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Advancing Gender Equality in Muslim Mindanao: Training and Promoting Gender-Sensitive Religious Leaders to Effect Change

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Objectives/Background:

The context in which Moro¹ women in the Philippines live is dire, having suffered numerous social, political, cultural and historical injustices. At present, poverty, banditry, kidnapping, clan feuds, the unresolved Moro claim to self-determination, and the continuing decline of agriculture and homegrown industries have made life in the region highly unstable. Against this backdrop of poverty, war, and displacement, Moro women face other forms of oppression and discrimination. Under formal laws such as the Code of Muslim Personal Laws, as well as traditional and cultural practices, they are susceptible to early, arranged, and/or forced marriage, polygyny, gender-based violence, inequitable rights and responsibilities between husband and wife, and the loss of inheritance rights, among others.

In the past few years, discussions on gender issues in the context of Islam have begun to surface, especially in three areas of concern: marriage and family, economic rights, and political participation and decision-making. One of the chief concerns that emerged from these dialogues is that gender issues often arise from differing interpretations of the Qur'an by Muslim religious leaders coming from different schools of Islamic thought. Thus, among the recommendations was to return to the basic teachings of the Qur'an in order to clarify the roles of women and men and to enlighten the community insofar as these roles and rights are concerned. The project is a concerted effort of both women advocates and Muslim religious leaders (MRLs).

Among the pressing gender issues which the project intended to address are (1) early, arranged, and/or forced marriage and (2) violence against women. NISA research has shown that early marriage is prevalent in the ARMM among girls as young as 13, with a number of harmful and wide-ranging consequences. Violence against women, including rape, prostitution, trafficking, wife battery, the taking of *mahr*, and violence to women in situations of armed conflict and displacement is also occurring in the ARMM with alarmingly increasing rates.

Strategies for Change:

Through concerted efforts of women advocates and gender-sensitive MRLs (both *muftis* and members of the Assembly of the *Darul Ifta*), 15 *khutbas* (sermons) were drafted and rigorously scrutinized through several consultations and workshops by MRLs and other experts to guarantee their authenticity and faithfulness to the basic teachings of the Qur'an and human rights principles. These *khutbas* tackle various issues on gender and reproductive health that have been considered contentious in the context of Islamic traditions. These issues were included in mainstream discussions on gender and human rights advocacy and were given appropriate explanations and support by Qur'anic verses and *hadith*. The *khutbas* were compiled in a handbook, originally in English and later translated into five widely spoken dialects in the ARMM provinces, for use by the imams of mosques. The handbook will be used by these imams during Friday sermons, marriage counselling, *nasihat*, and in other appropriate occasions as a reference for gender equality in the Islamic context.

¹ The minority Muslims in the Philippines, collectively known as the “Moros”, comprise roughly 10 percent of the Philippine population. Once proud peoples with at least 2 sultanates in Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan, the Moros are now concentrated in only five provinces and one city, together known as the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in the southern part of the Philippines. The Moros have been waging a war against the Philippine government in their struggle for self-determination since the late 60s. Once comprising 75% of the Mindanao population at the turn of the century, the Moros have been reduced to 18% thereof. Displaced from their ancestral domains, discriminated against, and suffering from the effects of long-standing armed conflict, the Moros are at the bottom of the human development index.

Capability-building activities for the MRLs began prior to and continued throughout the khutba project. Those MRLs immersed in gender advocacy were brought together with those just beginning the process, in order that the authority and expertise of the more seasoned MRLs could benefit the newer ones. Prior to the finalization of the 15 khutbas, a more intensive training was conducted which helped in settling unresolved differences and in finalizing the khutbas. The MRLs were trained using a four-pronged approach:

- (1) gender justice in the context of Islam using the Qur'an, *hadith* and *fiqh*, particularly on the issues of early and arranged marriage, polygyny, and violence against women, with techniques on how to deliver the compiled khutbas;
- (2) national laws and instruments on women's rights, such as the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children Act;
- (3) international human rights instruments on gender, particularly the provisions of the CEDAW and its Committee's Concluding Comments to the last Philippine report; and
- (4) the lived realities of Moro and other Muslim women in predominantly Muslim countries through the social sciences and research projects on the impact of such practices.

Challenges & Successes

The above four-pronged approach has proven effective since the drafters of the khutbas came up with more progressive interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadith*. Confronted with the lived realities of Muslim women vis-à-vis international and national human rights instruments, the MRLs applied Qur'anic principles of justice and equality to the khutbas they drafted.

The khutba on early marriage, for example, provides that "Islam clarifies important requirements before marriage can take place, which include the age of maturity or capacity to distinguish right from wrong, mental capability, emotional preparation, and physical grounding...financial capability and finally, the consent of the concerned parties." Although no specific age for marriage has been recommended, nevertheless, the khutbas do not take the stand that puberty is equal to marriage-age. On the issue of violence, the khutbas recognize the existence of many forms of violence against women in the Moro communities, declaring that women are equal partners of men and that Islam's mandate is equality between men and women. This necessitates that all forms of violence against women must be eradicated, "for so long as women suffer abuses, women cannot achieve their full potential as free and equal members of society", citing relevant Qur'anic text and *hadith*.

Although our work has been effective, we have also encountered challenges when the khutba compilations are used on the ground. Many imams, especially those who have not undergone the capability-building training, retain the same traditional, discriminatory and repressive beliefs on women. Thus, the challenge for us is to continue to advocate at the grassroots level, training more gender-sensitive MRLs and promoting their work.