

‘No peace without women!’

By Rina Jimenez-David

In the coverage of the current standoff in Marawi, the focus has been mostly on men — the forces led by the Maute brothers (with the strategic involvement of their mother Ominta aka “Farhana”), generals and soldiers and police (including two rogue cops sent to Marawi as a punishment) on the ground, and male refugees and spokesmen, including local leaders. And of course there is President Duterte, clad in “camo” wear no less and toting a long arm in a visit to Iligan, but stopping short of setting foot in Marawi allegedly because of bad weather.

Women, when they do make the news, are depicted mainly as victims — especially as mothers of infants and young children who worry about their survival while mourning the escalating deaths of babies and the elderly. There is also mention of women who have been victimized by sexual predators, allegedly by both the Maute and government forces. Occasionally, much too rarely, we also hear from women working to broker peace.

One of them is Irene Santiago, chair of the government peace implementing panel who made the news when she helped organize the “Peace Corridor” leading to and out of Marawi.

We have also heard from women, including Moro women leaders, working with the “bakwit” and articulating their gender-specific needs. (Yes, even lipstick, no matter what critics say.)

But by and large, women in the context of Marawi, and of other sites of contention and disaster, are relegated to victimhood, passive recipients of aid and succor.

The irony is that since 2000, there has been “official” support for the role of women, known as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that “is intended to protect women against violence in conflict and to promote women’s participation in peace negotiations and reconstruction.”

Some years back, Philippine peace groups and government bodies crafted the National Action Plan to respond to UNSCR 1325, 1825 (on protection of women from sexual violence in armed conflict) and 1888 (creating a rapporteur on ending sexual violence in armed conflict). Still, despite some tentative early victories, the National Action Plan has yet to be fully implemented.

In Colombia, where the latest peace accord between the government and the biggest guerrilla organization, FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), is showing promising results on the ground, women’s participation in the peace process is only now beginning. For starters, they have yet to formulate and implement a National Action Plan. Still, even without formal recognition, “considerable pressure” from civil society led to the institution of a gender subcommittee within the peace structure.

Peace negotiator Alejandra Miller Restrepo says the committee “was a very effective force in bringing about the participation of women. Despite tenacious resistance on the part of clerical and conservative circles to a gender-responsive approach, the concerns of the committee are represented in the current peace treaty.”

However, observers note that “the number of women at the decision-making level in the peace negotiations ... remained small: in the 10-member negotiation team of the government, there were two women, on the side of the FARC, there was only one. In other words, despite the initiative towards an approach for fair gender representation, it was men who dominated the four-year negotiations in Havana, Cuba.”

But women persisted in making themselves heard in the march toward peace in Colombia. The women, says Miller Restrepo, “remained anything but passive ... [acted] as mediators in regional ceasefires, took down testimonies of victims, set up solidarity networks and, alongside the official negotiations, organized civil-society-run regional and local events, during which the peace process was discussed.”

Indeed, the rallying cry today in Colombia, emerging after decades of violent conflict, is “No Peace without Women!” Which might well be the cry of women in Marawi, in the rest of Mindanao, and throughout the country.