

Navigating Widowhood: Economic Struggles and Livelihood Challenges of Widows of Conflict in Lanao del Sur, Magindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan in Mindanao, Philippines

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Abstract

In war, women become the most vulnerable group. As a result of conflict in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines, the widows experience intersecting challenges linked to livelihood, education, and social participation. The study has delved into women's economic hardships and the main ways of coping with these problems among 50 conflict widows from the provinces of Lanao, Magindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Basilan. Using a qualitative thematic method, the researcher has collected data through interviews and focus group discussions. The findings show that the main problems faced by participants were chronic poverty, limited job opportunities, and the difficulties of caring for dependents. The results also show that widows are resilient and resourceful, but their efforts only help them get by rather than reach stability. Institutional support exists, but it is often insufficient and inconsistent, highlighting gaps in policies and programs. Younger widows mentioned they could engage in entrepreneurship if they received loans and training. In contrast, older widows stressed the need for direct social assistance because of health issues. This study emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive and context-aware programs in livelihood and education. This paper claims that empowering widows through economic and educational means is not just about welfare; it is a way to achieve long-term peace and community recovery. Future research should include widows from other regions and explore how to include health and mental health support in development programs. Policymakers should create well-rounded solutions linking livelihood support with education, healthcare, and peacebuilding.

Keywords

widowhood, livelihood strategies, economic insecurity, Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

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Introduction

In the shadow of wars and armed conflicts, women usually bear the burden of survival in silence. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, where insurgency has etched deep wounds in communities and families. The reoccurring displacement, economic collapse, and militarization that followed in the aftermath of these provinces between 2000 and 2017 changed the daily lives of people greatly. Women whose husbands died in these wars not only have the pain of losing their loved ones but also the challenge of reconstructing their families without any social or institutional support. Their money problems became worse since the disruptions caused by

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the conflicts led to the cutting off of the systems for livelihoods, restriction of movement, and the discouragement of access to education and markets (Tol et al., 2013). The existence of widowhood in those conflicted areas is thus a very different situation from that of widows in peaceful communities because of these women bearing heavy loads in many different ways. Widows of war—women whose husbands were killed in violent conflict—have not only emerged as symbols of loss, but as pillars of resilience. This research focuses on their financial hardships, which extend years beyond the sounds of gunfire.

Despite the ceasefires and political accords, the socio-economic situation of widows does not change. Far removed from towns, disconnected from economic opportunities, and saddled with caregiving responsibilities, these women engage in economic struggle daily. This study aims to shed light on their economic situation, survival strategies, and the constraints of current support systems. By personalizing these experiences, the research provides context-grounded recommendations for the development of inclusive, culturally responsive economic solutions to post-conflict areas.



Figure 1: Map of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines

Widowhood is a transformative experience that goes far beyond the death of a spouse, tending to cause social isolation, economic vulnerability, and psychological distress. In most settings, widows are subjected to stigmatization that restricts their integration into community life. In Nepal, Houston et al. (2016) demonstrated how widowhood may result in extreme isolation, and Surkan et al. (2015) discovered that women tend to hide their widowhood from their children to shield them from prejudice.

Economic difficulties are one of the most enduring challenges. Brück and Schindler (2009) noted that war widows tend to experience steep drops in household income and lower access to resources. In the same way, Murray (2002) noted that conflict diverts from customary livelihoods and compels households into precarious coping mechanisms. These results are most applicable in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, where armed conflict and displacement have been weakening women's economic security for decades.

Psychological effects of conflict add to widows' hardships. Witting et al. (2018) discovered that Sri Lankan widows became more depressed when support systems in the community were inadequate. In Kashmir, Mir et al. (2023) wrote of widows weighing sorrow against domestic survival, while Verma (2015) redefined resilience as a constant negotiation among victimhood, mothering, and survival. These are the same dynamics that widows in BARMM face, with both trauma and financial strain.

State policies and structural injustices also inform widowhood. Zahedi (2006) demonstrated how Iranian war widows were symbolically acknowledged but economically constrained, repeating Barrett's (1977) initial assertion that widowhood indexes wider gendered inequities. Widows, however, are also resilient: Masten (2018) highlighted how it operates as an active process influenced by both personal and systemic factors, while Lopata (1970) stressed the need for social engagement to facilitate recovery.

Cumulatively, these works indicate that BARMW widows would most likely experience intersecting issues of stigma, interrupted livelihoods, and weak institutional support, yet also represent resilience that holds their communities together.

On top of these findings, research and understanding of conflict-affected people in general, reveal that becoming a widow reflects the structural and political forces, which deepen the level of the widow's vulnerability. De Jong (2010), for instance, states that political violence creates prolonged public health consequences that victimize women who lose their male breadwinners mostly. In a similar manner, Trani et al. (2010) observed the same situation in Afghanistan where intersecting conditions such as disability, poverty, and forced migration not only worsen the social exclusion of widows but also their inability to access the support system of the community. These are the very patterns to which we can compare the stories of widows in BARMW, who need to deal with displacement, unstable situations, and continuous unfairness all at once.

Another significant theme in the literature on widowhood is the gendered aspect of post-conflict recovery. Barrett (1977) contends that the state of being a widow exposes the patriarchal societal structures that are deeply ingrained and limit women's social and economic mobility. Various empirical studies across South Asia, such as those by Mir et al., (2023) and Verma (2015), demonstrate that widows will be constantly striving for their rights amongst the societal requirements that ask them to be modest, to have inner strength, and to undertake motherly roles even if they are affected by the trauma and lack of resources. Despite similar kinds of behavior, ladies who live in the Southeast Asian region are still stuck in high poverty rates in the provinces that have been hit hard by conflict (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2019; 2022). For widows in BARMW, these issues are factors leading to their marginalization on various levels, which include economic, cultural, and emotional aspects.

Despite these challenges, resilience emerges as a common thread in studies of global and regional experiences. Masten (2018) defines resilience not as some trait but rather a dynamic process for adaptation under continuously changing conditions, resource availability, and support systems. Such is a framing which allows a deeper understanding of how widows rebuild their lives amidst conflict-driven instability. Evidence from various contexts suggests that when widows are empowered with community networks for support, livelihood opportunities, and inclusive institutional programs, their recovery capabilities substantially strengthen in support of their families.

Problem Statement

This research seeks to answer this problem statement: What are the economic struggles and livelihood challenges of widows of conflict in Lanao del Sur, Magindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan in Mindanao, Philippines?

Objectives of the Study

This research seeks to identify the economic struggles and livelihood challenges of widows of conflict in Lanao del Sur, Magindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan in Mindanao, Philippines.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative thematic approach to examine the economic experiences of 50 widows in BARMM's five provinces.

Participants and Sampling

Fifty widows were purposively selected to represent diverse ethnic and geographic backgrounds among Meranaws, Magindanaons, Tausugs, and Yakans across Lanao, Maguindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Basilan. The representation of some provinces was limited though, due to financial and time constraints, and the security of certain areas, which may affect the extent to which the findings can be generalized.

Data collection

Information was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The guides for the interviews and FGDs covered issues on livelihoods, economic insecurity, coping strategies, access to aid, and the role of dependents and age. Field notes and transcripts were developed outlining issues for analysis. This research mainly discusses the widows affected by armed conflicts in Lanao, Maguindanao, and Sulu, which frames the interpretation of experiences in regions like Tawi-Tawi and Basilan more cautiously.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was performed by repeated reading, coding the transcripts, notes, and theme development to find the commonalities in the narratives of the participants.

Ethical considerations

Participation was on a voluntary basis, and informed consent was obtained. In reporting, respect for confidentiality and sensitivity to participant experiences were ensured through pseudonyms.

Results and Discussion

Key Themes emerged from participant Narratives:

Persistent Economic Insecurity

Most widows reported chronic poverty. Farming, especially corn cultivation, was a common job but barely covered everyday needs. One widow from Magindanao shared:

“Kung wala akong mais na maibenta, wala rin kaming ulam o pambili ng gamot...”
(If I don't sell corn, we have nothing to eat or buy medicine with...)

Others relied on occasional remittances or the help of relatives. With limited education and skills, widows often face challenges in finding stable jobs. For many, losing their husband was not only an emotional blow but also an economic collapse.

A 52-year-old widowed Meranaw informant narrated the unexpected changes in their family life after her husband's death caused by the conflict. She shared,

“Igira a daden a perak a kipamasa sa mga khakan ami, kaw ma ambush su karuma aken sa gyera, kiyadaan kami sa tao a pambigay sa perak para mipamasa sa makan ami... makhapangilay ta sa kawiyagan...” (When we ran out of money to buy our food, after my husband got ambushed in the war, I had to find any kind of work to feed my family...)

Another 51-year-old widow recounted the heaviness of the heart that comes with the emotional side of taking over the family's economic affairs after the death of her husband:

"Gyuto i pkiuman sa rata ginawa, ka kaw mauyag uyag su karuma aken, seka niyan i pembigay sa mga khakan ami... kapamumulaan, kapamanayi, kapangawiyagan..." (It is so unfortunate, when my husband died, I had to plant vegetables and do sewing job to provide for my family, I am learning to generate income despite having limited resources...)

Livelihood as Survival, Not Growth

Several widows took part in vending, sewing, or small-scale farming. These efforts focused mainly on survival. Younger widows showed greater interest in starting their own businesses and asked for financial support for *sari-sari* (mini) stores or mobile food stalls. However, financial services or micro-loans were mostly out of reach.

"Gusto ko sanang magtinda ng kape at tinapay pero saan ako kukuha ng puhunan?" (I want to sell coffee and bread, but where will I get the capital?)

Widows typically did various small-scale works side by side to make ends meet. One of the 40-year-old informants shared,

"In pinakaimahunit amuin nahinang ako balo amuin nawapat in Bana ko...humingat ako magtanum panggi Iban mga kasayulan-sayulan amuin mga hinang sin Bana ko usaha niya nakauna amuin buhuh pa siya..." (I learned to plant corn, vegetables, and sell what I could to survive after my husband died...)

A 58-year-old woman without a husband, and one more, pointed out the same qualities of being a craftsperson and creating more sources of income:

"Kapangawiyagan aya ken myasuwa. Barang barang den a katawan aken...Lagid o kapamamanayi. Kapangantwiras..." (I searched for ways to earn money, joining any activity I could to make money like sewing job and doing beadworks...)

Limited Reach of Institutional Aid

Some people got help from BARMM's Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD) or NGOs, but the support was inconsistent and often not enough. The rice packs or one-time cash aid provided short-term relief but did not offer long-term solutions. Most widows were still unaware of the economic reintegration programs available.

Several widows have been beneficiaries of the various programs initiated by the government and NGOs, although their support was not consistent. A 50-year-old Meranaw widow recounted,

"Margas ago aden a yakuwa aken a cash a galing kun uto sa Philippines Red Cross. Yakapiya piya sa ginawa..." (I received rice and cash assistance from the Philippines Red Cross and it helped us a lot...)

An additional 52-year-old widow narrated the support that was given during the pandemic:

"Su margas na sii poon sa BARMM-MSSD, sa Iligan so sewing machine kaw pandemic. Na myakatabang raken..." (I received rice from BARMM-MSSD, sewing machine from Iligan, which helped us sustain our livelihood during the pandemic...)

Role of Age and Dependents

Older widows, ages 50 to 65, mainly looked for financial help due to physical limits and health issues. In contrast, widows aged 30 to 45 wanted support for earning a living, motivated by their wish to provide for children who were still in school. The number of dependents significantly affected the need for economic assistance, with some widows caring for as many as 11 children.

The situation of supporting various dependents weighed heavily on the mind of a 55-year-old widow who gave an example:

“Gira saman nuto a da kapapantagan a perak na su mga watana kailangan iran ka bayad...” (Sometimes your children need money to pay for food, etc... but you don't have any...)

Along with the same lines, a 45-year-old Yakan widow shared the experience:

“Bang wayrooon ako bayaan landu in sigpit ku way makaon...” (If sometimes your children need money to pay for something, I don't have money to give...) This shows how the number of dependents exacerbates economic vulnerability.

Coping with Dignity

Despite hardships, widows consistently highlighted self-reliance and dignity. They showed a strong preference for earning their own income instead of depending on charity. This finding underscores the need for policy responses that focus on empowerment, rather than just welfare.

Widows in general showed the qualities of endurance when they decided to come up with their own initiatives in order to make money on their own. A 56-year-old widow shared,

“Da kipamasa sa mga gamiten kasa kapangantwiras. Na dapen a kautangan ka mlagelaged kami saya sa masusuwa...” (I have no one to borrow money from to buy beads for beading works because everyone here is poor; I had to find ways to earn income by myself...)

Another 49-year-old widow talked about the importance of small business profits to be the main source of income:

“Margas agu cash assistance a BARMM-MSSD agu Political Candidates su perak. Yakalala den uto a panabang...” (I received rice and cash assistance from BARMM-MSSD and politicians which helped us momentarily, but my focus is on sustaining myself through my own efforts...)

The findings are aligned with international studies that link widowhood in conflict contexts to increased vulnerability, downward mobility, and social isolation (Brück & Schindler, 2009; Sajanathan et al., 2014; Verma, 2015). The development of long-term poverty and restricted livelihoods indicate structural barriers, whereas the age-differentiated needs indicate the value of age-specific interventions (Murray, 2002; Masten, 2018).

Institutional support in BARMM, where it existed, was temporary but did not enable sustainable reintegration, consistent with evidence from other post-conflict settings. The overwhelming preference for self-sufficiency indicates that programs focusing on skills training, access to microfinance, and market connections—along with psychosocial assistance—are most likely to be more acceptable and effective. Policy interventions need to shift from event-specific aid to combined, multi-sectoral programming that connects livelihoods, education, health, and peacebuilding goals.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

Conflict widows in BARMM experience various and intersecting economic problems influenced by gender, space, and the long-term impact of trauma. Their lives expose gaps in existing models of aid and the necessity for all-encompassing, context-driven solutions. Interventions must integrate livelihood skills with psychosocial care and accessible social protection and be created in collaboration with widows themselves to assure applicability and dignity.

Recommendation

Policy recommendations include incorporating window-sensitive services into development and peacebuilding interventions, creating age-responsive and health-inclusive livelihood programs, improving awareness and sustained provision of requisite institutional assistance, and ensuring access to markets and financial services.

Future research recommendations: increase geographic scope to areas outside of the five provinces; investigate merging health and mental health services with economic programs; assess the long-term impact of empowerment programs on household welfare and community recovery

Author Contributions

Rohanida M. Mohamadali: Conceptualization, methodology, research design, participant recruitment, investigation, data collection, interviews, focus-group discussions, data curation, transcription, thematic analysis, interpretation of findings, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. The author read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, institutional, political, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions presented in this article.

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Data Availability

The qualitative data supporting the findings of this study were collected through interviews and focus-group discussions with conflict-affected widows from Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Basilan. Because the data contain sensitive personal experiences and potentially identifiable information, they are not publicly available. De-identified data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to participant confidentiality, ethical requirements, and applicable data-protection restrictions.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the sensitive nature of the research, their right

to withdraw, and the measures adopted to protect their privacy. Pseudonyms were used, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes.

Use of Generative AI

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used to collect or analyse the qualitative data, generate the scholarly content, interpret the participants' narratives, or formulate the findings and conclusions presented in this article.

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