

**Delivered during the Bangsamoro NextGen Young Women Leaders Training  
Narratives of Women Political Leaders in the Bangsamoro**

*on February 18, 2022*

*Istiadha*

*Basmala*

*Hamdala*

*Musa's du'a*

*Amma baad*

*Assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullah wa barakatuh.*

Thank you for the honor of being part of this very important conversation amongst young Bangsamoro women. I am glad we have this opportunity to share experiences, knowing that we come from different backgrounds and that in this group alone, we have a wealth of stories that need to get out there. I am part of a group of women peace builders that have aptly called ourselves – Women Inspiring Women. And I think conversations such as this is key to that reality. Hence, I have decided to share something more personal – my own journey as a woman Bangsamoro in a position of leadership or decision-making.

I don't know about you but when I was in your shoes, not too long ago, with all the responsibilities I was being given, not to mention the demands that I felt my environment brought, I would often find myself asking – “kaya ko ba ‘to?” Am I cut out for this?

You see, my involvement in what would eventually become my vocation – peacebuilding and the peace process – started when I was quite young. I was recruited to be part of the Government's peace panel in the talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front at 22. I was still a law student then, in Metro Manila. But having just witnessed what I felt was a very divisive national conversation during the MOA-AD debacle in 2008 – skewed heavily against my people – I grabbed at the chance to first, learn more about the conflict in the Bangsamoro, and more importantly, to be part – in my tiniest of ways – of coming up with the solution.

The rest, as the old cliché goes, is history. There was no coming back or keeping away from the Bangsamoro. I eventually became the head of the legal team – getting more involved in the internal processes of the Government to come up with its negotiating position, that the Government Panel, my principals, will then bring to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia during the formal talks, and eventually lobby with lawmakers for translation

into domestic legislation and policy issuances. From the age of 26, I was asked to pitch to Cabinet Secretaries or their technical staff and explain the legalities of greater autonomy for the Bangsamoro, convince them that what we're doing is not illegal nor unconstitutional, discuss possibilities with our counterparts in the MILF in Malaysia, and then come back to the Philippines and assure our legislators that what we have done will only be for the good of the country. And let me tell you, while talking about the merits of the peace process to your fellow Bangsamoro can be very challenging, discussing it with people who have no idea what happens on the ground is a different level of grueling. Hence, the perennial question to myself – kaya ko ba 'to?

Now, we are where we are. Three years into the Bangsamoro Transition Authority. Something, that people might have started forgetting, that is hard fought and should therefore be protected just as determinedly. We are laying the building blocks to what will eventually be, inshaaAllah, strong institutions that will respond to the unique needs and desires of the Bangsamoro and everybody else living in the region. We fail, and we don't know if we'll be given another chance to – by ourselves and on our own – charter a more prosperous future for our people.

See? No pressure at all. Especially not for us, women. Haha! But seriously, kaya ba natin 'to?

I notice that when we talk about women's participation in the Bangsamoro, it is tempting to look only at the number of women in the Parliament and in the Cabinet. That's well and good. The Magna Carta of Women has certain standards for the number of women in certain decision-making bodies. But as someone who's in the thick of things, I can tell you that we shouldn't be reduced to that. Women's participation and contribution in the Bangsamoro Transition Authority is more than the number of female MPs, ministers, commissioners, directors, etc that it has. I see in your program that you had that discussion about not just counting women but making us count. And that, I offer, is the strength of this current composition of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority.

First, your women MPs come from different backgrounds, with diverse experiences, that afford a healthier and more robust discussion on any policy point. We are granted the opportunity to head critical committees and lead the deliberations of key legislation particularly the priority codes. A lot of us are heavily involved in the filing, interpellations, and passage of any measure – resolutions and bills alike. In the Cabinet, there is no shortage of input and intervention from your female Cabinet members and other key officials of the Bangsamoro Government. This goes to show that women are heard in the Bangsamoro Government and are part of key decision-making. And why is that important? Key participation of half of the population of the region ensures that policies and laws are more gender-conscious. Example, do you think having at least one female member in the en banc of the, say, Bangsamoro Youth

Commission, would have been incorporated in the law if not for the female members of the BTA?

There are many more examples of the “wins” we have as an institution that we owe to women’s participation. I am happy that conversations like this happen because we can only sustain this if more people, especially those coming from the youth are aware of the power and potential that they wield to introduce positive change to our communities.

So enough with the second guessing of whether, kaya ba natin to. We must ask ourselves, how can we in our own spheres of influence also achieve this?

And if there’s anything that I can share with you this morning, it is the following:

1. Find your calling, your passion, what you deem important. Because once you identify that, as women, as persistent and insistent women, we will fight tooth and nail for it
2. Make yourself – your skill set that you bring to the table – indispensable. There is no need to be disrespectful about making ourselves heard. It naturally happens if our colleagues find – even if it’s a male-dominated arena – that they cannot do without us.
3. And finally, capitalize on our natural inclination to listen before speaking, to find nuances in the body language, the tone of the voice, and other “tells”, to get people on our side. They say women are the softer of the two genders. Not always true. But if you are, know that it is not a weakness to be ashamed of but a strength to be brandished. You get more flies with honey than with vinegar.

Again, thank you to the organizers for this opportunity. And to our young Bangsamoro women leaders, may the remaining sessions you have be as fruitful and engaging, and may this translate to positive action in your communities.

Thank you very much.

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