have Been Affected by Displacement

Filipino women have been affected by displacement in various ways. And since they are generally expected to take care of their families' well-being, it is the women who bear the heavy burden of conflict.

The long years of fighting in Mindanao have resulted in the general impoverishment and deterioration of people's lives. As they leave their homes, displaced people have no choice but to live in evacuation areas where the living conditions are very poor. Thus, children and women themselves suffer from poor sanitation, lack of access to clean water and malnutrition. As homes and livelihoods have been lost, women are therefore burdened to provide for their families' needs. A Muslim woman scholar noted that Muslim women are expected to take care of their families' (sometimes even their whole clan's) needs, particularly provide them shelter, food and education (Gutoc quoted by Sarmiento 2009). With no livelihood and home, women depend largely on external assistance – from government and non-government groups – to provide for children's needs, especially food and health care. However, according to a recent Amnesty International report, the food donations received by IDPs have been barely enough to meet the hunger and nutritional requirements of children and women as these consisted mostly of rice,

instant noodles, mung beans, and sardines (Sarmiento 2009). Medicines are also rarely available in evacuation and relocation centers.

Perhaps, among the many ways by which women have been affected by displacement, it is the impact on their health and well-being that must be emphasized since this is the most basic and has implications for the lives of their children and other family members. The poor living and sanitary conditions in evacuation or relocation areas have generally been the cause of illnesses and diseases of women and children. And, it should also be stressed, that these women who are expected to take care of their children and other family members, have also been severely traumatized by the conflict that caused their displacement. Thus, how women have been affected physically and psychologically must be addressed. For instance, cases of women abandoning their children because they think that they could no longer take care of them have been reported.

Implications and Agenda for Further Study

While several incidents and anecdotes have been shared about how women have been directly affected by displacement, there is a need to know the specific and effective ways by which such impact could be addressed. Indeed, this is significant as women's role in rebuilding the lives of communities is crucial. Furthermore, while efforts from various groups have been undertaken, it is necessary to determine how these have directly affected or benefitted women, especially in terms of the protection and promotion of their rights.

For instance, there is a need to know what the concrete situation on the ground, i.e., in areas that are affected by conflict, where abuses and threats on the rights of women are high. And while there are existing programs and initiatives to address the situation of women (and children), it is also important to know if these adequately address the needs of this sector. Given this context, the following questions arise: (1) What are these initiatives and do these sufficiently address violations and abuses of the rights of women?; (2) What are the rights of women that continue to be violated and how could these be appropriately addressed?; and (3) How are women's health and well-being affected by conflict and how could these be appropriately and adequately addressed?

Furthermore, documenting the initiatives of civil society groups and donor agencies in conflict areas to protect and promote the rights of women (with the view of determining how these initiatives can be further improved to effectively address the concerns of this sector and ensure that the commitments made through international agreements are implemented on the ground) may be important. More particularly, it is imperative to know how the health and well-being of women have been affected by the conditions that have been brought about by conflict. Furthermore, collaborative research may be undertaken to gain knowledge about the experiences of different countries as well as identify measures that could be undertaken at the regional and international levels.

References:

Ahmad, N. and K. Lahiri-Dutt. (2006).“Engendering Mining Communities: Examining the Missing Gender Concerns in Coal Mining Displacement and Rehabilitation in India”, *Gender, Technology and Development*, 10 (3): 313-339.

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). 2009. *Cycle of Conflict and Neglect: Mindanao’s Displacement and Protection Crisis*, Geneva: IDMC, Norwegian Refugee Council. (Accessed through <http://www.internal-displacement.org>)

Perez, F. 2008. ”Forced Displacement Among Rural Women in Colombia”, *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 163, Vol. 35, No. 6, November: 29-40.

Sarmiento, P. 2009. “Women in Troubled South Bear Heavy Burden of Conflict”. (Accessed through <http://www.maranao.com>)