

This year's Women's Month will close with one victory scored by women's rights and peace advocates outside and inside of government who have jointly worked hard the last 15 months to draw up a plan that would address the needs of women in conflict situations and promote their empowerment and participation in building peace.

Last March 25, over a hundred women and men came to the Environmental Studies Center of Miriam College in Katipunan to launch the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security. The female police officers from the Philippine National Police sat upright, the pink scarf given out to conference participants and emblazoned with the words, "women, peace and security" brightening up their drab bluish uniform. The baby pink scarf on the fuschia-colored t-shirts of the delegation from the National Commission on Muslim Affairs (NCMA) looked good, too. The greenery surrounding the environment-friendly building complemented the explosion of bright colors inside its halls.

The staff of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) and the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), together with their respective heads, Anabelle Abaya and Myrna Yao came in full force, along with the co-organizers from civil society, led by Dr. Jasmin Nario-Galace of Miriam College's Center for Peace Education and the peace and human rights network called Sulong CARHRIHL, where I also serve as convener. The OPAPP and the PCW are the lead government agencies tasked to implement and monitor the NAP. Most of the other government agencies identified by Executive Order No. 865 as members of the National Steering Committee also sent their representatives. The other member-agencies to the Steering Committee are the local government, social work, national defense and foreign affairs departments, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, and the NCMA (formerly the Office on Muslim Affairs).

The civil society groups who helped steer the process of drawing up the plan had wanted full membership in the steering committee. In the end, they got a provision identifying their role as partners. But this didn't dampen the spirit at the launch, since the agenda is what counts most, and partnership can be defined and redefined along the way. For example, PAPP Secretary Abaya played with the idea of an advisory council where civil society groups can play an influential role.

Six women from different faiths, in different languages offered the invocations. Participants affixed their signatures on the covenant and each tied a small bell around the combined symbols of peace and woman, sewn patiently from different strips of indigenous cloth by the PCW secretariat led by Lorelei Astrera.

The small touches prepared by this team of passionate and hardworking women certainly made the event festive, even though the agenda that occasioned the event were most serious, dealing as they were with matters of life and death of women in conflict or tenuous post-conflict zones.

The National Action Plan operationalizes key provisions of the 10-year old UN Security Resolution No. 1325, urging all member states to ensure the protection of women's rights during armed conflict, and to achieve gender balance and mainstream the gender perspective in peacekeeping and peace building. It also incorporates the more specific provisions in the more recent UN Security Resolution 1820 that seeks to prohibit the use of sexual violence on

civilians as a war tactic. It warned, in particular, that rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime or a crime against humanity.

Made up of 18 Action Points classified under four goals – protection and prevention, empowerment and participation, promotion and mainstreaming, and capacity development and monitoring and reporting – the National Steering Committee was provided with an initial P5 million budget drawn from the Office of the President’s Contingency Fund to oversee the plan. But to meet all the trainings, researches, coordination, rapid needs assessment, and service delivery components, citizens’ groups would need to tap into the Gender and Development fund allocations of local governments and other government agencies.

Other action points call for increasing the number of women’s rights and peace advocates in peace keeping operations and peace bodies at the local and national levels, and of the community women in local programs. These do not cost a centavo, but do require the appointing and implementing authorities’ awareness and conviction to achieve gender balance in institutions and programs that are crucial to women’s empowerment and right to peace.

Action points like those on stopping gun-related violence and improving the criminal justice system require major reforms in the police, the military, and the courts. Others, such as passing laws on internal displacement, enforced disappearances and the International Criminal Court, would require intensive legislative lobby work.

Altogether, the six-year plan is a program of governance. As it will practically start and end with the term of the next administration, it is a set of standards by which the next president, whoever he (we use he, as the top contenders are all male) is, will be judged.

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