

# Faithful peace, peaceful faith



**The role of women of faith in building peace**

Jane McGrory

# PROGRESSIO

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Cover photo: Sister Guillhermina Marcal talks to a UN soldier outside her convent in Balide, Timor Leste.  
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### **About the author**

Jane McGrory worked with Progressio from 2004 to 2007 with a focus on capacity building and advocacy in the south-east Asia region. Jane's work with Progressio extended her past involvement in peace and development in Indonesia to the surrounding regions of Mindanao and Timor Leste. She currently lives with her family in Jogjakarta, Indonesia.

### **A note on terminology**

In this report, the word Religious – when used as a noun – refers to nuns, priests, monks, clerics and other members of a religious congregation or faith community who have a particular standing and role in promoting the teachings, activities and institutions of that community.

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# Preface

With a commitment to gender equality and an interest in the way faith interacts with development work, the topic of this report – women of faith – has a natural appeal for Progressio. Beginning in 2004, Progressio’s project for interfaith and faith-based peacebuilding in south-east Asia provided an opportunity both to study and to support the role of women of faith in building peace, particularly in the project’s focus areas of Papua, Timor Leste (East Timor) and Mindanao.<sup>1</sup> In February 2006, Progressio held a workshop in Timor Leste that brought together over 20 women of faith from the three regions. This report builds on the outcomes of this workshop by pulling together the experiences of participants, along with research from other sources.

Our initial interest in this topic was based more on a perception that there was something important about the role of women of faith than a clear vision of the wisdom to be uncovered. We were also curious as to why the peacebuilding work of women of faith has been given so little attention. As we began to look closer at the topic and our initiatives to support women of faith progressed, the reasons for studying the topic became clearer. It became apparent that women of faith are an entry point that provides an insight into a broad range of issues. Our suspicion that there was something important about the roles played by women of faith gradually became a conviction that women of faith are strategic actors for peace and justice, and that their contributions deserve more attention and support. Aiming to explore this further, and also to fulfil a promise to workshop participants, we offer this report on the role of women of faith in building peace.

### **Sr Emma Delgado is a Dominican nun from Mindanao who works for Peace Advocates for Zamboanga (PAZ)**

I come from Basilan in the southern Philippines. PAZ is 12 years old and its mission is inter-religious dialogue: we work with Muslims and Protestants, reach out to indigenous people, and dream of reaching out to the Buddhist community. We celebrate the Mindanao week of peace, supported by the government. Every year more religious communities and community groups get involved, from all over the Philippines and beyond.

My own personal story is of inter-religious dialogue in life. I grew up in a Muslim community: we played, ate and lived together without concern for religious differences. Life was beautiful. But in the 1970s the situation became very confused and the military took control. There was violence everywhere, widespread rights violations, and war. The conflict was between military forces and Moro rebel groups, and the victims were both Muslims and Christians. Members of my family died as a result of the conflict and the tensions. Different communities and faiths became suspicious of each other, and hatred developed. This has been going on for 30 years now and the culture of violence is everywhere. In our own convent, a rebel group, Abu Sayyaf, nearly took us all hostage.

I became so mad with all the madness. Our family left Basilan as it was a day-to-day struggle to live amid violence and hatred. It was very hard not to mistrust other groups and faiths. At that time it was unthinkable for me that one day I would work with Muslim communities: I was against inter-religious dialogue. I would look at how Fr Angel Calvo, the PAZ Director, was working to build dialogue between faiths, and think that he could only do this as he was an outsider and did not understand our suffering.

I became a postulant and did my training. I went to Darwin and worked on a programme for reconciliation between Aboriginal and white Australians. But I realised that I wasn't being honest because there was a gap in my own understanding of how communities live together, forgive and understand each other.

I returned to the Philippines and started working on myself to reconcile my hatred and suspicion. The turning point for me was when I saw a TV report about the kidnapping of a Catholic priest. The kidnapper had been my childhood friend and his family had been killed. When I saw his face I remembered how his family had been killed, and realised that we are all victims of the violence.

I went to volunteer in a Dominican school where 60 per cent of the students are Muslim. There was a change within me as a result of this experience. The school did not previously allow students to wear head scarves, but we did. We celebrated Ramadan and campaigned for other schools with Muslim students to do the same. I started to reach out to returnees who had belonged to rebel groups. Now I see them as models of peace and admire them, which I could not do before. And last year, when I was invited to work with PAZ, I felt ready. I never stop dreaming that Mindanao will be one.

*Edited extract from a 'Sharing stories' session at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

# Introduction

## Who is a 'woman of faith'?

A 'woman of faith' is someone who believes in a spiritual reality beyond the material. She is inspired and guided by her faith, which may be practised publicly or privately, individually or collectively.

## Why study the role of women of faith in building peace?

Little attention has been given to the role of women of faith in building peace. Although volumes have been written on the topic of women and peacebuilding in the last decade, there has been scant reference to faith. And while there has been intense interest in the relationship between faith and conflict – particularly in the post 9/11 world – references to women or gender have been largely absent.

We know that women of faith are active in building peace. We encounter them at all stages of conflict work, from prevention to resolution. However, as their efforts are given so little attention, their contributions are poorly understood, and even less well recognised. Even without fully understanding how women of faith work for peace, it is not difficult to appreciate that as actors in the hugely complex and challenging task of building peace, their contribution, like the contribution of all others, deserves to be recognised and promoted. This alone is sufficient rationale to justify study of the role of women of faith in building peace.

While the neglect of women of faith is unfortunate, it is unlikely to be coincidental, and the reasons for this oversight are certain to be instructive.

## How do we understand 'peace' and 'peacebuilding'?

'Peace' is not simply the absence of conflict or violence. Peace means justice, equality and well-being for all. It is based on an awareness of the need for harmony not only between humankind, but also with nature. It is premised upon human dignity and recognition of rights and responsibilities. Peace requires justice in all aspects of life, and this includes formal justice for victims as a prerequisite for reconciliation. Peace presumes solidarity among people and an awareness of their interconnected destinies. 'Peacebuilding' refers to all manner of non-violent efforts to create this kind of peace.

*Definition drawn from the discussions of participants at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

## Questioning the invisibility of women of faith in building peace

It seems there are two significant obstacles that obscure the visibility of women of faith as peacebuilders.

The first obstacle appears to be a consequence of the troubled relationship between feminism and religion. Feminist discourse tends to regard religion with disdain, focusing on the way that many world religions have fostered and institutionalised patriarchy and the subordination of women.

Yet behind some of this rather simplistic feminist rhetoric, we find that many women involved in peacebuilding and activism attribute their involvement to faith teachings or inspiration.<sup>2</sup> Many feel empowered by their faith. Women's own experiences show that it would be wrong to dismiss the significance of faith to women's consciousness and activism.

It is also reasonable to assume that women make up at least half of the five

billion people who identify themselves as members of religious communities.<sup>3</sup> Not only does faith matter to women, it matters to a large number of women. If we ignore faith as a major influence on women's lives, we fail to reflect the fuller reality of women's existence and their involvement in activism and peace work.

The second obstacle to the visibility of the peacebuilding work of women of faith is associated with the problematic relationship between religion and peace. The history of world conflicts shows that the most protracted and devastating conflicts have involved religion in some way.<sup>4</sup> While very few of these conflicts have been contests over religious doctrine, religion plays a part in many conflicts, either in direct or indirect ways.

Yet this history belies the fact that most faiths extol values of tolerance, understanding and peace. There are also many examples of how religious institutions and communities have acted as powerful and effective actors in building peace and justice. The peacebuilding role of religion is rarely recognised. And given that the role of women generally is poorly recognised within religious institutions, the contribution of women of faith to the work of religions in building peace is further marginalised.<sup>5</sup>

### **Addressing the knowledge gap, acknowledging women of faith**

Behind the problem of poor recognition for the role of women of faith in working for peace we can find two troubled relationships: that involving feminism and religion, and that between religion and peace. In both cases, these relationships are problematic because they rely on simplified understandings and generalisations. Poor understanding of faith in relation to both feminism and peacebuilding has done a great disservice to women of faith.

The topic of women of faith building peace merits study not only because it has been neglected, but also because it offers us a better insight into gender, religion, justice and peace. Richer knowledge and understanding of each of these concepts and how they interact opens the way to enhancing both the contribution of women of faith and the broader task of building peace and justice for all.

And all these reasons aside, this topic is worth studying simply for the fact that women of faith have some enlightening stories to tell.

### **Do women of faith make a unique contribution to peacebuilding?**

To focus on women of faith and how they work for peace suggests that there is something particular – or perhaps even unique – about them. Literature on women and peacebuilding has repeatedly argued that women are affected by conflict in different ways from men and have a unique set of attributes, perspectives and experiences that they bring to the task of building peace.<sup>6</sup> A common refrain in discussion on women and peacebuilding is that women (and children) are the greatest victims of armed conflict and therefore have the greatest interest in ending it. It is generally concluded that the interests of women have long been neglected and women themselves have been sidelined by peace processes. We are led to believe that women – as symbols of all that is good, caring and peaceful – have a unique contribution to make to peacebuilding, and therefore their inclusion will produce a 'better' peace.

Louise Vincent rightly cautions against generalising and romanticising the role of women as peacebuilders. She notes how arguments for including women in peace processes tend to regard 'women' as a general category and blindly ascribe to them qualities of caring, responsibility and peacefulness, which are social rather than biological traits, and over which women do not have a monopoly. To argue dogmatically for the inclusion of women based on a sweeping characterisation of who women are and what they want is flawed. She stresses that – irrespective of whether women are involved or not – unless peacebuilding approaches are able to transform unjust structures and relations, including gender relations, the goal of lasting and just peace will not be achieved.<sup>7</sup>

Peace is achieved when men and women counter injustice in all its forms. Women should be involved in this process because, like all others, they have much to contribute. Injustice affects women – and may also be perpetuated by women – and therefore women must be involved in the transformation of injustice. Women, both collectively and as individuals, may bring particular characteristics and strengths to this process. It is only right that these characteristics and strengths are utilised, but this must be based not on romantic generalisations, but on realistic analysis.

The same applies for women of faith. The contribution of women of faith is no more 'unique' than any other. Yet women of faith are indeed a particular group with a particular set of attributes. And while diversity abounds within this group, there are some common qualities and experiences.

### **Documenting some commonalities among women of faith**

The purpose of this report is to draw out some of the commonality of experience among women of faith. It is hoped that the work of women of faith can be better understood and recognised, and therefore optimised. While women of faith do not make a unique contribution they do make a special contribution. In this report, we aim to show that there are two ways that the contribution of women of faith to peace is both special and strategic to the transformation of injustice and building of peace.

Firstly, women of faith have a special role because of the spirited way in which they work for peace. Faith and organised religion give women many strengths and resources with which to build peace and justice, enhancing their work in rich and varied ways. We will examine some of these ways to show what faith offers women in their efforts to build peace.

Secondly, it is not only what faith offers women that is significant, but also what women offer faith. The contribution of women of faith lies not only in the way that they explicitly work for peace, but also in the way that they can help 'pacify' religion, that is by enhancing the ways that religion can contribute to peace.

We noted above how religion can be both a source of conflict, and a resource for peace. When it comes to religion and peacebuilding, the challenge is to reduce the ways in which religion is a source of conflict, and enhance the ways that religion contributes to peace. Women of faith make an important contribution to peace because they see religion less as a cause of conflict and more as a resource for peace. In particular, we will see how, as marginalised voices offering alternative ways and visions, women of faith can be a strong force for transformation. This includes the transformation of unjust structures and relations that are generated and sustained by religion, particularly patriarchy and religious chauvinism.

In the following sections, the aim is to examine the contribution of women of faith in building peace, firstly by looking at how faith strengthens the work of women in building peace. Secondly, we will see how women strengthen the ways that religion can contribute to peace. To conclude, this report will examine the factors that support and obstruct women of faith in their work for peace, and from this, draw recommendations on how they can be supported and their potential better utilised.

### **Bai Liza Saway is from Mindanao and is a teacher and a member of Mothers For Peace**

I am non-Muslim and non-Christian: I am a woman of indigenous spirituality.

I teach at a school for living traditions, meaning the culture of the traditional community. We can survive amid war, but we need to teach peace and find ways to live in peace with our natural environment. We need to teach our children that life involves air, water, fish, trees, spirits, and teach them about the value of nature as the spirit of God, and about respecting nature. Without this, we will lose our cultural heritage and our identity.

We need to teach mediation, arbitration and skills for living together. We need to teach about the balance between rights and responsibilities, that no one person is above another, and that everyone has good and bad elements. Harmony has been successfully achieved in our community. To establish harmony, we need laws, including customary laws. This includes recognising and respecting others just as we recognise and respect ourselves. We impose customary laws as a way to provide peace and settle misunderstandings through dialogue. In customary law, we also refer to Magbayan which refers to the state of the world at the time of creation.

In promoting interfaith relationships, we can achieve harmony by using our senses. Because of the land, water, fish and other resources, all of us survive. But to survive equally, we need to share things equally. To have interfaith understanding, we always remember what we call the ancestral domain story, which says that when God created the world, he shared everything equally.

We believe that this is enough – more than enough – to live harmoniously with others regardless of faith and race. It is always important to remember and put into practice the idea of recognition and respect of other people's rights and responsibilities without suppression, oppression and domination.

*Edited extract from a 'Sharing stories' session at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

## Part one

# Faithful peace: women of faith building peace

Women of faith work for peace in very similar ways to other women, and to men. Although there is little difference in the roles they play, there are some special qualities that faith provides and these qualities can strengthen the work of women of faith.

The best way to understand how women of faith work for peace is through hearing their own stories, and some of these will be profiled here. Amid their diversity, we can see clearly how faith contributes significantly to their efforts. The contribution of faith takes many forms, and relates both to structures, such as institutionalised religion, as well as individual spiritual belief. Drawing particularly on the stories of participants in Progressio's women of faith workshop, this section aims to identify the ways in which faith strengthens the contribution of women of faith to peace.

### Roles played by women of faith in building peace

Women of faith are active in all aspects of peacebuilding. In working to build peace, along with secular activists and men, they seek to resolve conflict, mitigate its impact on vulnerable people and address the causes of conflict by working for justice. Participants in the women of faith workshop from Papua, Timor Leste and Mindanao introduced the different ways that women of faith in their communities are building peace. Each region has its own story of peace that reflects its particular cultural background and history of colonisation. Yet there are also similarities. These included efforts:

- To struggle for equality between men and women
- To revitalise cultures and rebuild from the impact of colonisation
- To understand each other and bridge differences, including differences in religious affiliation
- To build a community that has political awareness and is organised. This includes involvement of women in decision making and structures.

### What faith offers women in their work to build peace: spiritual aspects

#### Faith as a frame of reference

Faith teachings and understandings of justice and humanity provide a moral lens that help women to recognise injustice. Faith offers a frame of reference that assists women in identifying something as 'wrong'. The importance of this is fundamental; it is not possible to challenge an injustice that we are not aware of or able to see. The moral lens that faith provides is crucial in prompting women of faith into action.

For example, Catholic social teaching regarding a preferential option for the poor can act as a lens that brings into focus injustice or inequality. Fredrika Korain, a lay Catholic woman and human rights activist in Papua, explains how her Catholic beliefs give her the kind of perspective she needs to recognise injustice:

A woman of faith is someone who lives true to Catholic values and makes these a guiding philosophy of life. For example, the Catholic church teaches the 'option for the poor', which is a call to side with those who are marginalised and disadvantaged. For me, this is the essence of what it means to be Catholic and it encourages us to take a critical perspective toward the world. If we take a critical perspective on what is happening around us, then we are certain to see that there is injustice, and that people's dignity is being trampled upon. Christian teaching tells us that this is not acceptable. To be active in our faith means that we are able to use our gospel values as a mirror in which to view conditions in society, and to struggle to bring about change.<sup>8</sup>

### **Faith as inspiration**

Faith not only helps women to identify what needs to change, but also inspires them to work for change. Challenging injustice and working for a better world are seen by many as the very essence of what it means to be a woman of faith. As Fredrika Korain stated above, and Paddy Meskin, President of Religions for Peace, also makes clear: 'our faith is about making choices, not being bystanders'.<sup>9</sup>

Faith is also a powerful motivator for action as it inspires a vision of a better world or how things should be. The traditional faith of the Talaandig people in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, provides this kind of vision of the natural order of God, nature and people. Bai Liza Saway, a Talaandig woman, explains:

The story says that when God created the world, he shared everything equally among men and women and nations. God the creator created all races. This is your land, your water, your fish, flowers, mountains and resources and wealth. This is your faith, beliefs and knowledge system; your laws and economy; your security and territory. Take care of these things and I will give them to you. Respect those I give to others. This is your identity and these are your rights and your responsibility to the world.<sup>10</sup>

Faith teachings, texts and stories are a great source of inspiration for women in working for change. Tina Beattie writes of how the Virgin Mary serves as a source of inspiration and spiritual sustenance for Catholic women. Sr Emma Delgado, a Dominican Sister from Mindanao, specifically refers to the bible story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman as a source of inspiration for her ministry and interfaith work:

[The idea that all people are worthy] inspires me. The value of respect inspires me. Above all, it is really [an invitation] to love. It is an invitation to love one another. You do not love because you serve in the Church. You love someone just the way the person is, as long as you can see people as they are, irrespective of their religion, and even if they are not doing the right thing.<sup>11</sup>

The example provided by Religious and lay people of faith is also a common source of inspiration to become involved in work for peace and justice. Religious – both women and men – who have devoted their lives to the people are often a powerful inspiration for women of faith. Women of faith also find inspiration in each other's experiences and aspirations. Progressio's workshop, which brought together women of faith, was testament to this. Participants overwhelmingly reported that one of the best outcomes of the process was the inspiration from fellow women of faith and the confidence they found in their potential to work for peace. This is reflected in feedback from workshop participants:

The composition of participants [was a strength of the process]. It provided opportunities for women of faith of different religions, different orientations and different backgrounds to come together. The experiences shared were very enriching. This will be a great experience for me that will serve as an inspiration to grow in faith and to make peace possible.<sup>12</sup>

### **Faith as guidance**

Faith not only alerts women to injustice and motivates them to work for change, it also guides women on ways to work for a just and peaceful world. For many women of faith, working for peace and justice is a way to live their faith in practice, and perhaps also their love of God. Whether Religious or lay, women of faith tend not to distinguish between their work, their faith and their worship. Each flows into and sustains the other.

Fredrika Korain explains that faith is not only an essential foundation to her activism, but that activism is an essential part of her faith. She refers to 'active Christianity' as a calling to promote social justice and realise Christian values by taking a critical perspective to the world and acting when and where injustice is found.<sup>13</sup> Faith, life and activism are inseparable.

Yet being able to fully live and give life to faith values is not an automatic or inevitable process. A Dominican Sister from Mindanao, Sr Emma Delgado, refers to the struggle to find a way to truly believe and live the values of her faith:

I felt it is just so easy to say you forgive those people you like. But to those who you see as enemies or those who have wounded you [...] it is difficult to put the gospel values into practice. For me, it was a long process, even as a nun.<sup>14</sup>

Sr Emma talks of a turning point in her own process of reconciliation when she realised that one of the members of a Muslim rebel group that was targeting Christian communities was a former childhood playmate. She knew the rebel, and knew of the hurt and suffering he had experienced as a child. It became possible to empathise, and to realise that no one side had the monopoly on suffering and everyone was a victim of violence. She claims that this was her personal turning point leading her to reconcile, and to discover the true nature of reconciliation. When able to see the world from the other point of view, animosity and bias dissolved, and she was able to work to help reconcile others. As a Dominican, she says, this is what is meant by 'contemplation in action'.<sup>15</sup>

### **Faith in the divine**

The desire to put faith values into action does not mean that there is no place for belief in the divine. Women also turn to the transcendental, perhaps through practices such as prayer and ritual, to build peace. A Higanon woman from Mindanao, Bai 'Rose' Nene Undag, explained that prayer and ritual were vital to her people: 'We have our own prayer as a means of ritual. We ask for guidance from the spirits. That is our best medicine as women.'<sup>16</sup> Women in Timor Leste also placed faith in traditional practices for protection and strength during the struggle for liberation, particularly through the use of a talisman called *biro*.<sup>17</sup>

Workshop participants said that prayer is a source of strength and guidance. In their life and work for peace, they find and sustain inner strength from prayer and a prayerful life. Rituals combine the willingness to surrender to God or the gods, and a desire to influence a reality that is 'beyond us'. Through rituals a shared concern is expressed and communicated in a communal way, making it a community matter and not just one person's burden.

### **Faith sustaining commitment and hope**

An extraordinary sense of commitment is something that women of faith feel is very special about them. This commitment tends to come from inner resolve, rather than an expectation of rewards or power. Anum Siregar, a Muslim and human rights activist in Papua, referred to the way that women of faith draw

strength from the fact that there is a force outside of themselves, something transcendental, that they can draw on and seek guidance from.<sup>18</sup> This is the source of remarkable commitment and determination, and gives women of faith the strength to keep going, even when difficulties appear insurmountable. Fredrika Korain explains the way faith sustains her work:

My Catholic beliefs are a strong foundation in my struggle for justice and rights for the people of Papua. Activists who are inspired by their faith (like me) have a strong sense of commitment. When encountering problems, they are resilient as they see their work as a divine calling and part of God's design. I often experience this myself. Often when I face challenges I feel that I have no alternative but to give up. But when I think of this as my calling, then I have strength and I know that I cannot give up. For me, life is like a cross in the same way as it was for Jesus Christ. The cross is heavy; it is painful, but we have to bear it and overcome it to be victorious. It is the same with God who had to die before He could rise again.... Although difficult, it is His example that we are trying to follow and this is the essence of our Christian faith. This is the true way for us to live our faith.<sup>19</sup>

Women of faith feel that by working for peace, they are doing God's work. They regard their work as a mission: it has a sacred quality and is a way of giving expression to their love of God. This often translates into a strong sense of voluntarism, being of service to others and working without expectation of reward. A young Timor Leste woman, Martinha da Costa Pereira Neto, refers to the faith inspiration of her volunteer work to support disadvantaged families:

We are able to share what we have, although it is not much.... People feel strengthened by the solidarity we offer, even though it does not answer all their problems. We feel we are also giving expression to our relationship with God by doing this.<sup>20</sup>

Faith can also inspire the courage to pursue an alternative course or life path, to take risks and break through boundaries. A young Catholic Timorese woman, Abenta da Costa, explains how her faith gave her the courage to defy cultural norms and pursue higher education:

Now I am even seen as a role model for young women back in my community to get an education.... I feel that my success was in the hands of God and not my own.<sup>21</sup>

Courage and determination can also come from confidence and certainty in their mission. Sr Emma Delgado, who has seen religious differences divide her community and family, provides an example of how faith can help keep a dream alive:

Members of my family do not support what I do, nor do the sisters in my community. Many people say that it is impossible [for people of different religions to live in peace], but I tell them it is possible. I never stop dreaming. My dream is that my family will come together and Mindanao will be one.<sup>22</sup>

### **Faith encourages integrity**

Workshop participants also identified integrity and consistency as special qualities shared by women of faith. Faith inspiration and the sense of mission it fostered helped women to stay true to their principles and stick to agreements. This was particularly true with respect to how women dealt with the potentially corrupting influence of power or wealth. They claimed that women of faith tend to honour a commitment or promise because this has spiritual meaning for them.<sup>23</sup>

### **Faith fosters identity**

Faith can also support women by providing a sense of identity and strength in the knowledge of being part of a broader religious community. A Moro woman from Mindanao, Baileng Mantawil, explained how her faith was a strong part of her identity and, therefore, vitally important in giving her a sense of worth and belonging. In Timor Leste, during occupation by Indonesia, the Catholic faith was very important to Timorese in fostering and maintaining a sense of national identity. Adherence to Catholicism and adorning oneself with Catholic symbols became part of the Timorese identity, and therefore an implicit rejection or protest against the rule of majority Muslim Indonesia.<sup>24</sup> For some indigenous communities, traditional faiths are something to be valued as a gift from the Creator, and therefore essential to their identity. The sense of identity that faith provides often strengthens women of faith in their personal and collective struggles.

An identity as a woman of faith is also a source of comfort and solidarity. As one participant in Progressio's women of faith workshop shared:

I really appreciated the workshop because everybody expressed and shared.... I reflect to myself when I go to sleep that I am not the only woman or group or IP [Indigenous People] who are seeking peace for the next generation, but also in Timor Leste and Papua. All over the world there are mothers who are seeking peace.<sup>25</sup>

### **Faith and fellowship**

A woman's relationship with God can be an important source of fellowship, particularly when this is lacking from worldly sources. Maria Lourdes Martins Cruz, or 'Mana Lou', explains:

I left Timor to study in Java. This was a very lonely period of my life. Because I did not have a friend with whom to share my deepest thoughts, I turned to Jesus Christ as my confidante. When I thought about Timor, with its poverty and the lack of basic freedoms, I would rage against God. I would ask Him why He created a land for us, only to allow us to be constantly colonised and oppressed.... I would tell God that our people are living in darkness. I would ask Him to give us strength to struggle for the independence of our country. I would speak to God on behalf of the Timorese people.<sup>26</sup>

### **Faith offers solace**

In a very fundamental way, faith can provide solace amid suffering. Irena Cristalis and Catherine Scott write about how women in Timor Leste – then a society facing severe oppression – turned to the Catholic Church for comfort. Facing threats to their existence and dignity, women sought solace in their faith and often turned to Religious to share their concerns and unburden themselves.<sup>27</sup> Many Timorese women look to the Virgin Mary as a source of solace and strength. A women's rights activist from Timor Leste, Laura Abrantes, explains:

There was a strong belief in the Virgin Mary [and that] hope in the Virgin Mary and God would help us to find a way out of our difficulties. People felt that the Virgin Mary could hear them, and that with her help, the situation would change. We felt that all of the pain and trouble was a consequence of the war, and with the help of the Virgin Mary and God, one day the sun would rise on our country, and the war and our troubles would be over.<sup>28</sup>

### **Faith and acceptance**

Faith can also help women to reconcile themselves to difficult and painful realities. Although religiously-inspired notions of fatalism can sometimes provide an explanation of suffering that discourages people from working for

change, there is no denying that faith is an important source of comfort when one feels powerless to change difficult realities. In these situations, faith often helps women to find peace, rather than becoming embittered or resentful. Baileng Mantawil, referring to difficulties she had encountered, particularly as a daughter of a revolutionary in Mindanao, said: 'I believed that God has His own reason why the war was happening. Therefore, bitterness was out of the question.'<sup>29</sup>

A Timor Leste woman involved in the resistance during Indonesian occupation, Elisa L Santa Pereira da Costa, relates how, after suffering at the hands of Indonesian security forces, her faith helped her to find peace in herself and with others:

From my faith understanding and my beliefs, I did not want to take revenge against them. I wanted peace and to live in peace, even with people who have caused much suffering for me.<sup>30</sup>

Women who lived in Timor Leste under the oppressive conditions of Indonesian occupation say that their faith helped them to survive the pain and humiliation of crimes against them and their loved ones. Irena Cristalis and Catherine Scott refer to how women turned to their faith to uphold the inviolability of the soul and therefore preserve their dignity and honour. Faith helped women to make a distinction between body and soul as a way to help them survive suffering and injustice, particularly in the form of physical and sexual violence.<sup>31</sup>

### **What faith offers women in their work to build peace: circumstantial aspects**

Aside from spiritual aspects and the way that faith strengthens women on a personal level, organised religion can also contribute to the work of women in circumstantial and often very practical ways.

#### **Education**

Religious institutions and faith communities have been at the forefront of providing education in many developing nations, often schooling women who would ordinarily have struggled to gain such opportunities. A prominent woman activist in Papua, Beatrix Koibur, explains that it was the Church that made her what she was: as a young girl she would never have had the opportunity to be educated had it not been for the Church.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Protection**

In oppressive environments, places of worship have provided protection to threatened women. Religious life itself can provide protection, and this was the case in Timor Leste during the Indonesian occupation. Maria Dias explains how, even after leaving the convent, the fact that she was still thought to be a nun gave her the freedom she needed to provide medical care to wounded members of the resistance. She was able to move around and work more freely than many others because as a nun she was seen to be beyond suspicion.<sup>33</sup> Beba Sequira from Timor Leste also recalls an incident in which a youth meeting was under threat of being broken up (or worse) by the Indonesian military:

We were praying, and suddenly found ourselves surrounded by military personnel with their rifles directed at us. They ordered us to disperse and end the meeting. We kept on praying and they did not take action against us. It seems the fact that we were praying saved us and enabled us to finish our meeting in peace.<sup>34</sup>

#### **Arena of activity**

Religious congregations also provide an arena of activity and community for women. Laura Abrantes explains how in Timor Leste worship and religious practices opened up opportunities to meet and discuss, particularly in situations where gatherings of people would ordinarily attract suspicion and reprisal:

We had to find ways to communicate with each other and maintain our solidarity amid very oppressive conditions. It was difficult to get permission to gather and so often we used church organisations as tools to spread information and organise ourselves, and to provide support to the fighters. Women would attend Mass every day. Aside from prayer or seeking a way to ease our pain or difficulties, Mass was also a way for women to come together to meet each other. We would discuss among ourselves and plan ways to support the struggle.<sup>35</sup>

Religious rituals also helped the struggle. Laura recounts how the procession of the Virgin Mary travelling from village to village provided an opportunity for people to talk about their suffering. It was a chance for people to cry and sing, and to lay bare their suffering and problems.<sup>36</sup>

Beba Sequira talks about how the Catholic youth movement combined church-related activities with organisation as part of the clandestine movement for independence.<sup>37</sup> Fredrika Korain explains her work with established women's organisations within the Church:

[Church women's organisations] have relatively good resources, we are generally well-established, we just need to be spurred into action. We need to make women realise that prayer alone is not enough, and encourage them to become 'active Christians' who are aware of things that are not always immediately apparent. We need to encourage them to take on such concerns as an expression of their faith.<sup>38</sup>

### **Community**

Faith organisations generally have a community or congregation that can be easily accessed. This may be a local community, or an international community such as the broader society of Muslim *ummah* (community).

### **Facilities**

Religious institutions often have the kind of facilities that can be important arenas for efforts to build peace and justice. This may simply be a meeting space, but having a place to meet is a significant contribution to efforts to organise and bring people together. Religious facilities are also places where women seek assistance, shelter and safety. Even today, now that Timor Leste is free from colonial oppression, people immediately turn to the Church when seeking safety and protection. In 2006, when a political and security crisis in the Timor Leste capital forced as many as 100,000 people to flee their homes, the majority sought refuge in church facilities and compounds.

### **Opportunity**

Existing initiatives of faith communities and institutions provide an opportunity and vehicle for women to become involved in peace and justice work. Anum Siregar refers to the large number and energy of women's religious groups in Papua. Sometimes these are prayer groups that provide essential spaces for women to seek spiritual solace, hope and comfort in their relationships with God and with other women.<sup>39</sup> Referring to the role of faith organisations in Namibia, Caroline Roseveare also describes how, given the under-developed civil society, churches provided one of the few spaces for women to organise aside from the women's organisations of major political parties. Church-associated women's groups provided a place for women to share their problems and ideas, and foster important support structures during conflict.<sup>40</sup>

### In spiritual ways, faith offers women:

**Frame of reference:** faith beliefs and teachings provide a 'lens' that helps women recognise injustice

**Inspiration:** scripture, faith teachings and the examples of Religious and lay figures inspire women of faith into action

**Guidance:** faith lights the way for women in working for peace and justice; often this means living one's faith; faith, life and work are inseparable

**Divine:** prayer and ritual offer tools for peace and spiritual support to maintain the struggle

**Commitment and hope:** faith fosters inner strength, generates commitment, encourages resilience and courage amid difficulties; commitment comes from a sense of mission; the struggle for peace and justice is seen as something sacred

**Integrity and consistency:** as the struggle for peace and justice is seen as something sacred, women of faith tend to have high integrity and consistency; they honour commitments and principles

**Sense of identity:** faith can provide a sense of identity and belonging that strengthens women in their personal and collective struggles

**Fellowship:** faith can provide strength through fellowship and spiritual accompaniment

**Solace:** comfort and solace can be found in faith teachings, prayer, rituals and so forth

**Helping to reconcile:** faith can help women to reconcile themselves with difficult circumstances and not lapse into bitterness or a sense of victimhood, and rebuild damaged relations

### In practical ways, religion offers:

**Education:** religious institutions and faith communities provide opportunities for education that otherwise may not be available, particularly for women

**Protection:** places of worship; the seeming inviolability of religious activity can provide protection from threats and suspicion

**Arena of activity:** religious institutions and faith communities can provide opportunities to work together with others to build peace and justice

**Facilities:** religious institutions and faith communities often have spaces where people can meet and other facilities necessary to organise and act for justice

**Community:** faith organisations have communities or congregations that women of faith can work with for justice

**Opportunity:** the structures of organised religion and their activities offer a vehicle for women of faith to become involved in work for peace and justice

### What faith offers women: empowerment

What faith offers women – both spiritually and in practice – is empowerment. Providing a source of inner strength and opportunity, faith empowers women to act for their own liberation and that of others.

Mucha Shim-Arquiza, a Muslim woman from Mindanao, is a strong advocate for the potential of faith to empower women. She stresses that faith can help women to believe in themselves and put them in a position to make choices about their life.<sup>41</sup> For Flora Laguellano, a Catholic Filipina, faith means 'singing our own song', and the song refers to relationships with the self, others, nature and God.<sup>42</sup> Irena Cristalis and Catherine Scott found that faith has helped to empower women in Timor Leste, particularly in the face of threats to their existence under occupation:

Religious faith enables [women] to continue believing in themselves. It staves off despair, from which total subjugation would quickly follow. As a symbol of their culture and identity, it restores ... a sense of humanity, worth and dignity to a people who have been stripped of everything....

It is crucial as inspiration, resource, and lifeline; and in this way, it has served to empower women.<sup>43</sup>

The power women derive from faith not only affects the way that women regard themselves and their capacity to act for change, but also the way they are regarded by their societies.

Women Religious and lay women of faith are often seen to embody qualities of neutrality, incorruptibility, and goodness. This gives them status and influence that they can use in their efforts to build peace. Women of faith who are active in organising other women or communities can command significant authority and power – albeit generally on a localised level. Anum Siregar gives the example of women in Papua who organise prayer groups and activities to provide humanitarian assistance to victimised or vulnerable groups. Because of their prominent position in society and their strong faith orientation, they are well-regarded. They are often respected as women of faith and integrity, and are seen to be representative of people's concerns.<sup>44</sup>

A woman priest with the Protestant church in Timor Leste, Rev Juliana Temparaja, relates her own experience:

I run a programme that provides support and counselling to women, children and youth, and also Church personnel. The responsibility is very heavy, but I am proud as I can do this job as a woman. Many ministers are men. But people look to me as a mobiliser who can get people moving. The part of my work that I regard as most successful is the simple fact that when I speak, people listen.<sup>45</sup>

In defiance of the common feminist critique of religion, the experience of women of faith reveals how women's relationship with faith teachings, practices, institutions and communities can be deeply rewarding. Women can derive internal and external power from faith. The external power, however, in the form of the authority and influence that women of faith can command, is largely informal and local. The fact remains that the broader structures and institutions of religion are largely dominated by men. The capacity of women of faith to address this imbalance is considered further in the following section.

### **Mucha Shim-Arquiza lives in Mindanao and works for Lumah Ma Dilaut**

I am a Muslim from the tribal community of Samal Moro and I come from the Sulu area of the southern Philippines, but for the past 30 years I have lived in Zamboanga on mainland Mindanao as we were not able to live on our island.

I studied at the 'people's school', a programme set up by the Marcos regime to train technocrats. But then instead of going to college, I returned to Mindanao as I realised that I should be working with my people as a Moro.

From 1970 to 1996, there were three peace agreements and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao was created. I was involved in the youth movement, and we agreed with many in the Moro struggle that autonomy was not a complete answer to the Moro demands. It was very difficult to secure a peace that was owned by all parties: the Moro people were divided, both within the armed movement, and also between ethnic groups, tribes and social classes. Like many youth, I gave up my opportunity to have a career to take part in the struggle, but also like many others, I was given no place in the peace and my contribution to the struggle was not recognised.

When I was in the youth movement, there was a strong movement to go back to Islamic values as the basis of human rights and community. We were attracted to the alternative vision the Islamic revival offered, wanting to learn about Islam and how it could inform human rights. Yet this was also a time when divisions formed among the Moro on politics and ideology. These divisions were mainly among men and created by men, but wives and daughters followed the same divisions.

There was also a problem with the Islamic revival movement: it was a monopoly of men as they are the ones who learn the doctrines and therefore speak with authority on theology. Women had little place in the movement, myself included.

Now I work with women, because women (including wives and sisters of members of the armed movement and Moro leadership) did not receive recognition or appreciation for work they did during the revolution. We need to redress this to ensure women can take their rightful place in society.

*Edited extract from a 'Sharing stories' session at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

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## Part two

# Peaceful faith: women of faith reducing the role of religion in conflict and injustice

The previous section has examined what faith offers women in their efforts to build peace. We noted earlier that the contribution of women of faith to peace lies not only in the spirited way in which they work to build peace, but also their influence in ‘pacifying’ religion. Women not only gain much from faith, they also contribute much, in particular by reducing the ways that religion feeds conflict and injustice, and enhancing the ways that it can help promote peace.

### Reducing religion’s role in conflict: women of faith challenging patriarchy

A key contribution of women of faith in reducing the role of religion in conflict is by challenging patriarchy. Patriarchy allows the subordination of women and is a form of structural violence. It creates a trajectory of violent conflict from interpersonal relations through to communal, state and international relations. Stressing the inviolable link between gender equity and peace, two women of faith (one lay, one Religious), Marigold Best and Pamela Hussey, claim that ‘without the full participation of women, enjoying equal rights with men, there can be no real peace, no real development, no real reconciliation, in fact no real hope for the world.’<sup>46</sup> Participants in Progressio’s women of faith workshop also recognised this connection and identified working for equality between the sexes as one of their primary peacebuilding roles.

Workshop participants also identified how religious institutions – in particular those of the main world religions – have a major role in perpetrating patriarchy. Sr Josephine Tekege, a Catholic nun in Papua, shared her perspective on this problem:

Slowly I have come to realise that the root of our problems as women is also found in our own Bible. This does not mean that the Holy Bible is wrong, but some interpretations of it are wrong. I have heard many arguments used to defend violence based on texts or interpretations of the Holy Bible.... [We are] in a world where inequality is secured by holy talk.<sup>47</sup>

Referring to Catholic theology, Tina Beattie explains how men’s experience of self, God and the world has been the basis of theology. She claims that ‘the exclusion and silencing of women means that theology has developed as a one-sided form of knowledge’.<sup>48</sup> Mucha Shim-Arquiza recognises a similar problem in Islam, noting that as it is primarily men who have opportunities for religious education, they are the ones who dominate discussion on theology.<sup>49</sup>

Once conscious of the impact of patriarchy and motivated to change this, women of faith have massive potential to challenge and transform the patriarchal bias in their religious traditions. In August 2006 over 400 women of faith from 65 countries took part in the Women’s Assembly of the Religions for

Peace 8th World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan. They formulated a set of recommendations offering a clear and authoritative voice on the institutional and cultural changes needed to make their religions more supportive of the rights of women and of peace.<sup>50</sup> Women of faith have an essential role to play in redressing the structure, practice and culture of patriarchy to bring about gender justice and to ensure genuine peace. We can find many examples of how women of faith are working to bring about this kind of reform both at the levels of theology and action.

In Islam, there is a growing momentum to find theological arguments for equality within Islamic teachings. Some are seeking to redefine Islam as a legitimate tool for negotiating with and tackling gender issues in Muslim societies. Imam Hashim writes of how Muslim women have used the Qur'an to great effect and writes: 'here in Islam, we as women have rights which are stated in a source considered to be divine, and consequently much harder to refute'.<sup>51</sup>

Tina Beattie provides the example of Christian feminism and how the development of feminist theology offers a reinterpretation of the gospel 'with women's experience as its starting point'. Beattie explains that feminist theology's focus on women's experience opens the way for efforts to re-examine and correct the masculine bias of existing theology; she characterises the central tasks of feminist theology as exploring 'new ways of speaking about God which challenge the use of exclusively masculine and paternal images and metaphors'.<sup>52</sup>

The challenge to male-centric doctrine may come from the development of an alternative theological perspective, but importantly, it also comes from action. Mana Lou is an example. She forged an alternative way of ministry, founding a secular institute, Maun Alin Iha Kristu, which aims to train young women to work and bear witness to the poorest of the poor, based on the teachings of the Gospel as well as on the traditional values and social patterns of the Timorese community.<sup>53</sup>

Mucha Shim-Arquiza explains how she is helping women to use religious teachings and *shariah* law to strengthen their rights in Mindanao:

I work with women who are victims of violence and conflict, and also victims of the interpretation of Islamic doctrines. Many women are forced into marriage, often under-age marriage – and these practices are sanctioned by custom, which is based on interpretations of Islamic teaching.... We are trying to work with the women to reflect on Islamic teachings and promote their empowerment. The success stories are the stories of women who have been able to take cases to religious (*shariah*) courts to seek divorce and custody of their children – which was previously denied to them. It is the success of women who dare to stand up for their rights.<sup>54</sup>

Women of faith are playing an essential role in challenging 'religious' excuses for women's subordination and violence, often from their standpoint as victims of this oppression. Marie Macey, in a study of Pakistani communities in Britain, shows how just as some men are using Islam to justify violence against women, women are also using their faith as a source of strength and to negotiate the cultural and religious demands placed on them.<sup>55</sup> They are working to make religion a tool to address the unequal treatment of women and the underlying causes of inequality, rather than a means of perpetuating it. In this way, they help to make religion more just, and also, therefore, a greater force for justice.

### **Reducing religion's role in conflict: women of faith contesting religious chauvinism**

Women of faith are well-placed to challenge religious chauvinism, and thus to decrease religion's role in conflict. Religious chauvinism is a major factor behind conflicts over religion and in the way that religion is used to inflame conflicts of a political nature. It has implications for the ways that faiths relate to other faiths, and for internal relations within faith institutions.

### **What is meant by 'religious chauvinism'?**

Religious chauvinism is founded on the idea that one's own religion has a monopoly on the truth, and that all other faiths are inferior or invalid. People of faith may believe in the truth of their own religion while respecting different religions and faith traditions. Religious chauvinists do not respect other religions, instead showing exaggerated or prejudiced support or loyalty for their own faith, and rejecting all others.

Women's theology, feminist theology and other alternative perspectives on religious doctrine can help to chip away at the basis of religious chauvinism as they provide alternative perspectives. These perspectives can add new dimensions to religious understanding and experience and make it more complex. They challenge the idea that there is only one way, one interpretation, one experience of faith. They challenge the presumed monopoly on the truth that underlies religious chauvinism. An assumption of superiority by one faith over another, or one interpretation of faith over another, is a barrier to peaceful co-existence among faiths and within faith communities. Alternative interpretations and perspectives, and acceptance of them, are essential to build religious pluralism.

Mucha Shim-Arquiza, in referring to her experience of strengthening women's rights in an Islamic context, points to the key role of women in encouraging critical thinking and injecting alternative perspectives. Irena Cristalis and Catherine Scott describe 'female religious leaders who, in a spirit of early East Timorese religious emphasis, provide an alternative locus of leadership and an example'.<sup>56</sup>

Women of faith tend to offer a voice of moderation that can curb extremist views. Perhaps because women's place in faith communities is generally far from the centre of power, and perhaps also because women's faith is often practised in the complexity of a lived reality, women tend to be less attracted to religious extremism. The grounded reality of women's faith does not readily allow for the kind of absolutist ideas available to ideologues. Women of faith can offer a moderating voice that has the potential to curb extremism.

Women of faith tend to represent religion's 'human' face and to maintain a distance from its power politics. From this position, they have great potential to enhance the contribution of religion to peace, and to mitigate its role in violent conflict.

## **Increasing the contribution of religion to peace: what women bring to faith**

### **Sustaining religious life**

First and foremost, women of faith contribute to the way that religion serves as a resource for peace by sustaining religious life in the community. Irrespective of the fact that the leadership of many religious institutions continues to be dominated by men, it is often women who are most present and active in religious communities. Sr Emma Delgado finds this in her congregation in Mindanao:

In my community ... it is the women who take a leading role [in religious life]. [In the home] the faith aspect is the responsibility of the mother. In the Catholic Church you can see how there are many women in the Church, young and old. Men have become a minority.<sup>57</sup>

Rev Grace Monim from Papua explained that women make up the majority and the most active part of the congregations of her church.<sup>58</sup> By keeping alive faith and a religious way of life, women of faith give life to the many positive and peaceful aspects of faith. And barring some exceptions, a religious life is inherently peaceful.

### **Promoting the role of faith organisations in social change**

Not only are women sustaining religious life, but they are also sustaining and

advancing the role of faith organisations in social change. Fredrika Korain relates how she is working to mobilise women within the church:

After a long period of oppression – now lasting 44 years – the group that gives us the most hope for the future is women. Those who are still active in worship are women. When there is worship in the community or worship in church, it is women who attend... Women worship because it gives them strength... We are trying to encourage the women to come forward and take a lead; encourage them to pass over the men who have become apathetic and have surrendered themselves to the situation.<sup>59</sup>

#### **Driving faith-based community service**

Throughout the world, religious institutions and faith-based organisations play a substantial role in delivering health, education and other community services – and women are very much on the frontlines of this service delivery. In Africa, women represent 90% of all service providers working in faith-based organisations.<sup>60</sup> The significance of this lies not only in terms of how faith organisations minister to the needs of communities, but also how such activities bring faith organisations into contact with the suffering, the disadvantaged and the marginalised. Women are well-placed to build in a gender perspective to assistance, and to work to ensure that it meets the needs of women and marginalised groups.

#### **Promoting and grounding the contribution of faith-based organisations to peacebuilding**

Anum Siregar says that there is a strong dynamism to organisations of women of faith in Papua and that women are often the ones driving peacebuilding activities. Women come together to pray, talk and plan. Back in their communities and their homes, they set about working for peace in very real ways.<sup>61</sup> Women of faith have a special contribution to make to the role of religion in building peace because they help to ‘ground’ the contribution that faith-based organisations and institutions make to peace. The work of these women goes largely unnoticed. It is generally undertaken far from the negotiating table and the official peace processes, and therefore, the limelight. But we will often find women of faith at the centre of faith-based action to build peace on the ground in communities. Sr Emma gives an example from her experience in Mindanao:

It was the women who stayed in that evacuation centre because the men will go on hiding afraid of military or rebels. You can really see how women played a role. They did not carry guns or go to the street and talk like leaders, but in their own way when they do cooking, prepare foods or give comfort to children, it is in that way they are able to gather together and think and talk about what they can do. I think from many of the stories I got, [I see] peace is in the doing, less than in the talking.<sup>62</sup>

Mucha Shim-Arquiza also explains that while men were being paid to talk about peace, it was women who were busy building peace on the ground.<sup>63</sup>

#### **Standing at the frontlines of education**

Another major contribution that women of faith make to the role of faith in promoting peace is through education. Many of the women of faith participating in the workshop were involved in education in some way, and as noted above, education is one of the core benefits that religion has made available all over the world to both women and men. Those involved included Fransina Yoteni, a Papuan providing support in life skills and education to young Papuan women, and Amelia Braga, a Muslim women in Timor Leste supporting young Timorese in getting an education. Bai Rose and Bai Liza, traditional community leaders from Mindanao, play a crucial role in teaching

'living traditions' in their community to help keep their faith alive.<sup>64</sup> Several participants noted that it is women who take the lead in promoting religious education in the home and passing on faith to their children.

### **Promoting interfaith collaboration**

While much of the assistance provided by religious institutions may focus on helping members of their own congregation or faith community, these institutions also assist those of different faith backgrounds or affiliations, adding a powerful interfaith dimension. Anum Siregar explains how her work in providing legal assistance and human rights advocacy as a non-indigenous Muslim in Papua has a relevance beyond the assistance provided:

As a minority group working to promote the rights and interests of the majority (with a different race and religion), we can send a strong message that justice and truth are values that we all share... We are trying to convey a message that when we are committed to these values and willing to fight for them, we can do much together.<sup>65</sup>

When women of faith work together, their collectiveness not only strengthens their efforts, but becomes a concrete expression of all that is tolerant, open and respectful of difference within their faiths. Bai Rose explains the power of this in relation to the unity of Moro and indigenous people in Mindanao: 'When we come together in our prayers and rituals as one faith, we will be considered as one.'<sup>66</sup>

Of course, women are not the only ones who build interfaith relations. The experience of women in communities in Papua, Mindanao and Timor Leste, however, certainly attests to a special capacity of women of different faiths to coalesce around very concrete issues of common concern, often problems affecting the welfare of families and children. Bai Liza Saway, for example, is a member of 'Mothers for Peace', a nationwide peace coalition in the Philippines. As the name suggests, women of different religious and cultural backgrounds come together in solidarity in their motherhood and their shared aspiration for peace. Their unity and image of motherhood help them to become powerful advocates for peace. Bai Liza explains the integral relationship of motherhood and peace:

All over the world there are mothers who are seeking peace. Mothers are important to peace because they are the owners of the generation. Mothers are the ones who carry the child for nine months in the womb and one year in the arms. Women are the dark or the light of the world and with women the world will be in peace.<sup>67</sup>

Tina Beattie suggests that the potential of women to forge strong ties across religious or cultural boundaries may lie in their common experience of alienation, which enables them to 'form alliances across religious boundaries, working together to challenge sexism and inter-religious conflict and to harness the spiritual energy and liberating potential inherent in Asia's religious traditions'.<sup>68</sup>

### **Anum Latifah Siregar lives in Papua and works for Aliansi Demokrasi untuk Papua (AIDP)**

My organisation has a unique identity. It was set up by people from outside Papua (I am from North Sumatra), and we are all Muslim, which means that we are different from the majority of the population, and yet we work to promote the rights of the majority. We work for human rights and justice through legal aid and advocacy. We focus our legal aid on cases involving indigenous Papuans, particularly those who are prosecuted because of their claims for independence. Our advocacy work deals with local communities, tribal community groups and women's groups, and focuses on conflict areas, especially where the security forces have a heavy presence.

Two places where we are engaged at the moment are Waris, on the border between Papua and Papua New Guinea, and Dempta, on the coast. There are often military operations there because of the perceived existence of the armed independence movement. Many women are victims of violence, survivors of torture and state violence.

Our success is perhaps more in the process rather than the outcome. We perceive a new reluctance among the military to show force. Communities are more courageous in speaking out and telling others about what is happening to them. The military now inform communities about upcoming military operations due to their concern about community resistance. We organise meetings between local communities and the government, between local communities and the military, and meetings bringing all stakeholders together. This enables the community to voice their expectations, and the military to communicate with the community. We can see progress in the way that people are taking a stand and not being afraid. The success is that people are daring to speak out.

*Edited extract from a 'Sharing stories' session at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

## Part three

# Concerns and recommendations

The stories of women of faith have revealed the myriad ways that they contribute to peace. We have seen how faith adds colour and strength to the tapestry of women's peacebuilding. We have also seen how these women have much to contribute in making religion a greater force for peace and justice. We have tried to look beyond common perceptions of women and faith, to see the largely unrecognised potential of women of faith and of faith itself in promoting more peaceful and just societies. This has provided a new insight into concepts of peace, faith and the role of women of faith. Understanding the potential of these women has also cast a new light on the relationship between religion and conflict. It has become clear that although religion is often entangled in conflict and violence, women of faith offer many ways for religion to disengage from conflict and become a greater force for peace.

Often we have seen that the strength of women's contributions comes from the fact that they are marginalised from the centre of power in both religious institutions and communities. From this position, they offer alternative perspectives and ways of worship, and alternative forms of influence. They open up a realm of possibility for reforming injustice within faith institutions and communities, and for faith institutions and communities themselves to become more positive forces for social, cultural and political change.

While this discussion has shown a wealth of possibility and potential, from the beginning of this discussion it was clear that this potential is largely unrecognised. Women of faith have called for greater understanding of their role and the recognition this deserves. They have called for greater support to better develop their potential – and to this end, have sought to highlight a number of concerns. Some of these concerns are introduced here with the aim of finding ways to address them and to expand the remarkable potential of women of faith.

### Concerns relating to peacebuilding

Although working in diverse environments and in vastly different ways, workshop participants discovered they shared the following concerns in their efforts to build peace:

- We are facing a community that is frustrated because of people's long process of suffering, and the healing process will take much time
- Our culture and tradition have been destroyed
- There are cultural practices that do not support the empowerment of women
- There is internal division even among women

*Discussion of participants at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

### Concerns for women of faith

Women of faith at Progressio's workshop found that, aside from the specific issues facing their communities, they shared some concerns. These concerns became a common thread through their stories.

### **Insufficient information and documentation about women of faith**

From the outset, the women made clear that they lacked information about how other women of faith were building peace and the strategies they used. With little documentation about the work of women of faith and few opportunities for them to exchange experiences, they had very limited chances to learn from others' successes and failures.

### **Lack of recognition and appreciation**

The women agreed that there was poor recognition and appreciation of the work of women of faith. They felt they struggled away in the shadows, while men, both Religious and lay, attracted the limelight. Even when women were given recognition for their contribution to peace, it was often on the basis of their profession or vocation, and rarely with appreciation for the fact that they were women of faith.

### **Poor understanding of or support for their pioneering vision**

Often acting as 'pioneers' among their communities, women of faith frequently encountered resistance. Several participants from Timor Leste told of this experience. Others sought to enter religious life, but left after failing to gain support for their vision for change or for what they felt was their true mission.

Women who pursued a religious life also found numerous obstacles to their aspirations. Sr Emma Delgado spoke of the difficulties she has encountered in convincing other women in her religious community to see the merit in interfaith collaboration and peacebuilding. She has sometimes struggled to convince her sisters to support her work and open up to the possibilities of building relations with Muslim communities or other faiths. In Papua, Sr Josephine Tekege also has had to deal with resistance to her work. Her feminist-inspired vision and criticism of how faith teachings are perpetuating discrimination against women attract a backlash from some of those in religious orders who seek to silence her 'radical' perspective.

### **Poor theological literacy**

Each religion has its progressive and fundamentalist elements. Activist women of faith tend to face resistance and perhaps even obstruction from some of the more fundamentalist interpretations of their faith. Mucha Shim-Arquiza explained that women are at a disadvantage in seeking to counter resistance from such elements, as their level of theological literacy is generally low. In order to successfully rebuff arguments – particularly religious arguments – against their activism and progressive vision, women need to be able to phrase their defence in the same theological language as their detractors. Yet – specifically referring to the case of Islam – Mucha explained that theological study is generally not available to women, particularly poor women, and therefore, women are not able to put forward counter-arguments, specifically interpretations of religious texts that support their position.<sup>69</sup>

Poor theological literacy has also meant that women do not get the chance to participate in public debate on issues of religion and dialogue. Speaking in relation to the poor involvement of Muslim women in interfaith dialogue in Mindanao, Mucha Shim-Arquiza explains that formal interfaith dialogue often engages on issues of theology. Muslim women are rarely able to participate, as they do not have the level of theological literacy required.<sup>70</sup> Indigenous women also found they were sidelined from interfaith dialogue as their indigenous faiths, which often do not have written texts and doctrines, were not recognised by world religions, and therefore they were not given a place in 'interfaith' dialogue.<sup>71</sup>

The concerns and obstacles faced by women of faith in building peace are not only external. Many have struggled with questions of how to live their faith, and how to stay true to this when tested.

Many of the concerns raised by workshop participants have been raised in other fora of women of faith. These fora also highlighted additional challenges that are worth noting.

### **Lack of professionalism in faith-based women's organisations**

The African Women of Faith network identified an instructive set of concerns facing women of faith, based on their experiences of seeking to promote the role of women of faith. In particular, they point to the fact that women of faith are often not well organised and often have only informal associations. They noted that a core problem was the fact that women's engagement was based on voluntary service:

Women of faith offer their services as a way of living religious principles and teachings. Thus, it is difficult for women of faith to receive the material and information resources they need to do their work efficiently.<sup>72</sup>

Professionalism tends to be lacking in many faith-based women's organisations, and this makes the challenge of gaining recognition all the more difficult. The lack of professionalism and organised structures means that women of faith find it difficult to secure resources. This lack of resources is a consequence of these organisations' poor capacity in areas such as project formulation and management, training and other skills specific to their work. Members of the World Council for Religion and Peace Global Network of Women's Organisations also identified access to resources as a significant challenge for them.<sup>73</sup>

### **Difficulties obtaining and managing resources**

The difficulty in accessing resources was highlighted by Fatima L Adamu in reference to Northern Nigeria. There tends to be a donor bias against faith-based organisations. This problem seems even more acute for Muslim women's organisations and in Muslim communities, where feminist ideas are viewed as illegitimate on the basis that they are 'Western'. Women activists often face accusations that they are Western agents under the pay of international organisations to undermine Islam.<sup>74</sup> Aside from this particular stigma faced by women's organisations in Muslim countries, in general, faith-based women's organisations have to contend with the 'doctrine of secularity': poor consideration of faith in development thinking and practice leaves many donors reluctant to support religious or faith-based organisations.

### **Poor representation of women in the leadership of faith organisations**

The Religions for Peace Women's Assembly in Kyoto in August 2006 highlighted concerns related to women's representation and leadership in faith organisations. They identified marginalisation of religious women in faith-based communities and institutions as a major challenge in advancing human security. They referred to an 'invisibility of the structures, networks, roles and leadership by women of faith to build peace, transform conflict and advance sustainable development'.<sup>75</sup> Women of faith expressed a need for support from their own religious leadership, their governments and international development agencies. Importantly, they noted there are tensions and difficulties between the faith and development worlds on women's changing roles in a global society and on reproductive health rights.

It is evident that the challenges facing women of faith are numerous. The African Women of Faith Network underlined just how taxing these challenges are. They claim that African women of faith 'are traumatised, fatigued and burnt out by the overwhelming and burdensome situation of injustice, war and disease, and they are not effectively engaged in peace processes'.<sup>76</sup>

Yet despite the many concerns, there is an awareness that many of the areas of concern are also areas of influence for women of faith, and areas where they find opportunities to work for change. With this spirit and potential for change, we can turn to some of the recommendations for strengthening the role of women of faith as agents for peace and justice.

## Positive elements

- There is an increasing awareness of the need for change. This is not necessarily always evident, but there is a growing movement of civil society giving voice to the importance of gender equality.
- Strong commitment among young people. It seems the younger generation have a natural awareness for the need for peace.
- The growth of awareness to build a kind of unity and cooperation at local, national and international levels. Not only a feeling of togetherness, but also a structure of togetherness and mechanisms for cooperation.
- We have a long history – and history has taught us a lot. We get a lot of strength from knowing our history and learning from it. Even though this history is painful, we can gain much strength from it.
- Developments in religious circles: more religious people are interested in these issues and willing to take a role in the struggle.
- There is an increase in professionalism. We recognise that our work needs to be based on a greater degree of skill. It is not a hobby – and we need to ensure that we have the skills and the structures to support our work.

*Discussion of participants at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

## Recommendations

First and foremost, the women who took part in Progressio's women of faith workshop stressed the need for **increased awareness of the role and potential of women of faith in building peace**, particularly among religious leadership, governments, and secular peacebuilding actors. Other women of faith fora, including the African Women of Faith Network, have echoed this call. To promote awareness, some of the factors blocking the visibility of women of faith must be addressed. This applies both to the invisibility of women within faith institutions, and in the mainstream development and peacebuilding sectors. It is recommended that:

- **Religious institutions and communities should show more openness to alternative perspectives, such as those offered by feminist theologies and women of faith generally.** Women of faith are often in touch with the way things really are in communities, and can bring religious institutions into greater contact with the people. Alternative perspectives and lived experiences based on realities in the community can challenge religious groups and institutions to question and reaffirm their viewpoint. Recognition of the role of women of faith in building peace helps to paint a more complex, but also more accurate, picture of how religion and social justice intersect.
- **Religious institutions and communities need to be more aware of their role in perpetuating patriarchy and of its relationship to violence.** From this starting point, they must accept their potential to transform unjust gender relations.
- **Mainstream development and peacebuilding circles should give more attention and respect to women of faith.** Those engaged in discourse on development and peacebuilding theory and policy must consider the implications in practice of sidelining women of faith in discussions about peacebuilding, and about women and peacebuilding. Research and literature on these topics influences the policy and practice of the UN and other major international actors. The neglect of faith and women of faith is possibly symptomatic of what has been referred to as the 'doctrine of secularity' in mainstream development practice, which has

largely ignored faith and created a false separation of physical and spiritual well-being.<sup>77</sup> Given the importance of faith to people's lives, to neglect this is misleading and disrespectful.

- **Mainstream development and peacebuilding circles need to recognise that faith is part of the problem of injustice and therefore must also be part of the solution.** The stories of women of faith outlined in this report make this clear. In particular, their experience has highlighted that gender equity is essential to ensure development, peace and human dignity. Yet as religion is part of the problem of inequity, efforts to reform gender relations without consideration of religion are unlikely to be successful. Women of faith have a strategic contribution to peace because of the inherent value of their work in challenging gender injustice. Women of faith must be supported and recognised for their contribution in promoting gender justice, specifically for the contribution they can make in addressing the patriarchy perpetuated by religious institutions and teachings. Women of faith are strategic actors that secular development approaches must engage with. Superficial notions that faith disempowers women should be abandoned in favour of a more nuanced understanding of the ways that faith can help women reach their full potential.
- **Donors must be more open to supporting women of faith organisations.** The experiences of women of faith have highlighted how they struggle to gain funding and sometimes fail to meet standards of 'professionalism'. Yet we have seen that they are strategic actors in development and peacebuilding. Their contribution deserves to be recognised and supported through the provision of resources.

While this report has proposed that women of faith have a highly strategic role to play in addressing patriarchy and religious chauvinism, women's potential in this regard remains massively under-utilised. This is in part due to some of the obstructions highlighted above, but it is also due to a failure of women to fully recognise and exploit their own potential. To address this, there are a number of recommendations that can be addressed to women of faith themselves:

- **Women of faith must improve their ability to articulate the relationship between their faith and their activism, and effectively advocate for themselves.** They must develop this capacity themselves if they are to take a more significant role and live up to their strategic promise. Secular development circles will not recognise the empowering potential of faith if women cannot articulate and translate their faith experience and inspiration.
- **Women of faith should act as catalysts to inspire other women of faith into action.** The more aware and active women of faith have a vital role in raising the consciousness of other women of faith and inspiring them to translate faith ideals into action.
- **Women of faith need to better document their work.** By providing clear evidence of their contribution to peace and how faith can empower, they offer much in the process of adding complexity and depth to simplified understandings about the relationship between religion and peace, and religion and feminism. Improved documentation about and research into women of faith is essential if they are to gain the recognition they deserve.
- **Women of faith need to be more forthright in making themselves heard.** Women of faith should feel confident in their contribution and fight to make themselves heard. Women's theology is a fantastic resource that can enrich religion and religious practice, not only for women but also the broader religious community.

- **Women of faith could benefit from a stronger sense of identity and solidarity among themselves.** Active women of faith, irrespective of their religious background, often encounter obstacles in their work and challenges in fulfilling their vision. They should build greater solidarity among themselves for moral support and learning. They should further develop their collective strength. Take, for example, the World Conference on Religion and Peace global network of religious women's organisations. The network includes more than 700 Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Indigenous, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian religious women's organisations, some of which have as many as 5,000 members.<sup>78</sup> Women of faith must seek greater solidarity in their shared identity and overcome their differences. Progressio's workshop participants stressed the importance of ensuring that exchanges between women of faith can continue. The workshop itself helped to build the identity of participants as women of faith, heighten their own awareness of what this means and of the value in this. Such affirming experiences are important to build the confidence and competence of women of faith.
- **Women of faith need to become more active in forging interfaith alliances and coalescing progressive elements.** There is much that women of faith from different faith backgrounds share. Coming from their marginalised position and often sharing progressive perspectives, there is vast scope for women of faith to find commonality among themselves and join forces. By doing so, they can challenge religious chauvinism and provide a definitive example of the potential of faiths to act as agents of peace and justice.
- **Women of faith need to work together to improve their education and theological literacy.** Women's poor levels of education, in particular religious education, mean that they are not in a strong position to argue against discriminatory interpretations of religious doctrine. Women of faith and their allies need to strengthen their knowledge-base of religious teachings and principles that affirm the dignity and equity of women.
- **Women of faith also need to become better 'interpreters'.** Given that many religious institutions and communities regard feminism as a threat, particularly in some Muslim communities where it is seen as a 'Western import', women of faith need to be more adept at translating ideas of feminism and gender equity to their religious and cultural contexts. They also need to become better at interpreting their faith experience and language for secular development circles so that they can better understand and engage with each other.

'[W]e call upon ourselves to be the change we want to see in the world and to be instrumental in achieving sustainable peace and development for our families, communities and the world at large.'

*'Women of Faith: Action to Confront Violence and Advance Shared Security', Declaration of the Religions for Peace 8th World Assembly, 25 August 2006, Kyoto, Japan.*

## **Maria Dias is the founder of Pronto Atu Serbi (Ready to Serve), and is from Timor Leste**

I was born with very strict parents: my dad was in the Portuguese military and educated his children in a military way. Yet a great strength that I got from my family was faith. Every morning and every evening we prayed and every Sunday, we went to church. Our house was always open to anyone, and if someone needed help, we gave it. We were educated in a way that gave us a strong sense of mission, and we have kept a tight hold on this.

The story of Timor Leste is one of 24 years of Indonesian rule and 450 years of Portuguese rule. My family was involved in the struggle for freedom and independence from 1975-99. My father refused to cooperate with the Indonesian security forces, and was killed. My mother, my seven brothers and sisters and I were all in the clandestine movement for independence.

I was mainly involved in helping members of the struggle who were shot or wounded. We also took food and medicine to the liberation army in mountain areas. We collected data about rights violations and sent this overseas. This was not easy, as the Indonesian military and police would monitor us. We were always watched and I was arrested twice.

When I was 24 years old, I entered a convent, but I was still pursued by the military and interrogated. My superior sent me to Spain, but even there I continued my involvement in the clandestine movement by channelling information on what was happening in Timor Leste to international networks and human rights groups. Eventually my superior returned me to Timor Leste, and in 1996 I left the convent and returned home to my parents.

I started a regime of reflection, contemplating how I could contribute to my country. After three months I realised that people were changing their perspective and really looking for independence. At the same time, the number of human rights violations were increasing. It was very difficult to work as part of the movement because there were a lot of spies and intelligence operatives. But I felt a calling to serve and help those who did not have access to medical treatment because of violence.

I raised chickens to get money for medicine and used my mother's house as my first hospital. Mana Lou gave me land to build a hospital for TB patients, and we also treated members of the liberation movement. Because there were so many people coming and going, the security forces lost track and stopped being suspicious. Also the military did not know I had left the convent, which gave me some protection. Until September 1999, when the situation descended into chaos, we cared for people and our facilities escaped much of the destruction.

After independence, our work became even more difficult. We still can't say we are truly independent. Now we do not know how we can best contribute: there are so many problems, and so many people looking for direction and assistance. What is clear to me is that we should work for our rights as women. Our male-dominated culture in Timor Leste is patriarchal, and women do not have rights. But we have good leaders, a democratic system, and tolerance of other religions. We are fighting for women's equality and to help women take up positions of leadership. In our political culture today, there is room enough to put forward ideas and contributions in order to influence government policies and decisions. We want to see Timor Leste's resources distributed justly, equally to all people, men and women, and we want to ensure that the legal system guarantees the rights of women.

*Edited extract from a 'Sharing stories' session at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

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# Conclusion

Individually and collectively, women of faith represent massive potential for change, and for peace.

This includes the potential to transform unjust structures and relations that are generated and sustained by religion. We have identified here how women of faith have a powerful role in challenging patriarchy and moderating extremist elements within faith communities. They help to obscure some of the absolutes that underline fundamentalism, and shake the fragile basis of religious chauvinism. Women of faith can help show us the more human side of faiths, and with this, open the way for greater tolerance and peaceful co-existence. They moderate some of the ills of religion, particularly patriarchy and religious chauvinism, and enhance its contribution to peace.

The personal stories and struggles of women of faith show how faith offers much to women in their work for peace and justice. It gives inspiration, guidance, and resolve. The 'infrastructure' of faith institutions also provides women with many opportunities to translate their faith into action. Faith enhances the role of women in working for peace and justice.

These stories show how faith empowers women. This power is both internal and external. The external power comes from the respect women of faith command in their communities, as well as their perceived goodness and incorruptibility. Yet this power is largely informal and localised, and therefore limited. Women of faith remain largely marginalised from the centres of power in religious institutions and communities. Their roles and contributions are rarely recognised by formal institutions – religious or otherwise.

From their marginalised position, women of faith offer alternative visions and experiences that can challenge and enrich dominant theologies and interpretations of faith, as well as our understanding of gender and development. Women's marginalisation therefore is ironically both part of their strength and weakness. The challenge for women of faith, as they gain more recognition and a stronger position within faith institutions and beyond, will be to maintain the creativity inspired by their experience on the margins and continue to develop this.<sup>79</sup>

But this is still a long way off and there are numerous obstacles to overcome. Women of faith themselves must do much more to realise and develop their own potential. Their power is largely untapped. The onus for developing the potential of women of faith lies primarily with the women themselves, and those women who are aware of and able to utilise their potential – like many of those profiled here – must lead and inspire this process.

This report is intended to contribute to the process of enhancing the potential of women of faith. It has attempted to build a case for the need to appreciate, validate and support the role of women of faith and their efforts to build peace and justice. It was written with the conviction that women of faith, and their promise of faithful peace and peaceful faith, have an enormous amount to contribute in the ongoing struggle for a more just world.

**Maria Lourdes Martins Cruz (Mana Lou) is the founder of Maun Alin Iha Kristu, a secular institute in Timor Leste**

I left Timor Leste to study in Java, but while I was in Java, God called upon me to think about Timor Leste and prepare myself so that later I could serve my people. My friends in Java encouraged me to find my calling and made me realise that God had plans to work through me for the good of the Timorese people. He was preparing me for this, and therefore, I need not be afraid.

In Java, a priest advised me to make sure the Bishop was on my side, as the greatest obstacle to any new movement in the Church is always the Bishop. My Bishop, Bishop Carlos, gave me a lot of support and encouragement and helped to lay the seed of what has now become a large tree in Timor Leste. Unfortunately, I did not receive the same support from the rest of my colleagues in the Church. The Bishop told me to resign myself to the fact that people would talk about me and criticise, but urged me not to let this stop me.

Before returning to Timor Leste, I faced resistance from those who did not support the idea of my institute. For a while, I considered not returning and perhaps serving in another part of Indonesia. I told the Bishop that although I loved my country, my calling was to love people who are suffering, and that I would only return if I was given the opportunity to develop my path. The Bishop immediately sent me money and told me to return. I came back and began my work with the poor and the suffering.

These days I am able to smile each morning. It seems that in this life I have God by my side when the people look to me with tears and hope in their eyes. When I talk of the difficulties of the past, I often have tears in my eyes. These are not tears of sadness, but tears of gratitude: I am grateful that through these difficulties I have learnt so much, and gained the strength to help people.

Our institute is quite well known in Timor Leste today. When we celebrated independence in 2002, we were the only indigenous religious order that has emerged from among the poor. Many people want to learn from our experience. I ask how people can say that we are poor. We have the wealth of the land, the wealth of humankind. The problem is simply that our people have not been taught how to discover what is their true potential. We are rich in faith and our faith is a life-giving strength. If faith and religion can be united, we will have created a very powerful force.

*Edited extract from a 'Sharing stories' session at Progressio's regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.*

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# Appendix

## Mindanao (Philippines)

**Total population: 16.2 million**

*Major religious/ethnic groups: Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Lumad (indigenous)*

The southern Philippines is a culturally diverse region, and also an area that has long been contested. One cultural group is the Moro people (also known as Bangsamoro). The Moro people are Muslim and have been struggling to maintain control of their homeland of Mindanao since Spanish imperialists sought to control the resource-rich southern islands of the Philippines and convert the inhabitants to Christianity in the 16th century.

Aside from the Muslim Moro, Mindanao is also the homeland to 18 tribes of indigenous people, known collectively as Lumad. Many Lumad practise indigenous faiths, although some have converted to Islam or Christianity. Today, the Lumad constitute no more than 5% of the population of the southern Philippines.

A third group, and today the majority of the population of Mindanao, are Christian settlers who migrated to Mindanao from northern parts of the Philippines. The rapid influx of Christian settlers, which began under settlement programmes initiated by the American colonial government, has caused the Moro and Lumad people to become a minority in their homeland.

The differences between the three communities are sharpened by historical experience and a range of contemporary factors. The historical experience planted the seeds of conflict that continue to affect relations between Moro, Lumad and Christian Filipinos through to the present day. During the 333 years of Spanish-Moro war, religious beliefs were often misappropriated for colonial objectives and in the quest for domination over the Muslim majority in the south.

## Papua

**Total population: 2.39 million (Indigenous Papuans: 52%; Non Papuans: 48%)**

*Major religions: Protestant, Catholic, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism*

Papua, a former Dutch colony, was taken over by Indonesia in 1969 following a 'popular consultation' that, although viewed as fraudulent, has served as the legal basis for Indonesian occupation. From the outset, opposition to Indonesian rule was widespread in Papua: Melanesian Papuans viewed themselves as racially distinct from the ethnically Malay nation of Indonesia. Moreover, they wanted an opportunity to free themselves from colonial rule and control their own land. Indonesia used military force and oppression in an effort to quell opposition among the general population and to counter a relatively limited armed resistance movement.

Indonesia's use of force hardened opposition among Papuans and generated a strong sense of injustice. Papuans are also resentful of the way the natural riches of their land – gold, copper and timber – have been exploited for great profit, while their standard of living is among the worst in Indonesia. The majority of the population live below the poverty line, standards of education, health care, transport, communication are poor, and basic rights have been neglected.

Papuans are deeply spiritual people. In addition to indigenous faith traditions, many of the major world faiths have strong followings in Papua. A survey in 2003 found that religious institutions were the institution most highly respected among people in Papua, particular indigenous Papuans. As confidence in the government and other social institutions has eroded, religious leaders and institutions earn the greatest trust, which also gives them the greatest potential in building peace and justice. In terms of religious

composition, 58% of the population are Protestants, 24% Muslim, 16% Catholic and the remaining 12% follow Buddhism, Hinduism or traditional beliefs. The majority of indigenous Papuans are Christian, with Christianity largely supplanting – or in some cases merging with – traditional faiths since the arrival of Christian missionaries in the mid 18th century. There are also indigenous Papuans, mainly in the western region, who have converted to Islam. Many migrants are Muslim, in particular those who have migrated from Java and southern Sulawesi. There are also migrants, in particular people from Maluku, who are Christian, and many of those who originate from Bali are Hindu.

However, the diversity of Papua's religious and ethnic composition is often obscured by a generalised perception that indigenous Papuans are Christian, and migrants are Muslim. This generalisation creates the impression that indigenous and migrant communities are divided both along ethnic and religious lines: a simplification of identity that can be very dangerous. The experience of some parts of Indonesia has shown that ethnic and religious identities can become dangerous fault lines along which violence can erupt (for example, in neighbouring Maluku where Christian and Muslim groups have been locked in a long and deadly conflict). Experience has also shown that religious and ethnic identities can be politicised, manipulated and radicalised to serve the interests of elites.

### **Timor Leste**

**Total population: 924,642**

*Major religions: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Islam*

Timor Leste (East Timor) was illegally occupied by Indonesia for more than 24 years. During the occupation, it is generally believed that around a third of the total population died as a result of murder, starvation, mass population displacement, extra-judicial killing, disappearance and massacre. Timor Leste's agony finally came to an end in 1999 when, after a change of government in Indonesia provoked by economic crisis, President Jusuf Habibie showed a willingness to resolve the Timor Leste stand-off through negotiations brokered by the UN. A referendum was held on 30 August 1999 during which almost 80% of Timorese voted for independence from Indonesia.

Since 1999, Timor Leste has come through a baptism of fire on its trajectory to independence and beyond. Born out of the rubble of the revenge taken on its people and infrastructure by the withdrawing Indonesian army, it faces multiple challenges as its people build a nation from scratch.

Under Indonesian rule the population had become more diverse with an influx of Indonesian migrants encouraged by central government. Many migrants were Muslim, whereas Timorese are predominantly Christian. Many Timorese resented the fact that better educated outsiders often took job opportunities away from them. Mosques sprang up and Catholic bishops sometimes complained that the authorities were encouraging the 'Islamisation' of Timor Leste.

Today, Timor Leste's population is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. There is also a small Protestant community. Timor Leste's 2,000 or so Muslims comprise Indonesian migrants who have stayed on after independence as well as Timorese Muslims.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A brief explanation of these three regions can be found in the appendix. In this report, Papua refers to the entire territory of the western half of the island of New Guinea that is under Indonesian rule (at the time of writing this territory comprises two Indonesian provinces named Papua and West Papua).
- <sup>2</sup> Jordon, Ann 'Women and conflict transformation: influences, roles, and experiences', [www.taylorandfrancis.metapress.com/index/9GCE1VNLAJ4V32FR.pdf](http://www.taylorandfrancis.metapress.com/index/9GCE1VNLAJ4V32FR.pdf) (accessed October 2006), p148.
- <sup>3</sup> Vendley, William F 'The power of inter-religious cooperation to transform conflict', *CrossCurrents*, Spring 2005, [www.interfaithconference.com/Vendley.doc](http://www.interfaithconference.com/Vendley.doc) (accessed 20 June 2006), p7.
- <sup>4</sup> Vendley, William F, as above.
- <sup>5</sup> A chart outlining religious assets in conflict transformation put together by Dr William F Vendley, the Secretary General of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, demonstrates this lack of recognition. Vendley refers to women of faith as a separate category – different from religious leaders or religious congregations – and lists the advocacy role of women of faith as an example of the social assets of religion to transform conflict (rather than moral, spiritual or multi-religious assets). The slight is perhaps not intentional, but nevertheless reveals something about how women of faith are viewed.
- <sup>6</sup> See for example, Oliver, Angela, Kararm, Azza, Levy, E (2004) 'Women of faith transforming conflict: A multi-religious training manual', World Conference of Religions for Peace, p8.
- <sup>7</sup> Vincent, Louise (2003) 'Current discourse on the role of women in conflict prevention and conflict transformation: a critique', *Conflict Trends*, 3/2003, [www.accord.org.za/ct/2003-3/pg5-10.pdf](http://www.accord.org.za/ct/2003-3/pg5-10.pdf) (accessed October 2006).
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with Fredrika Korain, 2 March 2006, Dili, Timor Leste (translation by author).
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in Moturi, Jacqueline (2004) African Women of Faith Network report 2003 (Addendum), African Women of Faith Network.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with Bai Liza Saway, 25 February 2006, Dili, Timor Leste.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with Sr Emma Delgado, 25 February 2006, Dili, Timor Leste.
- <sup>12</sup> Progressio regional workshop on women, faith and peace, Timor Leste, 21-24 February 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview, as note 8.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview, as note 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview, as note 11.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with Bai 'Rose' Nene Undag, 25 February 2006, Dili, Timor Leste.
- <sup>17</sup> Cristalis, Irena and Scott, Catherine (2005) Independent women: the story of women's activism in East Timor, Catholic Institute for International Relations, p64.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with Anum Latifah Siregar, 2 March 2006, Dili, Timor Leste.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview, as note 8.
- <sup>20</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>21</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>22</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>23</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>24</sup> Cristalis, Irena and Scott, Catherine, as note 17, p61.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview, as note 10.
- <sup>26</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>27</sup> Cristalis, Irena and Scott, Catherine, as note 17, p62.
- <sup>28</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>29</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>30</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>31</sup> Cristalis, Irena and Scott, Catherine, as note 17, p63.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Beatrix Koibur, August 2004, Jayapura, Indonesian province of Papua.
- <sup>33</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>34</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>35</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>36</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>37</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>38</sup> Interview, as note 8.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview, as note 18.
- <sup>40</sup> Roseveare, Caroline (2005) 'Namibia: liberation, politics, and women's rights' in Cristalis, Irena and Scott, Catherine, as note 17, p130.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Mucha Shim-Arquiza, 26 November 2005, Zamboanga, Philippines.
- <sup>42</sup> Interview with Flora Laguellano, 23 November 2005, Davao, Philippines.

- <sup>43</sup> Cristalis, Irena and Scott, Catherine, as note 17, p65.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview, as note 18.
- <sup>45</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>46</sup> Best, Marigold, and Hussey, Pamela (2005) A culture of peace: Women, faith and reconciliation, CIIR Comment, Catholic Institute for International Relations, London, p3.
- <sup>47</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>48</sup> Beattie, Tina (2000) A culture of life: Women's theology and social liberation, CIIR Comment, Catholic Institute for International Relations, London, p15.
- <sup>49</sup> Interview, as note 41.
- <sup>50</sup> Religions for Peace (2006) 'Women's Assembly report: Women of faith assembling for action to confront violence and advance shared security', 24-25 August 2006, Religions for Peace 8th World Assembly, Kyoto, Japan, p10.
- <sup>51</sup> Hashim, Iman (2004) 'Reconciling Islam and feminism' in Afshar, Haleh and Eade, Deborah (eds) Women, and war: Feminist perspectives, Oxfam GB, Oxford, p9.
- <sup>52</sup> Beattie, Tina, as note 48, p15, p30.
- <sup>53</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>54</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>55</sup> Macey, Marie (2004) 'Religion, male violence, and the control of women: Pakistani Muslim men in Bradford, UK' in Afshar, Haleh and Eade, Deborah (eds) Women, and war: Feminist perspectives, Oxfam GB, Oxford, p48.
- <sup>56</sup> Cristalis, Irena and Scott, Catherine, as note 17, p59.
- <sup>57</sup> Interview, as note 11.
- <sup>58</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>59</sup> Interview, as note 8.
- <sup>60</sup> Moturi, Jacqueline (2004) African Women of Faith Network report 2003 (Addendum), African Women of Faith Network, p15.
- <sup>61</sup> Interview, as note 18.
- <sup>62</sup> Interview, as note 11.
- <sup>63</sup> Interview, as note 41.
- <sup>64</sup> Progressio workshop, as note 12.
- <sup>65</sup> Interview, as note 18.
- <sup>66</sup> Interview, as note 16.
- <sup>67</sup> Interview, as note 10.
- <sup>68</sup> Beattie, Tina, as note 48, p21.
- <sup>69</sup> Interview, as note 41.
- <sup>70</sup> Interview, as note 41.
- <sup>71</sup> Communication with Bai Liza Saway.
- <sup>72</sup> Moturi, Jacqueline, as note 60, p5.
- <sup>73</sup> Karam, Azza (2003) 'Armed Conflict: Women of Faith Transform the Challenges', Mosaic, Fall 2003. World Conference on Religion and Peace, New York, 2003. [www.wcrp.org/files/NL-Mosaic-fall-2003.pdf](http://www.wcrp.org/files/NL-Mosaic-fall-2003.pdf) (accessed October 2004), p1.
- <sup>74</sup> Adamu, Fatima L (2004) 'A double-edged sword: Challenging women's oppression within Muslim society in Northern Nigeria' in Afshar, Haleh and Eade, Deborah (eds), as note 51, p60.
- <sup>75</sup> Religions for Peace, as note 50, p4.
- <sup>76</sup> Moturi, Jacqueline, as note 60, p10.
- <sup>77</sup> Tripp, Linda (2004) 'Gender and development from a Christian perspective: Experience from World Vision' in Afshar, Haleh and Eade, Deborah (eds), as note 51, p66.
- <sup>78</sup> Oliver, Angela, et al, as note 6, p12.
- <sup>79</sup> Thanks to Theo van den Broek for this observation.