Emanating Change: Fragments of Micro-Empowerment Among Women Leaders in Mindanao, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Significant efforts have been undertaken to address the challenges in Mindanao. Given the complexity of issues in the region, a top-down approach must be complemented by grassroots-level initiatives. In this context, micro-empowerment is key to fostering positive community transformation. This article explores the motivations and work of twelve (12) women leaders in Mindanao who have advanced community empowerment through education, micro-entrepreneurship, and peace-building initiatives. These efforts have amplified marginalized voices and enhanced the visibility of women's participation in addressing issues of peace and social justice, contributing to the broader cause of women's empowerment in Mindanao.

Moreover, their community engagement has fostered personal growth, offering a nuanced understanding of empowerment. Using narrative analysis, the study evaluates the motivations and fundamental practices behind these leaders' grassroots efforts. Findings reveal that the women's activism arises from intersecting factors such as contextual influences, ingrained social activities, and experiences of marginalization, which shape their unique perspectives on community concerns. Their activism is not coincidental, but a reflexive response to their lived experiences, inspiring them to drive change.

By integrating the concepts of situated knowledges and intersectionality, the study highlights how these women's consciousness and worldviews have informed their community engagement, transforming personal narratives into political action. By amplifying women's narratives, the study underscores the importance of inclusive narratives in addressing gender inequalities, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Goals focused on gender equality and women's empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

Several feminist studies have made significant theoretical and empirical basis for creating space for women's voice and agency. The core features of most studies address women who have mobilized around gender-specific issues (Pardo, 1990), such as the subordination of women by the traditional, conservative, and patriarchal system and the political activism to resist oppression, discrimination, and inequality against women. However, women have also mobilized around issues not solely tied to gender but also broader community concerns. One under-researched topic is women working for change at the grassroots level to empower communities.

Community work is a critical arena where we can observe the complex interplay of self and community, as well as layers of roles and identities of women navigate in society. Abrahams (1996) articulates that women's community participation reveals much about the negotiation of power within families and communities. Women's community activism "challenges the conventional assumption about the powerlessness of women and the static definition of culture and tradition," (Pardo, 1990). In this sense, their activism negotiates a new identity outside conventional roles. Moreover, women engaged in community activism enhance the practice and significance of conventional roles often devalued in society, such as motherhood.

As Abrahams (1996) and Pardo (1990) found in their respective works on women's community participation, women view their community as an extension of their family and responsibilities. Their participation in the struggle to improve the quality of life in their community is seen as work for the benefit of their children's future. In their studies on white working-class women's grassroots politics and Black women's community activism, McCourt (1997) and Gilkes (1980), cited by Naples (1992) both argue that women's community activism serves as an "extension of their self-definition as women and mothers." In this sense, the boundaries between the "personal" and the "political" become blurred. Women often become involved in community activism because of their own experiences of marginalization. For example, Naples (1996), in her study on activist mothering among Latina and African-American community workers in low-income communities, found that women's social location informed their activism. These women described the poor quality of life in their communities, and these conditions fueled a sense of commitment to improve them.

Women are invaluable human resources in community organizing because their lived experiences help interpret how to address community concerns. In peacebuilding efforts, where there is growing literature on women's participation, it is recognized that women make valuable contributions to peacebuilding because their perspectives are rooted in experience. Thus, their aspirations for peace differ from traditional models

that prioritize state security. Instead, their peace model addresses a broad scope of concerns, such as development, human rights, and security (O'Reilly, Suillebhain, and Paffenholz, 2015). Women's experiences in conflict lend legitimacy to their views on how peacebuilding efforts should be shaped.

Women, as agents of empowering communities, embody an intrinsic ability to see things differently. They approach community organizing from a position of care (Stalle and Stoecker, 1998). Their socially constructed roles of nurturing and caring significantly shape their community organizing model (Glenn, Chang, and Forcey, 1994, as cited by Stall and Stoecker, 1998). The "duty" of caring for family extends into the public sphere through community activism. Women are often more attuned to systemic inequalities and barriers because they have directly experienced them.

Seeing from the perspective of the marginalized is deeply intertwined with women's social and historical experiences. As Haraway (1988) puts it, "Vision is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?"(p. 585). This emphasizes the importance of seeing from the perspective of the "subjugated" or those "below." Harding's (1992) concept of "starting off thought" complements this view, arguing that those who live on the margins are better positioned to illuminate critical truths than those who occupy positions of power and privilege. This concept not only validates the feminist standpoint but can also serve as a lens for understanding micro-empowerment initiatives. More than theoretical musings, Haraway urges one to struggle for their own "eyes" and also for others. She emphasizes the need to act, take accountability, and acknowledge the importance of non-innocence and complicity. Haraway's concept of vision underscores active participation in society, since "specific ways of seeing" are "ways of life." What counts as consciousness or knowledge is shaped by our experiences, which are often inscribed with the actions we undertake.

At the core of community empowerment is a sense of duty to address problems often believed to be neglected by the system. Insecure social conditions sow seeds of idealism, inspiring efforts to bring change and narrow the chasm between the existing and idealized society. Often, those involved in micro-empowerment initiatives come from the position of firsthand experience with harsh realities. Thus, their efforts to disentangle themselves from these conditions often involve working to liberate others from similar struggles, not necessarily their own. This is the context of the micro-empowerment initiatives of several women in Mindanao. It is indispensable to consider Mindanao's regional realities when reflecting on these women's works. Their efforts are shaped by and respond to these regional conditions. Therefore, to fully understand their experiences and advocacy, it is critical to delve into the regional context of Mindanao.

Gender identity and contextual influences are interrelated variables that simultaneously fuel women's community activism. Naples (2009), as cited by Mizrahi and Greenawalt (2017), describes women's community activism as a confluence of various intersecting factors. Intersectionality has become the

model for understanding the complexities of women's lived experiences. The concept has been expanded to encompass various social categories and identities experiencing "multiple burdens" of oppression and discrimination (Lutz, 2015). Although the experiences of Black women are the prototypical focus of intersectionality, many analytical configurations have been developed beyond Black women's experiences, extending to issues beyond gender, race, class, or ethnicity. Intersectionality argues that oppression and privilege can shift depending on the context, asserting that all experiences of marginalization are valid (Carastathis, 2016). Critically, intersectionality shares similarities with the concept of vision in the situated knowledges, particularly the notion of "positioned reality." However, intersectionality enhances this by emphasizing the lived experiences of oppression and discrimination.

The concept of intersectionality, as applied in this study, is viewed through the lens of community organizing, drawing on the experiences of twelve women working in empowering communities. This article argues that contextual influences, inherent social activities, and experiences of marginalization are inextricably linked, leading to a call for action to address community issues and concerns. In the process of empowering their communities, these women were also transformed. As Abrahams (1996) suggested,

> through community participation, women also negotiated communities. Their community participation stands at the intersection of community and identity. Community is created in relation to identities, and identities are molded through community involvements.

Community organizing conveys meaning, empowering women's roles and identities. In this study, we explore the interplay of women's roles and identities in community organizing, as well as how community organizing dynamically empowers their identities within the community.

METHODOLOGY

The existing literature on women's participation in grassroots movements in Mindanao is limited, with their contributions often overshadowed by the broader work of grassroots organizations. Despite the significant impact of women as drivers of change, their stories and achievements have received inadequate recognition in academic writings.

Given the scarcity of writings on this subject, this study employed a referral method to identify women who have played a crucial role in community empowerment in Mindanao. Notably, some of the participants in this study had previously engaged with the researchers' university through various dialogue programs, providing a valuable starting point for the research.

The data collection process involved a multi-step approach. Initially, letters of invitation were emailed to potential participants, informing them about the study objectives and seeking their consent to participate. Interviews were then arranged at the convenience of the informants, lasting between one and two hours. Some participants chose to respond to the interview questions via email, allowing for flexibility in the data collection process.

Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve female participants on several occasions, utilizing video conferencing and email. The interview transcripts were analyzed using the narrative analysis approach. Additionally, the data were coded based on two key themes: (1) motivation and (2) transformation and empowerment, focusing not only on the community level but also on women's roles and identities. The discussion drew on a combination of informant interviews and secondary sources.

The women in this study come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and their community engagement focuses on education, micro-entrepreneurship, and peacebuilding efforts. The analysis is guided by the perspective of situated knowledges, particularly on the concept of vision, and the intersectionality framework in the context of women's community organizing. Although the situated knowledges was primarily an agenda to contest the binary structure of knowledge and assist the feminist efforts to "restore" women to history, the concept of vision offers a flowing fountain of perspectives. In this case, it is used as a lens for understanding grassroots empowerment. Similarly, intersectionality serves as a framework for analyzing the various forms of oppression and discrimination faced by women from marginalized social categories. However, this intersectional perspective is reframed in this study to deepen our understanding of how gender identity and social location inspire women to effect positive change in their communities.

MINDANAO CONTEXT

When it comes to the Mindanao problem, there is no simple explanation, as it encompasses intricate and intersecting issues. T.J.S. George (1980), Ahmad (1999), Muslim (1994); and Jubair (1999) have noted that most studies of the Mindanao conflict highlight the injustices and grievances against the colonial and post-colonial Philippine state. They trace the roots of violence to the historical resistance of the Bangsamoro people against foreign colonizers, who brought Christian settlers and businessmen from the northern and central Philippines, as well as transnational companies that seized lands farmed and occupied by the Muslims and Indigenous People (as cited in Lara and Champain, 2009). In the 1970s, this conflict resulted in approximately 120,000 deaths. USAID data suggests that in the 21st century, it has become a low-intensity conflict. However, ongoing instability has led to repeated displacements, with thousands fleeing during skirmishes – sometimes involving other armed actors – returning home once the situation stabilizes. For instance, in 2008, a political crisis in the peace process triggered the displacement of around 500,000 people in a few weeks, marking the most

severe humanitarian crisis in the world at that time (Herbolzheimer, 2015, p.2).

The main pressing challenge in Mindanao remains the protracted nature of conflict and marginalization (Adriano and Parks, 2013), which exacerbates the complexities of the region's situation. Mercado (1984) and Ahmad (1999) observed that land colonization was worsened by the official neglect of poor rural communities by both the central state and local governments, compounded by political repression, militarization, and discrimination against Muslims and Indigenous Peoples in the countryside (as cited by Lara and Champain, 2009).

Though rich in natural resources, the overall advancement of Mindanao is hindered by a host of factors that have generated intersecting forms of social inequalities. The relationship between the Philippine State and a significant portion of Mindanao population has often been tumultuous, leading to social problems such as hunger, poverty, limited access to basic services, environmental degradation, armed conflict, and extreme militarization. Social categorizations based on ethnicity, religion, sex and gender, age, abilities, social class, and other factors have exacerbated existing social inequalities. Among these, one of the most pronounced and entrenched issues within Mindanao is the divide caused by gender inequality, as social norms and values, anchored on long-held traditions and beliefs, tend to perpetuate attitudes, institutionalized practices, and other social arrangements that are detrimental to development (Strategia Development Research Institute, Inc., 2021).

The region has the highest level of poverty in the Philippines. Mindanao has also shown highly uneven development, with the conflict areas having the lowest levels of growth. Conflict-affected areas of Mindanao have the highest poverty levels and the lowest levels of human development in the Philippines (Adriano and Parks, 2013). USAID identified that decades of poverty and internal conflict in certain parts of Mindanao have imposed tremendous economic costs, often leaving local governments unable to adequately serve people. The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao is marked by the worst health indicators in the country, especially in maternal and infant deaths.

Adding to these challenges are the weak rule of law, poor accountability, inadequate social services, and limited economic opportunity. International support for Mindanao's peace process and development — particularly from the WB, UNDP, and USAID— has poured in. Various development programs have been initiated, but poverty and inequality remain pressing concerns, as these projects have not directly benefited ordinary people (Encarnacion-Tadem, 2012). Governance challenges in Mindanao have allowed marginalization to persist and perpetuate economic instability across communities in the region.

Violent conflict disrupts society on many levels. While women are often disproportionately affected, the impact conflict has on women and girls is often misunderstood, manipulated, or ignored. Decades of conflict have

wrought substantial changes in women's lives, as well as in male-female relationships. There were important differences between communities, as well as among individual women, that shaped their experiences of conflict. At the same time, strong commonalities emerged across diverse constituencies. It is crucial to understand the various, and sometimes divergent, impacts of conflict on women and on gender relationships if women are to be effectively empowered and engaged in local and national peace processes, and if both men and women are to fully benefit from efforts to reduce and eliminate conflict (Dywer & Cagoco-Guiam, 2012).

Given the scale of the problem, a top-down approach alone is insufficient to tackle the region's challenges. Micro-level measures are essential. In this context, women are stepping forward to address these issues, holding themselves "accountable" and driving meaningful change within their communities.

NATURE OF WOMEN'S COMMUNITY WORK

In this study, it is necessary to describe the kind of community work engaged by women without the presupposed framework of analysis, to simply recognize and appreciate their contribution to their specific ways of responding to the needs of the Mindanao problem. The discussion divides the regional concerns of Mindanao into two (2) categories: marginalization and peace and conflict and highlights the assumed role of several women in the light of the struggle.

Marginalization

Marginalization is strongly associated with poverty and geographical location. Education performance in terms of access, survival, and completion varies greatly across regions and economic status. The 'poorer regions' in Mindanao are consistently falling behind the rest of the country in nearly all key education indicators. Mechanisms must be put in place to effectively reach out to the 'unreached' particularly the non-literates, the out-of-school, IP and Muslim children, and other vulnerable and socially excluded sectors. To reduce exclusion, especially for marginalized communities, affirmative action needs to be assured by putting in place an accessible and multicultural educational system to address their needs (Raya et. al, 2010, as cited in Briones et. al., 2010).

In the case of indigenous peoples, the recognition and integration of IP curriculum in the formal setting is a significant step to breaking the preconditions fracturing the right to access quality education. One remarkable woman was behind the drafting and passage of the National IP Education Policy Framework of DepEd in 2010. The name Norma Mapansa Gonos is widely attributed to the development of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act. As a full-blooded Mandaya from Davao Oriental, Norma became the Director of

the Institute for IP Education in 2005 covering Region XI, XII, and ARMM, respectively through the Philippines-Australia Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao. To capacitate the indigenous learners, she sustained such efforts by working with the Philippines Response to Indigenous People and Muslim Education from 2011 until 2014 and has taken the lead of Apo Governance and Indigenous Leadership Academy (AGILA) as Executive Director since 2015. Norma emphasized that advocating for Indigenous Peoples education was "not given on a silver platter," facing many obstacles and challenges along the way.

In the communities, Babu Angelina B. Ortiz, a Mansaka educator from Tagum City, Davao del Norte, is also committed to promoting learning for indigenous people and their inclusion in the Philippine education system. While serving as a social worker at Silangang Dapit sa Habagatang Sidlakang Mindanao (SILDAP), she was assigned as a graded literacy teacher to the Dibabawon children in the municipality of Kapalong, Davao del Norte. From there, Babu Angelina persistently lobbied the Department of Education and Local Government Units for the recognition of Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd). This resulted in SILDAP and the Department of Education becoming partners in the integration and implementation of IPEd in Basic Education. The partnership featured the crafting of a 10-year IP curriculum under the Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao Program, which was said to be widely used in public schools serving the IP communities. In describing her work,

> *"Ang skwelahan…na feel nako nga nindot man gud siya nga instrumento nga direkta natong ma develop sa sayung panghuna-huna ang mga bata kung kinsa sila, ang ilang pag-ila sa ilang tribo, ug ang pag-panalipud sa ilang community…" (The school.. I felt like it is an important instrument for us to directly develop the minds of the youth of who they are, knowing their tribe, and of the protection of their community).*

The desire to protect the interests of IP communities is also evident in the work of **Bo-I Era Colmo-Espana**, a tribal chieftain of the Uvu-Manuvu tribe in Kidapawan. Since 1981, she worked and served the indigenous communities, particularly from issues of disenfranchisement of the ancestral lands. Due to her pronounced role in the indigenous people's struggle, she became the head of the Indigenous People's organization Tuddok and was later appointed as Commissioner of the National Commission for the Indigenous People. Her appointment only strengthened her capacity to address the protection of indigenous peoples from systemic gaps and challenges.

Issues and challenges in cultural awareness brought on by the lack of education and cultural sensitivity are also lingering in Mindanao. The supposed promotion and preservation of its diverse cultural heritage account for the acceptance and internalization of human differences. As a community-based measure, Mucha-Shim Quiling Arquiza, an impregnable advocate for

the rights of Bajaus and Sama, emphasizes the traditional and indigenous knowledge systems. Through her Lumah Ma Dilaut Center for Living Traditions, with the slogan, "Lost Language, Banished People," efforts are made to revitalize the sea-faring nomadic society of Sama Dilaut, also known as Bajaus, of Mindanao and Sulu seas. Coming from two of the most marginalized Moro ethnolinguistic groups based in Zamboanga, Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi, Arquiza underpins the promotion of the Sama Dilaut arts through poetry and literary essays,

> *"In promoting indigenous knowledge systems and practices and in modeling appropriate and empowering education program for reviving the spiritual and cultural energies of Sama ethnic communities is nonetheless a self-fulfillment for its mostly Muslim staff as their own personal jihad and a contribution to a favorable da'wah environment,...the Sama Dilaut issues have not been projected as much as the mentioned majority Bangsamoro groups have been."*

The marginalization concerns of non-Moro Indigenous Peoples in the Bangsamoro is also the focus of **Froilyn Tenorio Mendoza**. Froilyn spearheads the provision of educational assistance to women of Teduray, Lambangian, and Dulangan Manobo indigenous groups, helping them develop and promote their practices, culture, and tradition. As an esteemed member of the Bangsamoro Parliament, she has spent decades advocating women's rights through education as gleaned from her Teduray Lambangian Women's Organization Inc. (TLWOI) established in 2001. This covers community-based IP women's organizations in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur. With the kind of leadership that Froilyn is demonstrating, TLWOI prioritizes training and awareness raising about IP rights and inclusion in decision-making processes, community development projects, and peace and justice. Despite the amount of struggle at hand, Froilyn remains steadfast in advocating for the Indigenous people's interests.

Social exclusion and inequalities in Mindanao—particularly in health, essential services, economic opportunities, and socio-political marginalization— must be addressed systematically and effectively, especially for women (Strategia Development Research Institute, 2021). Another dimension of inequality, termed as inequality of opportunity, arises from differences in uncontrollable "circumstances," or environmental attributes for which individuals should not be held responsible (Romer, 1998 as cited Kanbur, 2014, p. 6). This concept refers to disparities in life chances influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, or geography. Mindanao remains one of the Philippines' most impoverished regions, with challenges stemming from geographical barriers, armed conflict, and socioeconomic disparities. Poverty and inequality are deeply interconnected, as inequality exacerbates poverty and poverty often reinforces inequality.

One individual who has demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination in bringing change and economic development to the region is

Betty Marfil-More. As a social entrepreneur, Betty served as Executive Director for the Kababayen-an Alang sa Teknolohiya nga Haum sa Kinaiyahan (KATAKUS), a community-based organization that provides capacity-building programs for impoverished, vulnerable, and marginalized communities to improve their socio-economic conditions.

Following her work with KATAKUS, Betty founded the Healthy Sweets Mindanao Corporation, a social enterprise that produces fair trade, and certified organic coconut products and teas while providing a consistent source of income for local women. Betty's career in development work spans over 30 years and encompasses organizing, awareness raising, capacity building of women, research, sustainable agriculture, and enterprise development. In her work, Betty has focused on sustainable agriculture, including innovatice projects such as converting durian husks into usable products. She has also organized women's groups, raising awareness of women's rights and gender issues. Notably, Betty contributed to the creation of the Women Development Code in Davao City during the peak of the women's movement in the 1980s. With three decades of experience advocating for women's empowerment through NGOs, Betty credits her journey for shaping her into the woman she is today.

Peace and Conflict

Mindanao has long been afflicted by conflict, stemming from its colonial past, which profoundly impacted its communities. This historical legacy continues to shape the region's present realities, notably evident in the political disenfranchisement and marginalization, particularly affecting Indigenous Peoples. This injustice, coupled with systematic marginalization and government policies of dispossession, has engendered deep resentment among the Lumad and Bangsamoro communities. The enduring struggle for self-determination has led to both armed resistance and various unarmed strategies. Since the 1970s, Mindanao has been besieged by recurring armed conflicts and instability. While progress has been made in peace and conflict resolution efforts, genuine change on the ground remains elusive, hindering the attainment of lasting peace.

Amidst these challenges, Mindanawon women have emerged as pivotal actors, driven by a commitment to safeguard their families, communities, and future generations from the ravages of conflict and violence. Their indispensable role in peacebuilding efforts is marked by the contribution of their voices, perspectives, and experiences, fostering a more peaceful and inclusive society. The undeniable, devastating effects of conflict are particularly profound for women. However, it is within this challenging context that women possess significant potential to contribute to peace-building in Mindanao. Despite the hardships, there are reasons for optimism. The Philippines has a long and rich history of civil society activism, which has bred openness to critical and diverse perspectives among residents of Mindanao (Dwyer & Cagoco-Guiam, nd). This was the path of Susana

Anayatin who immersed herself in the communities advocating the rights of women and in propagating conflict resolution, and even facilitating peace education in the universities. Susana saw the value of volunteerism, helping different communities, and providing support and assistance. At 69 years old, Susana continues doing all of her work and advocacies,

> *"I live out of the box, I know life is short, I can be taken anytime…so I give my best, I share my best"*

Susana is a peace educator and a strong advocate for nonviolence in efforts to achieve social or political change. Although she has now worked for the government as a member of the BTA Parliament of BARMM, she continues to organize community-based projects and programs because she believes this is how average people can sense the presence of government in their life. As a legislator, she underscored the importance of fostering a sense of belongingness. Advocating for this was personal for her because she was a minority member and one of just two non-Moro among BTA's 80 parliamentarians. During the approval of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, a bicameral meeting in the Senate and House of Representatives was held, and the section mandating the establishment of an office for settler communities was removed. Susana said that it was difficult for her to reinstate the provision, but she ultimately did. As a Mindanaoan, Susana hopes for a better Mindanao,

> *"A peaceful, well-developed Mindanao where…the incidents of poverty is gone, where our youth can go to school and become productive citizens…I really hope that there will be no more war, no more private armies, no more armed conflict…I really hope that every farmer in Mindanao will have his own land… I hope that there will be no more hungry children in Mindanao, no more war-orphans."*

Another woman who stands as a beacon of hope is Myla J. Leguro, who has been instrumental in fostering understanding and reconciliation amidst the diverse communities of the region. Since joining Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in 1991, she has been deeply involved in facilitating dialogue and implementing peace and development projects across Mindanao, bridging the gap between Muslims and Christians. Myla's leadership and impact extend beyond her organization and even beyond the borders of Mindanao. Sharing expertise in Timor-Leste, Nepal, Colombia, Thailand, and United States, globally, underscored her reputation as a respected figure in the field. As the President of the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute Board of Trustees and the lead convenor of Mindanao Peaceweaver, she continues to advocate for meaningful participation in peace processes and the empowerment of civil society organizations. Her involvement in various initiatives, such as the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute and the Grassroots Peace Learning Course, reflects her proactive approach to addressing the root causes of conflict and

promoting sustainable peace. Myla's vision for Mindanao transcends mere cessation of violence. She envisions a future where the region flourishes as a peaceful and progressive home for all its inhabitants, embracing diversity and fostering inclusivity. Her unwavering commitment to this vision, coupled with her pragmatic approach to addressing challenges, positions her as a leading figure in the pursuit of sustainable peace in Mindanao.

Weaving a sustainable society through interfaith and intercultural understanding**, Dr. Potre Diramptan-Diampuan**, on the other hand, hopes to be remembered as someone leaving a mark on balancing culture and religion. As a Meranaw educator and peacebuilder, her way of community empowerment is the inclusion of peacebuilding approaches in schools and curriculum by conducting trainings among teachers. She firmly believes that working with communities is a way to empower the peacebuilding agenda in Mindanao and that sustainable peace can only be realized if there is strong grassroots support. She is a co-founding member of the United Kingdom-Philippines Partners for Peace (UKPP), a group organized by Mindanao scholars with the support of the British Council-Philippines to help with the peacebuilding efforts in Mindanao. In 2005, she was chosen as a fellow for Minding the Gap, Intercultural Approaches Through English Language Teaching at Collingwood College, University of Durham, United Kingdom. Moreover, not long ago, Dr. Potre joined the United Religions Initiative where she became the Regional Coordinator for Southeast Asia and the Pacific of Interfaith Global Movement. These opportunities and roles had widened her perspectives on cultural, and religious discourses and realities. She brings her knowledge in interfaith and intercultural understanding in trying to contribute to the multifaceted problems of Mindanao,

> *"With interfaith and intercultural dialogue, allowed the side to gather together in a microcosm, whether locally or internationally. It gives a sense of joy believing peace is possible when people of diverse faiths are able to work together. Cooperate, elaborate, become friends, become mutual support systems together. It goes a long way, and the engagement and built relationships become lasting."*

In bringing the Islamic consciousness and women's rights in pursuit of peace, **Yasmin Busran Lao** organized and founded Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation in Marawi City, and Nisa Ul-Haqq Fi Bangsamoro in Zamboanga, both are resource centers that facilitate services, and provide interventions to various communities. Yasmin is one of the few women involved in the crafting of the Gender and Development Code of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. She was also part of advocacy campaigns for the drafting of the Philippine National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, along with the passage of the Magna Carta for Women. Yasmin recognizes the vital role of women in society contending that women have so much influence and their untapped potential hold the capacity for remarkable achievements

if fully realized. She emphasizes the inhibitive effects of patriarchal norms, positing that entrenched gender biases impede women from attaining their utmost capabilities. As a fervent advocate of peace and women's rights, she imparts invaluable guidance to the younger generation of Mindanao,

> *"We Mindanaons should be united in pushing for justice and peace in our homeland. The youth should be actively involved in this, in protecting the gains of the peace process, the bangsamoro...At the same time, ensure, also that peace process in other fronts should proceed...We should push equality for all...Young people should take the forefront in making Mindanao rise again and be part of the rebirthing of its glory."*

Women had been instrumental in peacebuilding initiatives in the Philippines, contributing significantly to conflict resolution and reconciliation. Among these influential figures is **Irene M. Santiago**, a renowned peace negotiator and advocate for gender equality. Irene played a pivotal role in facilitating dialogue and cooperation between conflicting parties. She was instrumental in implementing the historic peace agreement that ended the decades of conflict with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao, southern Philippines. Internationally, she recognized as the executive director of the historic NGO Forum of the Fourth World Conference on Women, also known as the Beijing Conference, held in China in 1995.

Raised in a family deeply committed to civic engagement—her mother a music school director and her father a lawyer and politician—Irene developed a sense of public service early in life. Her education at both Catholic and non-sectarian institutions honed her skills and self-confidence, fostering her ambition to become journalist and expose injustice and inequality. Returning to Mindanao, Irene dedicated her life to advocating for justice, equality, and peace. Working closely with grassroots initiatives, particularly among Muslim women in impoverished rural communities, she recognized that addressing inequality and injustice was fundamental to conflict resolution and sustainable development. This commitment to empowering women led to the establishment of organizations such as the Mindanao Commission on Women, the Mothers for Peace Movement, and the Women's Peace Table Worldwide, all of which advocate for women's meaningful participation in society. Irene's groundbreaking work in Davao, particularly as the peace adviser to Mayor Sara Z. Duterte, culminated in the succesful "Peace 911" initiative, which addressed the immediate concerns of violence-affected communities. This model, praised for its effectiveness, has been adopted nationwide as a peacebuilding strategy. Irene's vision for Mindanao focuses on "minding the gap," advocating for a truly democratic society where power and resources are equitably distributed, and the rights of future generations are safeguarded. She emphasizes the need to challenge entrenched inequalities and reframe power structures to prioritize equality and fairness.

Another woman known for her peacebuilding initiatives is **Noraida S. Chio,** a seasoned peacebuilder and civic leader with over 25 years of experience in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao. Rising from humble beginnings in a coastal town of Maguindanao, Noraida's parents instilled in her the value of education, paving the way for her academic success despite initial setbacks. Recognizing the disproportionate impact of conflict on women, Noraida advocates for women empowerment and highlights their crucial role in peacebuilding. She emphasizes the need for inclusive participation of women in peace processes and stresses the importance of laws to protect Mindanao's environment, identity, and heritage. Currently, she leads the Asia Foundation's Women, Peace, and Security Program in the Philippines, focusing on curriculum development and supporting women who actively contribute to peace efforts in Mindanao.

ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT OF THE SELECT MINDANAO WOMEN LEADERS

The intersectionality framework and the concept of vision of the situated knowledges are the tools for analysis of the community empowerment of the select Mindanao leaders. The analysis drawn in this research is primarily anchored on addressing the motives for community empowerment by these women, which, in a way, reveals the unique characteristics of a women-centered community engagement. The analysis also describes how their community work has impacted their place in the community and empowered them even more.

Moreover, the community activism of these women is analyzed as a result of the intersection of three factors: contextual influence, inherent social activities, and the experience of marginalization. The Mindanao region is compounded with social dilemmas—marginalization and volatile peace situations—shaping the lived experiences of these women. The contextual factor intersects further with women's inherent social activities. Their community activism grows out of their "mothering role," the responsibility to give care to the family, and we see the extension of that role in the community. In sum, the analysis suggests that the activism of these women is a natural evolution of their caregiving roles compounded by the socio-political struggles they face in Mindanao. Their community activism stems from their internal responsibilities as "caregivers" and the external pressures of marginalization and conflict. Understanding women centered community empowerment is to grasp the overlapping nature of issues that women engage with. Thus, women's community activism is characterized by the interconnectedness and seamless boundaries between the personal (private) responsibilities and public advocacy.

"The personal is political"

Yasmin Busran Lao fondly remembers her early memories in Marawi as "beautiful and peaceful," but the onset of the 1972 Martial Law fractured this tranquility. Yasmin recounted being 11 years old at the time, and her most vivid memory was the seemingly endless gunshots and the displacement of her family. The subsequent phases of conflicts and war in Mindanao caused trauma, as she witnessed the kind of devastation it wrought. These experiences serve as a fountainhead for Yasmin's peacebuilding efforts. The narratives of Yasmin significantly reflect the characteristics of women's community work: laying the fundamentals of their work always begins with their own lived experiences. Most women hold on to personal experience as the legitimate source of the choices and actions they take. Participants in the research often recall the deprivation and living in volatile peace situations. Being exposed to the image of a wrinkled reality cemented the desire to seek something better. Myla Leguro remembers a watershed in her life,

> "The bombing in San Pedro Cathedral, easter Sunday, April 1981, I was 13 years old that time…I attended the mass before that…What made it very significant for me in terms of my experience with the realities of Mindanao was that I really saw the [bombing]…for me that created faith and responsibility, and what can I do…it became for me a starting point of reflection…"

Susana Anayatin also shares her experience of poverty as the motive for her community work,

> "I grew up here experiencing all the deprivation of basic needs because my parents were poor, and it was very hard for us to get an education."

This suggests that the agenda in their community organizing overlaps with their understanding of "specific needs," usually through the lens of their own experience. They translate their individual experience as universal. They don't see their experience as isolated but rather framed as social reality and concern. Essentially, their motivations are deeply intertwined with their lived experiences, and their community work depicts the struggle of transcending. Community work becomes their mechanism to enable themselves to take control of their lives by organizing a collective effort to address and transform difficulties and create positive change. As Tulod-Peteros (2015) suggests, community organizations are channels to express the collective strength of the people—especially those who have less power—so they will have better chances of being heard by the government, private corporations, and other power brokers. Community organizations serve as avenues where the members will be informed and educated on issues that affect or will affect their lives.

Moreover, as much as their experience guided their actions in the community, it also communicated a means of connecting with the experiences of others. It nourishes a heightened sense of empathy and nurtures a strong inclination to feel connected to the underprivileged in the community and see the plight of others as a reflection of their own. Looking at their community engagement, although they have diverse agendas, what emerges from all of them is their advocacy for women's empowerment across class and ethnicity. Women's community work often includes advocating for other women. They are naturally drawn to the plight of women in the community simply because it mirrors their struggle. The marginalization of women is universal and only reinvents from generation to generation. From a woman-centered perspective, history and social experience are not a genderless dynamic when women have been disenfranchised, victims of systemic barriers, and silenced just because they are women. Noraida Chio relates,

> *"Just like other women, I also experienced being belittled because I'm a woman. My capacity and skills were questioned. But Alhamdulillah, I was never discouraged. I faced them with conviction and armed with my technical knowledge."*

In this context, we can derive that their community work is rooted in the desire to create better alternatives and as an act of resistance (Carothers, 1990 as cited by Naples, 1992) against injustices and structural disparities. Seeing from the position of those in the "below" (marginalized) has become innate in women, and community engagement is a conscious effort to address the concerns of the "below." In this sense, women's "positioned reality" is both a struggle and an empowering experience.

The Divide Between Private and Public is Narrow and Fluid

Women are traditionally thought to be "weak" because of their emotional potency. This nature of theirs takes a great hold over their worldviews, but it is not a trap or a reflection of weakness but rather an enabling mechanism towards empathy. In women's community engagement, being emotionally potent makes them able to understand the situations in the community and the individual struggles, which is what makes their model of community empowerment viable. Their community engagement is informed by listening and connecting with the experiences of the community, targeting specific needs. As they are more likely to embrace their feelings and acknowledge their validity, they are more flexible to adapt to change and less likely to be discouraged by setbacks. Resiliency is a crucial resource for these women because, as women leaders, they go through a more rugged terrain compared to their male counterparts, a terrain deeply rooted in cultural ambivalence (Ibarra, et.al. 2013, as cited in Pillay- Naidoo & Nel, 2022). Being resilient is not just a matter of bouncing back after an obstacle but also having

an increased capacity for positive adaptation (Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022). Acknowledging the challenges entrenched in their work, women have learned how to power through despite barriers. Myla Leguro describes,

> *"You have to be realistic and pragmatic to understand that there political dynamics, there are power dynamics, and how do you navigate is very important."*

Not only are the intrinsic values of women evident in their style of community, but their activism manifests as an extension of their inherent responsibilities as women, which are tied to nurturing and caregiving role. In essence, women's activism is not separate from their traditional roles but rather a continuation and amplification of the nurturing and caregiving roles they already fulfill in their families. Women in the interview consistently emphasize their concerns for the youth and children. The women view their community work as not only about immediate concerns but also shaping a future where the children can thrive. Women's community activism essentially expanded the idea of care from their families to the broader community. They integrate personal and collective interests, seeing the family's well-being as intrinsically linked to that of the community. By organizing and engaging in the community, women are fulfilling both personal and societal responsibility. These women possess a crusading spirit because to take action and address the issues in the community is to ensure the well-being of their families. In this sense, they see their activism with a great sense of purpose, and an unwavering commitment to persist despite challenges. As Yasmin Busran Lao would reflect,

> *"You don't get tired of something you value."*

Interestingly, women's heightened consciousness of caring for the community is fostered in the household, particularly by their mothers. Froilyn Tenorio recalls that when she was younger, her mother, a civic leader, would bring her whenever she held a community consultation. Because of this, she was exposed to the struggle of the Teduray Indigenous community. In the interview, she can't help but admire her mother's dedication, and she hopes to replicate it in her own community engagement. Froilyn's experience illustrates that her mother, who was actively involved in civic leadership, played a significant role in shaping her understanding of community service and activism.

Community Work: A Vehicle for Fostering Empowerment

The concept of empowerment is often viewed in terms of external achievements—gaining influence, effecting change, and advocating for marginalized communities. However, Lord (1997) mentioned, the concept of empowerment has diverse meanings. While studies have focused on the

process of empowerment, there are some important insights from this work that can contribute to clarifying the concept and meaning of empowerment. Thus, empowerment is a multifaceted concept that cannot be limited to external achievements alone. It has multiple meanings and dimensions, which can vary depending on the context and the individual experiences of those involved. For the women involved in community work in Mindanao, empowerment is not only acquiring authority or influence but also an intimate journey of personal transformation. It encompasses a profound change in how women perceive themselves, their roles in society, and their potential to effect change. This suggests that community work also helps these women grow, as they are changed in the process which this study is all also about, the micro-empowerment among women.

Community activism creates broader social change, but in the process, women also transform themselves on many levels, which, in a way, makes community work personally rewarding. Engagement in community work builds their confidence, enhances their skills and abilities, unlocks potential, most importantly, helps them negotiate their identity within the community. Through involvement in the community, women go through a process of self-discovery and a stronger sense of identity. These women gained visibility and recognition, built networks, transitioned into larger societal roles, and created an environment supportive of female leadership by influencing public opinion and social norms. The women in this research began by addressing concerns immediate to their communities, but they have now gained increased influence and authority by demonstrating their capacity and competence to lead, which has been legitimized by their community activism. Community has provided a platform for these women to demonstrate their leadership abilities, earning the trust and respect of the public. The women in this study have secured prominent leadership positions, both nationally and internationally, as their activism has made them visible and recognized as valuable candidates for larger societal roles.

CONCLUDING INSIGHTS

This research intends to highlight the contributions of Mindanawon women. Using the metaphor of the mirror and the candle, we illustrate the multifaceted experiences and advocacy efforts of these women as reflections of the broader Mindanao narrative, encompassing its challenges and diversity. The "mirror" symbolizes how these women reflect the complex social, economic, and political issues prevalent in Mindanao, serving as representatives of their communities' realities. Through their lived experiences, these women have risen to meet the challenges and have sought innovative solutions to community concerns. The "candle" represents their transformative power. Despite facing adversity, they emerge as beacons of hope, illuminating the possibility for a brighter future in Mindanao.

This research also underscores the critical importance of employing interview methods to include women's perspectives. Revealing the hidden truths about their lives requires giving them the opportunity to share their stories. Allowing women to express themselves directly addresses the inequality often present in written narratives. Conducting interviews is essential for documenting their experiences and ensuring accurate, fair, and equitable portrayals. This approach aligns with the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 and 10, which focus on gender equality and women's empowerment.

During the course of this research, as we listened to the testimonies of women, a common theme emerged: many faced significant hardships. Their community activism often arises from their experiences with the harsh realities in the region. The perspective from "below" offers a privileged understanding, as it enables one to empathize with the struggles of others. This "power to see" stems from intersecting factors that shape women's realities, providing them with a nuanced view of their communities' challenges. Common among these women is their unwavering spirit to create change. Despite numerous obstacles, they persist and overcome.

Drawing on Haraway's (1998) analysis, the narratives of these women illuminate their often-overlooked roles and significant contributions. By challenging male-dominated structures, they break free from traditional confines, redefining societal perceptions of their capacities. In line with Haraway's insights, the stories of Mindanawon women serve as a pathway to establish their presence in the national discourse on empowerment and development, enabling them to navigate the challenges of marginalization and conflict. The narratives of the twelve women illustrate that current realities do not dictate the future. Through perseverance and collective action, they can challenge traditional power structures, advocating for a more just and dignified life for all.

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