

## **The Impact of Local Armed Conflict on the Family Life of Women in Three Agusan del Norte Villages**

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### **Introduction**

**F**or over forty years now, localized armed conflict has featured in some parts of the Philippines. In particular, the conflict between the communist guerillas of the New People's Army (NPA) and the government security forces continues to claim a number of lives in the countryside.

Conflict poses a multilayered challenge to those living in the areas affected by it. Basic services are interrupted as heightened security hampers mobility. Desiring safety, people opt to remain indoors until the threat has passed. Households suffer as it is deemed unsafe to go out to till farms or to fetch food, water, and other essential items. Schools shut down or become the site for local governance to gather evacuees fleeing from violence and crossfire. In particular, for women who are traditionally expected to keep the social fabric of family and community together, the unwelcome descent of conflict into their communities renders critical their role to attend to the care and nurturance of family and community members. Efforts to support women become more essential when they are caught in conflict situations.

Gender roles in family interactions have traditionally been defined by the division of productive and reproductive labor among family members. Beginning at a young age, girls are socialized for motherhood roles: to care for the young, the sick, and the elderly; to manage the home; to foster social relations, emotional growth, and psychological well-being of family members; to educate and nurse; and, when necessary, to earn from the home to augment family income.<sup>1</sup>

Conflict and postconflict situations impose upon women to confront very specific concerns related to their performance of their family roles as daughters, wives, and mothers and their economic roles and obligations in the family in the context of the prevailing cultural notions of gender roles and relations. Localized armed conflict has the potential to break families apart. In times when violence visits the community, men may leave the family to fight. Sometimes, they get killed or they go away to hide when there is reason to fear for their personal safety. Whatever the cause, the absence and limited mobility of men lay the burden of securing the immediate family and putting food on the table squarely on the women who are left behind.

Recent trends in community reports of localized armed conflict alarmingly suggest that civilians are not spared from or are even targeted for violence. Gender-based violence, to include incidences of sexual violations, has been reported with enough frequency to suggest that it may even be used by certain quarters as a weapon of warfare. Because most of these incidences happen in isolated areas, these reports are seldom taken up by mainstream media, but are carried by word of mouth in these closely-knit hinterland communities. Local government officials and community health workers may hear of these concerns, but perhaps because they happen in places that are difficult to access, these cases seldom get documented, much less pursued. These threats to women in conflict situations underscore the need to incorporate gender analysis into early warning activities as the experiences of women present to be a valuable but overlooked indicator of conflict.

Traditionally, women in conflict and postconflict situations evoke the notion of war victims who are hostage to the oppressing onslaught of vicissitudes and have little control over their experience of hardship and suffering. However, a closer examination would reveal that far from embracing victimization, women are responsible for carrying out crucial acts that assure family survival during war and rebuilding communities in its aftermath. Rather than passively accepting the hardships and waiting for things to get better, they more often than not hold the community together through the painful process of reconstruction, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

Moreover, women in conflict-affected communities have proven time and again to be active actors at all levels of postconflict reconstruction. Their experiences, however, have not been duly

recognized and dignified. They are as yet to be equitably represented in any major peace negotiations, even though they are the ones most affected by war when it happens. Despite their limitations in terms of access to resources, skills, and participation in social networks, community women demonstrate a capacity for social action to bring back normalcy at the soonest possible time in the wake of violence in their communities.

Not much is known about how women experience conflict and postconflict situations in the affected areas of Mindanao. The security situation in the countryside often cautions media and local government officials against travel to these parts until the state security sectors would have declared these areas safe. This prevents accurate information about the community from reaching decision makers and relief workers, especially at the height of conflict when the community most needs help. In this situation, the communities are rendered isolated, and the people there are left to their own devices.

This paper explores how women experience conflict and postconflict situations in three selected barangays in two Agusan del Norte municipalities. Barangay Guinabsan in Buenavista and Barangays Camagong and Jaguimitan in Nasipit were randomly chosen from among the six barangays in these two towns that had been touched by counterinsurgency operations from 2000 to 2005. Through systematic sampling of households in these three barangays, the women and mothers were surveyed. Secondary data sources and key informant interviews were also used to enrich the findings from the household survey. Among the seventeen key informants interviewed were the chieftain of the Higaoanon<sup>2</sup> tribe, barangay officials, barangay health workers (BHWs), para-teachers, and former NPA combatants who are now residing in Barangay Jaguimitan.

### **The Research Sites**

The conduct of the study in all three barangays had been coordinated with the local government unit (LGU) and other pertinent agencies. Despite the active threat of violence, the researchers were able to stay long enough in the area to observe and gather data.



***Barangay Guinabsan, Buenavista, Agusan del Norte***

This conflict-affected rural barangay is a farming community located in the GUIMARIZ Agrarian Reform Community (ARC). During the five-year period in question, sporadic conflict had occurred in the neighboring sitios of Lomboyán and Balatacán. Sitio Lomboyán is about two-and-a-half hours' walk from the barangay hall of Guinabsan and is very difficult to access. Getting there requires travelers to cross the serpentine river sixteen times. A six-wheeler truck comes by every Monday to bring down the farmers' produce — mostly bananas, as well as coconut and corn in excess of those grown for family consumption. Even motorcycles rarely brave the trail to Lomboyán, leaving the residents there no recourse but to hike or to hitch on Monday's truck. Community electrification is powered by a few solar panels and a charged truck battery. Some houses do not have electricity.

At the time of the study in early 2006, an Army detachment manned by a few Army regulars and more paramilitary elements of the Citizen Auxiliary Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU) — mainly men from Lomboyán and Balatacán — had been recently located about a hundred meters from the residential cluster in Lomboyán. The residents reported that while the detachment was still under construction, the Army regulars were housed by the locals, such that the soldiers have developed close interpersonal relations with the residents. Indeed, during the interviews, the residents expressed their appreciation for the location of the detachment in the area. They believe that the troops' presence protects the village from harassment by NPA bands in transit that used to divest them of corn and food stocks with impunity.

In running after the NPA rebels, the detachment soldiers figured in encounters at the outskirts of the sitios. These violent episodes wreaked havoc on the farmers' cultivated fields, as the combatants chased each other through the landscape. Some houses were burned down or were riddled by the bullets exchanged. It was unclear as to who exactly was responsible for trampling the farm lots and for burning and firing at the houses. What is generally accepted is that the damage to the residents' property was sustained due to the firefights between the government troops and the rebels.

### *Barangay Jaguimitan, Nasipit, Agusan del Norte*

Located to the north of Barangay Culit and east of Barangay Camagong in Nasipit, Agusan del Norte, Barangay Jaguimitan has a total land area of 3,654,485 square meters. The barangay lies in the northwest mountain ranges of Agusan del Norte where the Alpha Company of the 29th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army confronts the Front 21 A and B forces of the NPA.

From 2000 to 2005, there have been reports of armed encounters between the government troops and the NPA, notably in Sitios Salaysayon and Tagbabacon, where heavy fighting required the deployment of helicopter gunships and truckloads of ground troop reinforcement. Bombs and boot tracks damaged the farmers' crops and there were many times when the residents had to flee as the firefights got intense.

Back in the 1970s, logging operations had extended to Barangay Jaguimitan, and some Cebuanos who were then part of the operations opted to settle there. Three decades after logging operations ceased

in the area, the logging roads have fallen into disrepair and much of these have been reclaimed by nature. While the barangay proper can be reached by motorcycle and the rare private four-wheeled vehicles that brave the rough road, its remote sitios seldom see any form of motorized transport.

The denuded forests have been turned into small farms where the barangay residents now plant banana, corn, and coconut. However, the difficult access to commercial centers and the sporadic outbreaks of violent confrontation between armed groups in the barangay adversely affect the income-earning activities of the residents. Houses remain fashioned from light materials, and most of these have no electrical connection.

Salaysayon and Tagbabacon are remote sitios in Barangay Jaguimitan that could only be reached on foot. The residents are mostly Higaoanons, although there are a few non-Lumad who have settled there. Sitio Tagbabacon sits on the western section of the barangay, about six kilometers from the barangay hall. It takes three hours of walking up and down the mountains to get there. It is noted that a community of former NPA combatants lives here.

Sitio Salaysayon, on the other hand, is about twenty-four kilometers from the Barangay Hall of Jaguimitan. It would take nine hours of hiking to get there. This is the farthest sitio from the barangay center, and the residents there are all Higaoanons.

At the time of the study, the residents reported that Sitio Salaysayon was still a “no-man’s-land”<sup>3</sup> because of the active counterinsurgency operations being launched by the military. Many among the residents had evacuated and had sought refuge among family and friends, some as far as in Sitio Hinandayan in neighboring Barangay Camagong.

### ***Barangay Camagong, Nasipit, Agusan del Norte***

For some time, this farming community west of Barangay Jaguimitan had been known to be one of the conflict areas in the province. In December 2004, the armed clashes occurred almost every day in the barangay, especially in the most remote sitios of Mimbahandi and Hinandayan where the residents were mostly Higaoanons. The firefights took place very near the residential areas and were reported to inflict much damage to property. There were also reports that the NPA were actively recruiting among the Lumads here.

Military personnel and CAGU elements were still temporarily encamped in Sitio Hinandayan when the researchers arrived there in

late 2005 to gather data. The residents appeared comfortable with the presence of the government troops in the community. Hinandayan was also hosting several refugees from nearby sitios who had fled because of the ongoing offensives launched against the NPA. Sitio Mimbahandi, on the other hand, had been put under a “red flag” condition,<sup>4</sup> and a complement of the Army Scout Rangers had been deployed there.

### **Family Life in Three Conflict-Affected Barangays of Agusan del Norte**

It was observed in all three barangays that there was very little inter-ethnic tension among the settlers and the indigenous Higaoanons. As neighbors, they were tolerant of each other’s ways and freely engaged in cordial interactions.

Most of the households surveyed for this study belonged to Christian settler families that commonly had nuclear family arrangements. The domiciles had enough living space to accommodate five people. Some of the larger houses had three bedrooms. In Sitio Lomboyán, most houses did not have doors. Flimsy curtains were dropped to cover the entrance or a slab of wood is placed there to bar dogs from coming in while the people retired for the night.

Their Higaoanon neighbors, on the other hand, had more extended family arrangements, with grandparents often coming to live with their married son or daughter. Higaoanons also have an extended sense of family and would welcome even distant relatives to stay for as long as they like or need.

The residents are united by a bond of close communal relations in a climate of trust and mutual assistance. They share what little they have with each other and are familiar with the details of each other’s daily lives and family concerns. It was observed that neighbors seemed to feel relatively free to come and go or sleep over in each other’s homes as night falls. They were not particular about where to sleep — on the floor, on benches, or resting against the door. When dropping by, neighbors freely join in whatever activity the family is doing — sharing their food at mealtime or lending a hand in housework.

Empathy and sensitivity to the feelings of others were interpersonal skills that parents sought to enhance in their children. While discipline of the young was recognized to be the sole authority of parents, the

socialization of children to communal life was a responsibility that the rest of the community shared. Neighbors informed parents about the children's public behavior. Parents sometimes spanked or told off their children in the presence of others.<sup>5</sup> Such actions demonstrated their adherence to the shared normative prescriptions of the community.

The shared parental responsibility for the upkeep of the family is delineated by gender. Fathers plow the farm and harvest the produce. Mothers tend the vegetable gardens in their backyard and help their men in the fields at harvest time. Fathers go out to fish and turn over their catch for the women to cook, share, or barter with neighbors for household needs. After school hours, fathers teach boys to do the work of men, and mothers teach girls to do the work of women. While the men and boys are out tending the farms, women and girls clean the house or do the laundry along the riverbank where they keep company with neighbors who go there to fetch water, bathe, play, wash clothes, or just listen to the conversation. Young children often follow their mothers or older siblings around and may be directed to gather firewood, help carry stuff, put the goat out to graze, or feed the chicken.

Fixing the house and managing the farm are primarily the husband's concern, and therefore men have control and access to carpentry tools and farm implements. But even though these tasks are believed to be strictly for men, women are not hindered to do such tasks if they feel like it or if the men are absent. In contrast, sewing is considered to be strictly for women, and the men who do know how to stitch would not do so where others could see. There is a general sentiment that a man who sews is either henpecked or gay.

For settler families, the household budget is controlled by the wives.<sup>6</sup> Men seem to have little need for pocket money, and most of them do not have vices, such as drinking or smoking that would require them daily expenses to maintain. *Tuba* — wine fermented from coconut — is not for sale but in the community, but is shared among neighbors on social occasions. Drinking tuba usually takes place while there's light because the people sleep early. Drinking is for men, but a married woman could also do this in company when her husband is present and does not voice his objection.

A number of women who had are trained as community-based BHWs who are deployed from the barangay health station (BHS) in Lomboyon. The BHWs respond to the basic healthcare needs of the

residents and liaise with the health officials stationed in the BHS. Most of the women — even those who are not BHWs — know basic applications of herbal treatment and first aid, unlike the men who aver that such knowledge is only for women. However, some men expressed that they gather the needed plants for herbal concoctions when such are needed by women and could not be found nearby.

The rural folk place a huge premium on their children's schooling. Either or both parents may show up for PTA conferences, recognition ceremonies, and school programs or inquire from school authorities about their children's performance. However, there are aspects to this shared responsibility for the education of the young that are divided across gender. Women purchase school supplies and help tutor the young to do their assignments and projects for sewing and cooking classes while men secure the finances for school needs and help in projects involving carpentry and farming.

Among the Higaoanons, especially those who are in the insular sitios of Barangay Camagong, there is a general belief that men should be more educated than women. This sometimes translates to tension about allowing the schooling of girl children beyond that grade which boys in the family are able to complete.

Generally, the land that residents own or work on consists of small parcels, over which family members have shared control and access. Some of these lots had already been covered by a Certificate of Land Ownership (CLOA) issued by the Department of Agriculture (DAR) in the name of the husband. In this regard, husbands have control over the family land and may sell or loan against the land without need of the wife's agreement.

The residents grow enough corn for consumption and chicken feed. For household income, bananas are harvested weekly, while coconuts are harvested every month. The activities of gathering and bringing these cash crops to the trading area — the basketball court in Lombuyan or the barangay center — involve many family members in order to make the job faster.

Vegetables grown in the farm are for family consumption. Because there are no refrigerators, the household members have to go out several times a day in order to pick vegetables for meals. The frequency with which someone in the family passes by the banana fields in order to pick vegetables allows them to keep an eye out for anything that needs attending in their farms.

The household also tends to livestock, such as chicken, goats, hog, and carabao. Care and use of the carabao is mainly the responsibility of the husband. Hogs are bred with the fiesta in mind or are raised to be sold.

### **The Impact of Conflict Elements on the Family Life of Women in Barangay Guinabsan**

In Barangay Guinabsan, the NPA bands that came to frequent the area were seen as unwelcome outsiders. Mostly, the residents resented how the rebels would extort money and merchandise from their neighbors who owned stores. Aside from this, however, the rebels did not aggress against the community people. NPA presence in the area did not significantly hamper the movements of the men as they felt relatively safe to go about their daily activities.

It was another story for the women though. Some men would not allow their wives and daughters out of the home while the NPA rebels were in the vicinity. The adults use the conduct of the NPA rebels in the community as an example of disrespectful behavior that they warn their children against following. Their distrust and resentment of the rebels make the community folk unlikely candidates for recruitment. As one community member expressed,

*“Nganong mu-uban mi sa ila nga dili man gani mayo ang ilang pagtagad sa uban namo? (Why should we join them when they do not treat some of us well?)”*

While bothered by the presence of the NPA rebels and fearful to be caught in crossfire should government troops come, the men continued to tend their farms because

*“Kun dili mi mulihok, unsa naman ang among kan-on? (If we don’t work, what will we eat?)”*

Still, the presence of armed outsiders presents for the residents a foreboding threat to their physical security. It reminds them to keep the children — especially the teenage boys — in or around the homes where the mothers could see them. When the rebels are around, the limited mobility of women and children means that men have little help tending the farms, bringing in food, and fetching water from the river. With no help to share the load, it takes them longer to transport their farm produce to the trading area. Meanwhile, women at home contend with having the children constantly underfoot, as there are

just so many household chores that could be assigned to keep the young busy and out of each other's hair. Livestock are also kept close to the home for fear that the outsiders would take them. While tending the animals is normally a shared responsibility, in conflict situations this becomes the responsibility of the womenfolk as the livestock are gathered nearer the family domicile and men have their hands full.

The women dread the time when the combatants catch up with each other in their community. They fear that the flimsy walls of their homes would not keep them safe from stray bullets. They know when combatants come upon each other because this is unmistakably signaled by the sound of gunfire:

*"Makadungog man mi ug buto-buto. Grabe gyud and kabalaka kay hadlok mi kaayo* (We could hear gunfire. We worry greatly for fear of our safety)."

They also know of at least one woman in the neighborhood who experienced some temporary psychological disturbance, which they attribute to her exposure up close to an exchange of fire between the government troops and the rebels. The women shared that their exposure to violent encounters when these happened rendered them distracted, absent-minded, and indecisive. According to one of them,

*"Dili mi kahuna-huna kung unsay buhaton. Wala man gani mi kabantay nga wala pa mi nilung-ag kay mura na-busy naman ang mga tao pamantay sa pagbuto* (We can't think about what to do. We do not notice that we have yet to cook because everybody is busy watching out for something to explode)."

The explosions tell them whether the fighting is drawing nearer their homes. When an exchange of gunfire happens within earshot, all household activities cease. Women become extremely stressed and cannot concentrate, but at the same time have to be more vigilant in making sure that every member of the family is accounted for.

The outbreak of conflict in the vicinity also puts a temporary halt to the harvesting and trading activities for cash crops that are the source of household income for daily needs. Those who need money at the time when trade in the sitios had been suspended have to brave the road to the barangay center. When operating in the vicinity, the military personnel do not restrict the movement of the residents, however, their very presence causes the villagers anxiety. They know that bullets could fly any time while the farmers are on the road.

In Sitio Balatacan, both the military and the rebels are known to maneuver on the same road from the sitio to the barangay proper. Civilians who carry large baskets could sometimes be mistaken for combatants trying to disguise themselves. There had been times when community men had been beaten up on the road allegedly because they had been thought to be so disguised. The residents report that they do not really know which side was responsible for the beating; they only that the men who did so were armed with rifles. These incidences have caused women to fear for the safety of their men who go to the barangay center to trade when military operations are going on.

As soon as it is announced by the soldiers that their area had been cleared, the community folk would hasten to check their farms and secure whatever they could salvage that had not been damaged by the fighting and transit of the combatants. Trading would resume even as people inventoried their losses.

As the combatants pulled out, social workers come in to distribute relief and medical supplies. Women are often the ones who make representation for the family to avail of the limited postconflict support from government agencies.

Agriculture is the main source of income for the residents and what little money they hold mostly comes from trading the cash crops they grow. In Barangay Guinabsan, the amount of produce that they trade is limited to how much they can harvest and haul by hand in time for the truck that comes on Mondays. Most of the residents therefore only earn enough until the next trading day and not much cash is in circulation in these sitios. It is more the norm for people to buy things on credit from the neighborhood stores and pay when they are able to sell their produce. Living in a closely-knit community, neighbors have a general idea of each other's ability to pay. They know when others come into money and could then afford to pay off their loans.

Women are generally accepting of their life condition and only worry about being short of cash when children have school needs that require paying or buying. Money becomes a source of marital discord when the family finances are disrupted because of avoidable circumstances. When men drink, for example, it affects their productivity at tending the fields or preparing the harvest for trading. When men gamble at numbers or card games, they might lose money that wives expect to use for the needs of the family.

To stretch as much resource as they could, the residents maintain subsistence farming to put food on the table. For family consumption,

women maintain vegetable gardens in the backyard while men grow small plots of edible roots alongside the main crops they cultivate for trading. Also, their knowledge of herbal remedies allows them to save on medical consultations and the purchase of prescription medicines.

The limited finances on hand become a big problem for women during a conflict situation when a little more cash could open up more alternatives to keep the family together and safe. The financial difficulties are compounded when the weekly trading is suspended because this not only means a depletion of family resources, but also the suspension of its replenishment. Conflict situations require belt tightening and much creativity on the part of the women to meet the dietary and other daily needs of the family members, especially as in addition to cash shortage, they also have to contend with limited mobility.

Sickness in the family had a way of energizing social support. When mothers get sick, for example, their children readily pull together to accomplish the daily household chores, such as cooking, housecleaning, and washing clothes. As these are considered womanly tasks, these are often done by girls. However, in cases when there is no other female in the household, the sons are expected to deal with what needs to be done.

When children get sick, the women in the community are quick to share their homegrown remedies in the hope of effecting recovery at the soonest possible time. Grapevine network gets the message quickly to the BHWs who would readily respond to any and all medical concerns of their neighbors.

In conflict situations, however, sickness in the family is an added burden for women. Because the support network for health-related concern consists mainly of other women also, the limited mobility of the BHWs and other community women during these times puts the responsibility solely on the poor mother.

But while there is close personal relationship among residents and social support for families in crisis, these do not translate to a shared regard for undertaking democratic processes necessary for community development. Community meetings that are intended for active social participation in assessing needs and identifying shared resources are more often than not ignored. Residents often choose to work their farms rather than walk a long way to where the meeting is to be held. Some who have at one time or another attended community meetings discontinue attendance because the meetings, in their experience, took too long to start or were postponed for

lack of quorum. The gatherings that are most attended are those that are called to discuss livelihood projects where people have an expectation to be given direction on how their immediate families could benefit. It is observed that community meetings are more attended by women than men.

Public meetings to discuss communal strategies and to influence the players to the conflict in the locality have never been called. When asked about it, the women replied that they can only pray and support each other emotionally through the violent times. They believe that the only actions they could do would be to try and ensure the safety and survival of the family. They do not seem to believe that they have control or influence over the military or the rebels, such that any attempt to talk or negotiate with the combatants on their part would require them to overcome their fear of antagonizing either or both.

### **The Impact of Conflict Elements on the Family Life of Women in Barangay Jaguimitan**

In the predominantly Higaoanon households in Barangay Jaguimitan, conflict situations had a more drastic effect on community women. The elderly often live with the family of their married son or daughter<sup>7</sup> and their care is the responsibility of the wife. Aside from the needs of the children, women must also address the particular needs of the elderly. Because the older persons often suffer physical debilitation and other geriatric ailments, they may have special requirements to be considered, especially during those times when there is a need to evacuate the homes.

Higaoanon society is patriarchal, with much authority vested on the husbands and the male elders. Like their Christian neighbors, the Higaoanon women also follow the division of labor along gender lines. All chores for family upkeep — laundry, gathering of firewood and foodstuff, cooking, childcare, and tending vegetable plots, and caring for fowl — are considered womanly undertakings. As in neighboring Barangay Guinabsan, carpentry is for males while sewing is for females. Men in Barangay Jaguimitan are averse to learning how to sew, but it is allowed for a woman to learn carpentry. The women also contribute to agricultural labor at all phases from land preparation to harvest. They say that,

*“Ang bae kung kinahanglan ang tabang sa uma kinahanglan naa pud sila kay ikaon man pud na namo tanan (If females are needed in the farm, they have to be there also because it feeds us all.)”*

Higaoanon women prioritize the needs of everyone else in the family. While they recognize their location in the gender divide, they do not hold the boundaries to be rigid:

*“Ang tarbaho sa mga bae sa balay gyud. Pero dili pasabot pasagdan ra na sila. Ang mga bana angay pud mutabang sa balay pag way trabahuon (Women’s work is really in the home. But that doesn’t mean that they should be left to it. Husbands should also help out when they don’t have work to attend to).”*

Men decide on the disposition of family resources that include the parcel of lot that they farm and the livestock that they raise. Women are only consulted about selling the family land when such was brought into the marriage from her side of the family. Men also have the final say on health care, use of tools owned by the family, shelter requirements, and disbursement of income. Men decide what to plant and women seldom argue about their husbands’ choice. While wives help out in the farm, they say that

*“Pagkahuman sa pag-ani uban mi sa among mga bana sa pagbaligya sa mga mais. Usahay diha ra sa barangay kuhaon. Ang kita niini ang bana gyud ang magkapot (After the harvest, we accompany our husbands to sell the corn. Sometimes, it is sold in the barangay.<sup>8</sup> Husbands hold the money).”*

A woman only holds money if the husband gives it to her to purchase foodstuff, medicine, or other household needs. Mostly, Higaoanons have little need for cash as they live off the land. Women seldom speak out against their husband’s decisions, trusting that whatever their husbands choose would be for the good of everybody. Women only attempt to persuade when it is about deciding on what vegetables to plant for family consumption.

They also weigh in on where to locate the family domicile, although more often than not they usually end up building it near the house of the husband’s parents. The consideration often involves safety and proximity to help in case of need. The size depends on the material to be had on the land — bamboo, straw, rattan, and logs. Men build while women arrange the interior. The decision to construct or to leave the house is a conjugal decision. On the possibility of evacuation from fighting, a respondent said,

*“Puede man mi maghimo utro ug balay kon mamakwit mi. Dali ra man mi makahimo ug balay kon mamakwit man gani (We can always build another house if we were to evacuate. It is easy to build a new one.)”*

Women look after the schooling and health requirements of the children. They make sure that children go to the schoolhouse in Sitio Salaysayon when the teacher is there. They are the ones who actively seek help when someone in the family is ailing. The traditional healer or *hilot* is oftentimes the one they approach to counsel and assist in these cases as the midwife assigned in the health center nearby seldom reports to her post.

In times of conflict, however, those affected flee to the school house where the social workers from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) would base relief operations. The teacher often stays away until the community has been declared safe, and so classes are suspended while the teacher is out and the schoolhouse is being used as an evacuation center. The residents, however, opine that they prefer to live among relatives than to stay in the school house. This living arrangement poses a difficulty in accessing relief services as the government workers would only serve those displaced who have sheltered in the schoolhouse.

When conflict came to Jaguimitan, the women report that it was a strain on their part to keep everyone safe. Curious children often looked out the window when the firing erupted and had to be reminded always to get down and keep safe. Worse, the government troops entered the sitio on high alert, seemingly holding everyone suspect. Some women reported that they were even lined up to have their legs inspected for evidence of bullet wounds and scratches that would tell the soldiers whether they took part in the recent offensives, most likely against the troops.<sup>9</sup>

This suspicion may have been because some residents in Sitio Tagbabacon are former NPA combatants who had since availed of the government's amnesty program and have returned to the folds of the law. When conflict in the vicinity erupts, however, their true sympathies are rendered suspect by both the military and the NPA. Some among the rebel returnees have chosen to go back to the hills. Some who have remained in the sitio are reportedly still being wooed by their former comrades to rejoin the rebel movement. Some of them also have since joined the CAFGU.

When the soldiers came to Tagbabacon, they purportedly detained and questioned some of the locals. Like wildfire, it was rumored in the neighborhood that arrests were being made. Those who feared that they too would be suspected of being rebels left their families to hide out somewhere before the soldiers could hold them for questioning.

They endorsed the family money to their wives before going away. As one respondent recounted,

*“Ang uban nidagan pagkahibalo nga nay dakop sa mga laki nga suspetsahan nga rebelde. Igo nalang gyud nagtugon sa mga asawa nga magtago sila para dili maapil ug dakop (Some of the men bolted when they heard others were being arrested on suspicion of being a rebel. They just told their wives that they needed to hide so as not to be included in the arrests).”*

In the months after the start of the fighting in Barangay Jaguimitan, some of the men returned when they judged that the government troops did not hold their loyalty suspect after all. However, the women continued to experience difficulties in living amidst the conflict. Some of their neighbors had fled community, and there were times when those who were left behind were rendered isolated.<sup>10</sup>

Some Higaoanon households in Salaysayon evacuated and sought shelter among their relatives in Sitio Mimbahandi in neighboring Barangay Camagong. The Christian settlers, on the other hand, fled to the covered court in the barangay center or to the school house in Sitio Salaysayon where the DSWD personnel provided relief assistance.

Food in the conflict-affected sitios was scarce as the farms got damaged, and people found their mobility hampered by the security situation. While there were sardines, rice, and noodles that were rationed by the DSWD personnel, those who were not staying in the Salaysayon Elementary School and in the Jaguimitan covered court were not qualified to avail of these. Those who received tried to share what they could with those who opted to stay in their homes.

Travel between sitios required the residents to secure a note from the commanding officer of the soldiers who were in the area. Even going to their farms was also difficult as the military personnel had marked off some areas there where the rebels were still reportedly hiding. Security was so tight for some weeks that even the barangay captain had to secure the authorization of the military to go from place to place and check on the residents.

Because of lack of social participation on their part, the residents have little practice at arriving at collective decisionmaking on matters affecting them and their area. Traditionally, residents only gather when someone in the neighborhood dies.<sup>11</sup> Also, for community meetings that are called for parenting and health seminars, religious activities, and community clean up, it is usually the women who show up. Public meetings are seldom utilized for community decisionmaking.

Conflict happening in the community therefore challenges the ability of the people to generate the political will and consensus to influence events. Mostly, they look to the barangay captain for direction. A nongovernment organization (NGO) tried to help the women get organized for better social participation, but the residents were wary because coming to meetings meant time away from their daily tasks. Also, some of them were afraid to participate lest they be identified to have “leftist” sentiments.

So while community work falls within the purview of these rural women, they have limited capacity to organize and be organized. Their social involvement and participation can only be such were if permitted by their husbands and when they are free of their domestic obligations. Still, it was the women who showed up for a community meeting with the mayor of Nasipit, the community leaders, *datus*, and Army commanders that was called some weeks after the community got caught up in the military operations.

### **The Impact of Conflict Elements on the Family Life of Women in Barangay Camagong**

The Higaoanons in Sitios Mimbahandi and Hinandayan were more insular than those in Barangays Jaguimitan and Guinabsan who lived in mixed communities with the settlers. Living in seeming isolation in these sitios, the people were not engaged in agriculture for trade. Instead, they only farmed for subsistence.

Agricultural practices were labor-intensive, and most families were of necessity large enough to have more hands to work the field. Perhaps for the same reason, the household arrangement was often extended. So was the Higaoanon’s sense of family. With so many relatives in the neighborhood, children felt free to frequent other households to eat and sleep over.

The Higaoanon women keep alive and propagate the traditions of the tribe. Questions about marriage and where the newlyweds would live are decided by the elders, with the foremost consideration being how the couple could still help out in the productivity of the bigger family of origin. Oftentimes, this would mean that the bride would live with her in-laws. Marrying outside the tribe is frowned upon as settler women are seen as rebellious to tribal ways.

Women’s tasks in the household extend beyond the confines of their immediate household. Though their husbands are the ones to

harvest the fields, the wives ensure that the yield is shared among the members of the extended family. Women are always on call for when men need assistance to harvest the fields and bring in the yield from the farm to the house. They also help their neighbors and relatives at harvest time.

The women are expected to take care of the children and of the other family members. They are to do all the household chores, often with the help of their daughters, nieces, and young boys in the family. When the boys are old enough, they are freed from domestic chores and are expected to work in the fields with their fathers.

The extended family is an advantage especially during conflict situations. The men are expected to protect the family against external threats. When families need to flee the fighting in their communities, they have to go together. Nobody is allowed to stay behind. This means more hands to carry the household possessions and the comfort of number while on the road.

It is the culture of the Higaoanons that except for the *bae* or the wife of the datu, women are not allowed to take part in any political meetings in the community. They may listen in, but at no time are they allowed to speak. During conflict situations, these community meetings decide whether the residents would evacuate or not.

The conflict episode in late 2004 to early 2005 did not require any of the families to evacuate even as much of their cultivated fields sustained war damage. Instead, the sitios became the sanctuary for many of their relatives in nearby areas who had to leave their homes as the violent confrontation drew nearer. The burden of more mouths to feed required more work for the women, especially since it was actually safer for the women than the men to go out of the house to secure food. Armed groups were more permissive of women moving about, and so it fell upon women to take up the farming activities, such as land preparation, that were usually done by the men. Men, however, continued to exercise their right to make decisions for the family. For example, while it was the women who lined up for the relief goods being rationed by the DSWD to the conflict-affected residents, it was the men who decided how and when these family resources would be used.

Higaoanons who had experienced several conflict episodes in the past have already adjusted themselves to the need to move out just as soon as the datu says so. These isolated sitios are a transit area for the rebels and ever so often, the military set up a patrol base here. When this happens, security is tight in the community. Recently, however,

some local men in Sitio Hinandayan were conscripted into the ranks of the CAFGU, and this had somehow warmed the reception of the community folk for the government troops. In Mimbahandi, however, the people remain ambivalent to members of either armed group whom they see to have turned their area of residence into a battle zone.

The presence of the military or armed groups in the local community has devastating effects on the lives of women. Women in these sitios expressed that they are afraid of strangers who carry guns. They have similarly come to fear the sounds of war — helicopter flying, bombs going off, and volleys of gunfire. They also resent both the soldier and the rebel for putting them and their community in the crossfire. As much as possible, the residents do not talk to outsiders who bear guns — be they soldier or rebel — for fear that they might be suspected of sympathizing with either.

### **How Community Women Adjust to Conflict Situations**

Conflict episodes in the community push the family members closer together as the experience provides them the opportunity to openly succor and comfort each other through the hardships and deprivation. It also requires them to work as a team, anticipate each other's needs, and be physically present for each other.

Local conflict, however, poses adjustment on the family roles that women and men play. In places where neither of the contending armed groups suspects the men to be loyal to the other side, the men are the ones who negotiate whatever needs the family has that have to be sourced from outside. Women are confined to the home to care for the children and to look out for their safety.

In NPA-influenced Sitio Tagbabacon, however, men are wary of evoking doubt as to their political sentiments. The perception of being suspect could disrupt family life and men and husbands choose not to draw further unwelcome attention to themselves. The suspicion on their men has repercussions on the women also as they have to put up with the physical inspections and domicile searches until the troops are satisfied that the residents are not aiding or spying for the enemy.

Among the Higaoanons in Barangay Camagong, the mobility of men is hampered when local conflict comes into the community. Women bear the brunt of the work needed for the upkeep of the family as they take on the role of food procurers and social services providers for relatives who come seeking safety. Moreover, they have

to defer to their husbands on decisions about the allocation of family resources and work in what the men allow when trying to manage what needs to be done.

It was also observed that while Christian settlers in these Agusan del Norte villages were more inclined to access the support provided by government agencies, the Higaoanons on the other hand much preferred staying with relatives. This has an implication on the accuracy of official data generated about the internally displaced as records often reflect only those who have been documented to stay in the designated base of the relief workers, such as the elementary school, covered court, or other public installation that have been turned into evacuation centers. Those who seek refuge among relatives are not likely to be listed as internally displaced and may not therefore be qualified to access whatever meager government support there is.

In conflict and postconflict situations when these villages could be temporarily rendered isolated, women only have each other to run to. Mercifully, community relations and gender role prescriptions encourage this form of social support for the women. On the other hand, local conflict limits the mobility of women, thus hindering them sometimes from seeking aid or giving it to other women. In Barangay Camagong, the relative safety of women to move around means that they would be more at risk of being caught in crossfire in cases of violent encounters between armed groups.

This study also found that rural women lack the voice to be part of the communal decisionmaking or to generate the kind of influence that would allow for immediate and positive changes to their difficult circumstances. Also, while women report some stresses, trauma, and emotional disturbances, there has yet to be any attempt made by pertinent government agencies and civil society groups to understand and address the psychological needs of women in conflict and postconflict situations.

There is therefore the need to examine more fully the experiences of women in conflict and postconflict situations to better support them in accomplishing their family roles. Women's voices have to be brought out in the discourse that argues for more peaceable resolution of the armed conflict that often puts their families and communities in the middle of violent confrontations.

## Notes

1 The motherhood role, however, is not the only role women and girls have in the family structure. Women are also wives, sisters, daughters, or grandmothers. Each of these roles carries with it very well-defined role expectations that, when dutifully met by the bearers, sustain family cohesion and allow the basic unit of society to fulfill its fundamental functions.

2 The Higaoanon is a Lumad (indigenous peoples of Mindanao) tribe in the Agusan area.

3 “No-man’s-land” as a term is a legacy of the martial law declared by former President Ferdinand E. Marcos on 21 September 1972. It meant that all the noncombatants had been evacuated out of the area and that any person left behind was likely to be an enemy of the state. The term is not used by the AFP any more to describe any of its current combat operations.

4 (Editor’s note: The term is not in current AFP usage either. This probably refers to a state of heightened community security when troops ascertain the identity of civilians in an attempt to identify and verify those who really are residents of the community where they have established a temporary patrol base.)

5 It is believed that hitting the head would adversely affect the child’s intelligence.

6 For the Higaoanons, however, all money matters are controlled by men.

7 The Higaoanons show great respect and obedience to their elders. They also have an extended sense of family. In theory, polygamy is allowed, although nobody among the Higaoanons in Salaysayon and Tagbabacon has been practicing this since the 1980s.

8 Meaning the main poblacion or center which is some distance from the sitio.

9 The women explained that soldiers inspected their legs to see if these were lighter than their arms. Such could indicate that they habitually wore pants, a garb identified to be used by female NPA members. The women in these communities commonly wear skirts.

10 Isolation also had a political component. Sitio Salaysayon was a Higaoanon community while Tagbabacon was a community of former rebel returnees. Local government priorities often neglect the delivery of basic services to Lumad communities and those identified to have active security threats.

11 The rural folk have a tradition that disallows immediate family members to cook or sweep the floor while the dead is still lying in state in the home. Thus, the community women volunteer by showing up and taking charge of the wake and preparations for the funeral rites. This expression of communal support is called *dayong* in these communities.