Case Studies: Context and Background

In this section, we provide a brief background for each of our cases, focusing specifically on their conflict histories, their peace processes, and the current state of gender inequality in each area.

**Aceh, Indonesia**

The province of Aceh, located in the northernmost part of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, was the site of a separatist war between the Government of Indonesia (GoI) and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) from 1976 to 2005. Seeking full territorial sovereignty, GAM presented its fight against the GoI as an ethnonationalist struggle against an illegitimate and economically exploitative national state. The 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which formally ended fighting between the two parties, has been criticized for lacking a gender perspective, prioritizing the interests of the predominantly male GoI and GAM elites, and ignoring both combatant and civilian women’s conflict experiences.

Founded in 1976, GAM initially operated mainly in the district of Pidie, focusing on ethnonationalist consciousness-raising and outreach. Consisting of only approximately 70 members, the group did not attract serious attention from the GoI until it attacked Aceh’s nascent oil and gas industries in 1979. Subsequently, the Indonesian Armed Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI) quickly suppressed the group, driving many GAM leaders and fighters into exile abroad.

Over the next decade, however, GAM fighters gradually infiltrated Aceh and, in 1989, launched new attacks on military targets. The resurgence prompted the authoritarian President Suharto to declare Aceh a “military operations area” (daerah operasi militer, DOM) and launch what one scholar has termed a “campaign of terror.” Although exact numbers are unknown, it is estimated that between 1,000 and 3,000 people were killed and between 900 and 1,400 were disappeared during the DOM period, which lasted until 1998.

When the Suharto regime collapsed in May 1998, there seemed to be an opportunity for the two sides to reach a political settlement, but the TNI’s abuses during the DOM period had deeply alienated many Acehnese, who came to support GAM despite its own human rights abuses. Capitalizing on this newfound support and the general political disorder, within a few years, GAM had extended its control over much of the Acehnese countryside.

On December 26, 2004, a tsunami struck Aceh, killing more than 165,000 people and leaving vast physical destruction in its wake. The devastation and the international attention that followed catalyzed peace talks that had been stalled for several years. Occurring in Helsinki, Finland (and hence inaccessible to the Acehnese public), and involving only GAM and GoI representatives, the peace process deliberately excluded Acehnese civil society actors, and no women were among the negotiators. Signed on August 15, 2005, the Helsinki MoU paved the way for the cessation of conflict, the normalization of GAM as a political actor, and the creation of a special autonomy agreement for Aceh. However, the MoU neither acknowledged the gendered impacts of the conflict nor laid the groundwork for a robust, inclusive peace.
Gender, however, radically shaped the conflict. As a rule, GAM and the TNI perceived any man of fighting age to be an actual or potential combatant. Consequently, to escape the violence of recruitment or retaliation, many men fled Aceh, while those who could not were trapped between two hostile forces. With men absent or immobilized—either abroad, at camps in the mountains with GAM, or unable to work—women took on expanded responsibilities in the public sphere to find income-generating opportunities while keeping their families safe. They faced many risks. For example, civilian women whose relatives were suspected of being GAM members were often targets of beatings, kidnappings, and sexual violence by the TNI as a strategy of war. After 1999, when GAM expanded throughout Aceh, an estimated 2,000–2,500 women joined GAM's women's military wing (known as the Inong Balee), serving in combat and support roles. However, because the MoU did not recognize them as combatants, and because DDR funds were eventually channeled through male-dominated patronage networks, the Inong Balee have, to this day, received almost no postconflict assistance.

While Aceh has a rich history of matrifocal traditions, which granted women cultural authority and extensive inheritance rights, numerous scholars have pointed out that Aceh's more recent history has been characterized by increasing patriarchalization. After the peace settlement, women were encouraged to return to the domestic sphere; programs favoring men for tsunami relief and recovery often rendered women invisible and, in many cases, effectively shifted property ownership from women to men, and the implementation of sharia law has particularly affected Acehnese women.

Women are profoundly underrepresented in Aceh's governance structures. No woman has been elected as provincial governor, and women are rarely elected as district heads. Further, across Aceh's over 6,000 villages, fewer than ten women were village heads as of 2011. Since 2010, women have not constituted more than 16 percent of legislators in the provincial parliament.

Maluku, Indonesia

Located in the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago, the province of Maluku has been home to communities of Christians and Muslims since the Dutch colonial era in the late 19th century. From 1999 to 2002, Maluku was the site of a large-scale horizontal conflict (i.e., a conflict between local entities) that was rooted in long-standing political and economic divisions between the religious communities. Before the violence subsided with the signing of the Malino II Declaration in 2002, the Moluccan conflict claimed an estimated 5,000 lives and displaced a third of Maluku's population.

During the colonial period, Dutch policies divided Christians and Muslims socially, economically, and geographically, positioning Christians as educators.
and government administrators and Muslims as traders and businesspeople. When Indonesia won its independence in 1949, Christians in southern Maluku launched a rebellion to establish an independent state, and while this was swiftly quashed by the GoI, Christians’ dominant positions in Maluku’s civil service, media, and universities remained largely unaffected. Several developments in the 1980s and 1990s began to threaten their privileged position, however. Moluccan Muslims began to gain expanded access to higher education while, under Suharto’s transmigration policies, Muslims from elsewhere in Indonesia were relocated to Maluku, altering the region’s religious composition and introducing further economic competition. Additionally, with Suharto’s attempt in the 1990s to shift his political base of support from secular to Islamist elites, all district headships in Maluku passed from Christians to Muslims. Amid these changes, Moluccan Christians felt increasingly threatened.

On January 19, 1999, an altercation between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim passenger in the provincial capital of Ambon broke open these underlying tensions, setting off riots. Initially, Muslim migrants were the main targets, because their dominance of certain lucrative labor markets had generated local grievances, but very quickly violence spread throughout Maluku and became more definitively organized around religion rather than a local-migrant divide.

In January 2000, the conflict escalated dramatically when members of Laskar Jihad, a Java-based Salafi-jihadist group, began relocating to Maluku, claiming they would protect Muslim enclaves from Christian persecution. Over the next two years, Laskar Jihad’s aims shifted from protecting Muslim populations to offensively persecuting Christians and then to imposing sharia law on other Muslims. Male-dominated youth militias became commonplace, and both these groups and Laskar Jihad militants leveraged narratives of masculine protection.

On February 11, 2002, representatives of the GoI and delegates from rival Christian and Muslim groups signed the Malino II Declaration, formally ending the conflict. Women’s ability to influence the terms of the agreement was markedly limited. During the Malino II process, three of the Christian delegates were women, but no women were among the Muslim delegates. Furthermore, none of the articles in the peace settlement addressed gender issues.

Most of the English-language research on the Moluccan conflict has focused on ethnicity and religion, and consequently information about how gender shaped the Moluccan conflict is limited. Some sources spotlight how, during the fighting, many Muslim and Christian women served as intercommunal mediators and peacebuilders; there are other reports, however, of women being directly involved in the fighting and the making of weaponry.

Our research begins filling in these gaps. In conversations between SPF and local partners, stakeholders spoke about how, after the conflict, women were forced by economically difficult circumstances to search for income-generating opportunities outside of the home. They also shared how women have been extensively involved in conflict mediation efforts, although, according to them, government-funded peacebuilding programs have focused almost exclusively on infrastructural development. Stakeholders touched less frequently on the theme of men and the conflict, but they noted that many men are still grappling with conflict-related traumas and that when communal violence does occur, it is typically carried out by small groups of men under the influence of alcohol.

The need for further gender research in Maluku is highlighted by women’s continued underrepresentation in governance structures. As of 2014, women accounted for only 31 percent of legislators in Maluku’s district and local parliaments, and other research found that less than 2 percent of all villages in Maluku were led by women. 
The BARMM, Philippines

The island of Mindanao, located in the southern part of the Philippine archipelago, is home to 13 Islamic ethnolinguistic groups (known collectively as the Moro), more than 18 other Indigenous peoples (Lumad), and Christian Filipinos. The island has been the site of the world’s second-longest internal conflict, with multiple separatist groups fighting at different points for independence. Since 2019, part of the island has operated autonomously as the BARMM under a peace agreement between the Government of the Philippines (GoP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Although progress toward peace has been made in the last four years, the island as a whole continues to confront endemic conflict drivers. The region remains economically and politically peripheralized within the Philippines; education, healthcare, and utility services are chronically underfunded; and the security environment is delicate, as political competition and unresolved land disputes frequently lead to sudden outbreaks of horizontal violence and as numerous armed organizations not party to the peace agreement continue to operate in the region.

Because Mindanao is home to the largest Muslim community in the predominantly Catholic Philippines, the numerous, evolving conflicts between the GoP and a series of armed groups in Mindanao have been frequently (though inaccurately) framed as a religious struggle between Muslims and Christians. The roots of the conflict, however, go back to Spain’s colonization of the Philippines in the 16th century, which created center-periphery tensions that fell along religious lines. These tensions were cemented in the 20th century when the American colonial government forcibly annexed Mindanao into the Philippines and implemented policies that systematically dispossessed Muslims of their land and further marginalized Moros and the Lumad through the state-facilitated internal migration of Christian Filipinos. The Philippines’ independence from the United States in 1946 exacerbated these inequalities. Muslims in the southern Philippines actively petitioned the US government not to incorporate them into the newly formed country, asking to remain under US rule until they were ready to establish an independent state.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, escalating violence and political repression by the GoP dramatically...
sharpened separatist sentiments, and, by 1973, war had broken out between the GoP and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The MNLF led the armed Moro separatist movement until 1996, when it agreed to demobilize under a peace agreement that did not, however, adequately address the Moro demand for self-determination. Subsequently, the MILF succeeded the MNLF as the main vehicle for armed separatist aspirations.

It was not until 2014 that the MILF and the GoP signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, which laid the groundwork for the BARMM—a special territorial and political entity that, by devolving many powers from the central government, would more substantively address Moro demands for autonomy. In 2019, a plebiscite ratifying the Bangsamoro Organic Law was passed, formally establishing the BARMM and taking a significant step toward more durable peace. Since then, the BARMM's interim government has passed a new electoral code, launched economic development programs, and built new healthcare and community infrastructure.

The MILF-GoP peace process is frequently hailed as a success story for gender-inclusive peace, with women representing 50 percent of the government’s negotiating team and 25 percent of the signatories. However, this emphasis on women’s numerical representation has been criticized for overlooking the many roles that women played during the peace process, as well as the ongoing gendered impacts of the conflict. Although the agreement contained specific provisions for women combatants, women from civil society and the MILF’s all-women unit have criticized the agreement’s failure to address preexisting gender inequalities, including women’s disproportionately high household labor obligations, lack of control over their own income, and unequal access to capacity-building opportunities. The persistence of these inequalities means that women in the BARMM continue to confront profound obstacles to their full and meaningful economic participation.

Gender relations were substantially affected by the conflict. Restrictions on men’s mobility during the conflict created new opportunities for women’s leadership and economic participation in the public sphere. However, because these new kinds of labor were not offset by any reduction in women’s household responsibilities, women often identified this extra labor as exhausting rather than empowering. Military threats restricted male combatants’ geographic mobility, generating a sense of physical and social paralysis and a feeling of failure for not being breadwinners for their families. In a study by Dwyer and Cagoco-Guiam, the BARMM men acknowledged that fighting brought with it illness, poverty, and psychological distress; they also felt that fighting was a way for them to achieve idealized notions of masculinity. When discussing these topics with women, Dwyer and Cagoco-Guiam discovered the repercussions of these dynamics: increased rates of domestic violence due to rage and frustration and a resurgence of polygamy as men attempted to prove their masculinity through displays of sexual desirability.

Women in the BARMM are not equally represented in politics. As of 2022, only 13 of 80 parliamentarians were women, though several women served in important roles, including as the attorney general. Of the women who hold political office, most come from elite backgrounds or have secured their positions through personal or familial ties to the MILF. Other political and social institutions also seem to be less accessible to women than to men. Concerns have been also raised over how women are being neglected in the decommissioning process and how expanding political and economic opportunities for women have not been accompanied by decreases in domestic responsibilities.