Dr. Lilian Sison Waging Peace by Healing Trauma

Nearly 300,000 people were displaced during the war between government armed forces and rebels in Mindanao, Philippines that lasted nearly four decades. Women in refugee centers faced increased risk of sexual violence, human trafficking and loss of livelihood.

In 2011, Religions for Peace (RfP) Philippines, in collaboration with the Psycho-trauma Clinic of the University of Santo Tomas, implemented an intensive capacity skills training program on mental health and psychosocial support for Christian, Indigenous and Muslim community women volunteers, internally displaced youth, and military personnel. Side by side with the psycho-trauma experts, those trained were given the opportunity to practise their newly acquired skills by acting as the initial advisers for youth and soldiers of various faiths from conflict areas in Central Mindanao. The project was implemented under the leadership of Dr. Lilian Sison, Dean of International Relations at the University of Santo Tomas and Chair of RfP Asia’s Women of Faith Network.

By providing psychosocial support to victims of conflict in Central Mindanao without discriminating victims on either side of the warring groups, RfP earned the trust of the people in the communities including the leadership of both the rebel groups and the military. This paved the way for exploratory talks on advancing the role of multi-religious communities in the peace process. The non-political involvement and extensive influence of multi-religious communities in the national and international arena and grassroots levels provided an effective mechanism in facilitating peace and development at various levels. With this understanding, RfP was able to conduct dialogues with the leadership of the rebel groups and key government officials involved to advance the cause of the protection of women and children.

Dr. Sison lauded the critical role of women of faith played in its success.

Women are capable of transcendent kindness. They often possess the generosity of spirit to empathize—the primal understanding of what it means to suffer, not only of their own pain, but also the pain of others, which makes them powerful advocates for peace.