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Harnessing the
Power of Social
Development
Amidst the
Polycrisis



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Foreword

The *Philippine Journal of Social Development* Volume 18 (2025) showcases six articles submitted by participants in the 10th Biennial Conference of the International Consortium for Social Development-Asia Pacific (ICSD-AP). The Conference was hosted by the College of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines Diliman, from October 23–24, 2024. The theme of the ICSD-AP was “The Fifth Industrial Revolution Amidst Multifaceted Disruptions: Harnessing the Power of Social Development.” It showcased the “role of social development such that social innovations and responses to disruptions create effective pathways towards the eradication of poverty and inequality” (ICSD Concept Note, 2024).

Humanity now lives under urgent challenges that social development strategies need to address: inequalities that are getting more extreme as the rich become mega-billionaires, with a tiny few controlling half of the world’s wealth; a pandemic that has killed millions and may be followed by more episodes of various mutations and consequent global health emergencies; a climate emergency that threatens all life on earth coupled with other forms of environmental destruction; and technology, principally digitalization, threatening to create more unemployment and exclusion of the already poor and vulnerable. Armed conflicts, racial, ethnic, and gender-based violence have erupted and intensified in both North and South of the globe, making a just and enduring peace an elusive goal. Escalation of war and violation of sovereignty in the rush to control oil and other vital resources now are alarming topics in our daily news. Bad governance, best exemplified by the mega-corruption scandals in our country, has combined with ever deepening indebtedness, moving us closer to a fiscal abyss.

One word to describe all this is “polycrisis,” when economic, political,

environmental, and social crises combine, interact, mutually reinforce and amplify each other, aggravating expected negative outcomes. Social development gives us the lens to tease out the elements of polycrisis even at the micro level, where it can manifest as continuing lack of adequate housing, inability to take advantage of opportunities to acquire international education, or as a mixture of disadvantages experienced by Filipino women workers given the impact of digitalization and COVID-19, as discussed in three of the papers in this issue.

The papers included in this volume illustrate how social issues such as inequality, discrimination, ostracism, violence, and poor governance continue to define relationships in our communities amidst the current polycrisis and the digital age. New technologies, perspectives, and policies associated with the 5th Industrial Revolution and the digital universe have so far failed to alleviate poverty and disempowerment. For instance, researchers from the Tagoloan Community College note that while informal settlers in Cagayan de Oro, who were relocated after a flood that swept away their homes, welcome ownership of more secure housing, other basic needs remain unmet in their resettlement community, including access to potable water, a functioning sewerage system, and transportation to centers of work. More problematic is the absence of a sustainable livelihood program, especially for those whose former employments are no longer accessible in the new habitat.

In Bangladesh, Umme Zarin Tasnim's paper reveals that, while many students desire to pursue higher education abroad to hone their skills in critical thinking, research, and global awareness, only students from wealthy families are able to pursue this aspiration. Poverty, lack of financial support from the family, and little or no personal savings are significant impediments to accessing international higher education opportunities for Bangladeshi students. Within Hmong migrant communities in the United States, Pa Nhia Xiong collected the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ persons. Despite significant progress in the U.S. to recognize LGBTQI+, within the Hmong community discussions about LGBTQI+ identities are considered "taboo and, in most cases, nonexistent. Additionally, in traditional Hmong shamanism, spirituality is inherently gendered, and reincarnation is believed to reinforce binary gender roles" (Pa Nhia Xiong, in this volume).

Despite these pictures of inequality and human insecurity, other papers

in this volume herald the importance of collective action, innovation, unity of purpose, and individual agency for development. Konde Lingaswamy describes the critical role played by Farmer Producing Organizations (FPOs) among the tribal communities of Andhra Pradesh, India. The FPOs were introduced by the government as mechanisms to address the shifts in the agricultural practices of tribal groups, from self-sufficiency to increased agricultural productivity for markets beyond their communities. It was underscored that the members of the FPOs are mostly women, who actively participate in general assembly meetings, in business planning, and day-to-day operations of the organization. The stereotype of women's invisibility in agricultural production was effectively disputed. In turn, Velasco and Ofreneo documented how collective action enables organized women workers in the Philippines to cope with the COVID-19 lockdown. Even while the lockdown affected the work status of women in the workers' organizations, it opened up opportunities for them to acquire relevant skills and develop innovative approaches to work and organizational life. The digital space became a platform for personal and organizational activities, through the exercise of individual agency and collective action in the use of digital technology.

Away from digital frontiers of collective action, Michael BJ S. Abellana illustrates the power of religion as a force for community development. In Upi, Maguindanao del Norte, a tri-people community has flourished despite religious diversity. There are persons who are Teduray indigenous faith believers, Christians, or Muslims. Together, they have held numerous peacebuilding activities to realize their vision of peace and development, formalized as "Upi: Haven of an Empowered Tri-People." Community development principles form the bases for unity between the religious institutions and are leveraged in community peacebuilding.

Social development theory is anchored on the promotion of human rights and the attainment of individual and collective well-being. This worldview is applied to give meaning to relationships, norms, situations, and other events observed in all aspects of our lives. For this worldview to apply concretely to specific circumstances, it is also important to have an intersectional perspective, and show how hierarchical power relations based on class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and other differentiating factors interact to create multiple identities and forms of discrimination. These power relations determine which groups are

privileged and which are disadvantaged in particular contexts.

The articles in this volume provide glimpses of social circumstances that different groups across Asia and the Pacific experience using an intersectional lens. It illustrates the difficulties faced by resettled families, economic deterrents to the pursuit of higher education, and the ostracism of LGBTQI+ identities because of traditional culture. But the suggested solutions remain constant—to develop strategies and actions that promote equality, social inclusion, resilience, and sustainable well-being. Moreover, all procedures for development need to emanate from individual choices and aspirations, as translated in collective action within organized groups and across stakeholder assemblies.

The innovations and technologies of the 5th Industrial Revolution will be meaningful to society if they will enable the attainment of these goals of sustainable human development despite the current polycrisis.

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The Living Condition of the Residents in San Miguel Corporation-Gawad Kalinga (SMC-GK) Village Socialized Housing of Barangay Balubal, Cagayan de Oro City

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ABSTRACT

Relocation housing programs in the Philippines aim to provide safe and secure homes for families affected by poverty, disasters, and urban displacement. However, questions remain about whether these projects meet the broader needs of residents, including access to livelihoods, basic services, and community participation. This study examined the living conditions of 218 households in the San Miguel Corporation–Gawad Kalinga (SMC-GK) Village, Barangay Balubal, Cagayan de Oro City. Using mixed methods research design, survey data measured satisfaction across four dimensions—physical, economic, social, and health—while interviews with residents, barangay officials, and the City Housing and Urban Development Department (CHUDD), as well as on-site observations, provided deeper insights into coping mechanisms and service gaps. Results showed satisfaction with housing durability ($M = 3.03$) and electricity access ($M = 3.70$). However, drainage systems ($M = 2.22$), water supply for chores ($M = 2.57$), transport costs ($M = 2.29$), and income opportunities ($M = 2.46$) remained major concerns. Families relied on water storage, house repairs, and informal livelihoods to adapt. Comparing actual conditions with standards from the Urban Development and Housing Act (UDHA), Batas Pambansa (BP) 220, and the WHO Housing and Health Guidelines revealed gaps in infrastructure, economic support, and service delivery. Anchored on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Galster’s psychological construct of housing satisfaction, and Durkheim’s structural functionalism,

the study recommends integrating livelihood programs, affordable transport, reliable water and drainage systems, and mechanisms for community participation into future relocation projects. These measures can prevent the simple transfer of poverty to new locations and support long-term community development.

Keywords: socialized housing, living conditions, relocation, housing standards, community development

Introduction

Housing is not only a physical structure but also a foundation for health, safety, and social well-being. The World Health Organization (2018) defines adequate housing as shelter that includes access to water, sanitation, electricity, and an environment that supports physical and mental health. In the Philippines, the Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 (UDHA) and Batas Pambansa (BP) 220 set standards for socialized housing to ensure that low-income and disaster-affected families receive homes that meet minimum requirements for safety and habitability (Republic Act No. 7279, 1992).

Despite these laws, relocation housing projects often struggle to provide livelihoods, affordable transport, and basic services. Families are frequently moved to sites far from workplaces, schools, and hospitals, raising concerns about whether housing programs truly improve quality of life. These challenges reflect global calls under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1: No Poverty; SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being; SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities) for safe, inclusive, and resilient human settlements (United Nations, n.d.).

The San Miguel Corporation–Gawad Kalinga (SMC-GK) Village in Barangay Balubal, Cagayan de Oro City was developed through partnerships between the local government and private sectors to relocate families affected by disasters and informal settlements. While the program addressed the need for secure housing, questions remain about whether it meets broader physical, economic, social, and health needs.

This study evaluates the living conditions in the SMC-GK Village

using mixed method approach. Surveys measured satisfaction levels, while interviews with residents, barangay officials, and City Housing and Urban Development Department (CHUDD) representatives, together with field observations, provided deeper understanding of coping mechanisms and service delivery gaps. Findings were analyzed against the UDHA, BP 220, WHO Housing and Health Guidelines, and theoretical perspectives from Maslow (1943), Galster (1987), and Durkheim (1893/1984) to assess whether housing programs meet both physical and social development goals.

Statement of the Problem

Relocation housing projects provide families with secure homes but often face issues related to livelihoods, basic services, and community participation. The SMC-GK Village in Barangay Balubal represents one such project where physical shelter has been provided, yet concerns remain about economic opportunities, health access, and social inclusion.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of residents in terms of age, sex, civil status, education, employment, household income, household size, tenancy-awardee status, tenancy start year, and distance from previous residence, and how do these characteristics influence the residents' living condition outcomes?
2. What are the residents' levels of satisfaction with (a) physical conditions (i.e., housing durability, utilities, water, and drainage), (b) economic conditions (i.e., income, livelihoods, transport costs, and access to finance), (c) social conditions (i.e., community participation, cooperation, and governance), and (d) health conditions (i.e., sanitation practices, environmental risks, and access to health services)?
3. Are there significant differences in satisfaction levels when residents are grouped by demographic characteristics?
4. What coping mechanisms and community practices do households use to respond to gaps in services, and which of these practices can inform scalable policy responses?

5. How do actual living conditions compare with standards from the UDHA, BP 220, WHO, and theoretical frameworks from Maslow, Galster, and Durkheim?
6. What policy and program recommendations can be drawn to improve relocation housing projects?

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

The general objective of the study is to evaluate the living conditions of families in the SMC-GK Village Socialized Housing by integrating demographic, theoretical, and policy perspectives to identify gaps and recommend improvements for sustainable relocation housing.

Specific Objectives

1. To describe the demographic profile of residents in terms of age, sex, civil status, education, employment, income, household size, tenancy details, and relocation distance.
2. To assess the residents' satisfaction with physical, economic, social, and health dimensions of living conditions using quantitative and qualitative data.
3. To determine significant differences in satisfaction levels when residents are grouped according to demographic variables using ANOVA.
4. To examine coping mechanisms employed by the residents in addressing service and livelihood gaps through interviews and field observations.
5. To compare actual conditions with theoretical frameworks (i.e., Maslow, Galster, Durkheim) and policy standards (i.e., UDHA, BP 220, WHO, SDG 11) to identify strengths and gaps in the relocation process.

6. To propose evidence-based recommendations for improving future socialized housing programs.

Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

Housing satisfaction depends on a mix of demographic, economic, social, and environmental factors shaping how the residents experience relocation projects. Differences in age, income, and distance from previous residences often produce varying needs and expectations, as families displaced by disasters prioritize security while those from urban informal settlements focus on livelihoods and access to services (Prasetyo & Adiando, 2022). Living standards such as reliable water supply, sanitation, electricity, and safe housing structures are critical for building livable communities, while their absence increases expenses and health risks, undermining relocation goals (Ballesteros, 2017).

Despite constraints, residents frequently modify their environments, engaging in home repairs, extensions, and community-led cleanups that improve physical conditions and strengthen local empowerment (Carrasco et al., 2016). Employment opportunities remain essential because steady incomes allow families to maintain their homes and avoid returning to unsafe living arrangements (County Health Rankings, 2023). However, relocation sites located far from economic centers often limit access to jobs and services, leaving households dependent on informal work or small-scale businesses (Ballano, 2017; Van Dijk, 2022).

Social participation also plays a central role in housing satisfaction. Racelis (1976), in *People Power: Community Participation in the Planning and Implementation of Human Settlements*, explained that meaningful participation requires residents to be actively involved in decision-making, not just implementation. When families influence planning, budgeting, and site management, they develop stronger ownership and cooperation, fostering long-term stability. Conversely, token participation where the residents join clean-up drives or meetings but lack decision-making power produces weaker community ties and limited trust in institutions. These insights align with findings by Srivarathan et al. (2022), who observed that strong neighborhood cooperation improves safety, conflict resolution, and collective problem-solving, while weak participation leads to dissatisfaction

and isolation.

Housing quality also directly affects health outcomes. Well-designed homes with proper drainage, ventilation, and water systems reduce exposure to diseases and environmental hazards, supporting physical and mental well-being (Bernstein, 2021). In the Philippines, the UDHA of 1992 and BP 220 both set legal requirements for minimum lot sizes, road access, water, electricity, and sanitation in socialized housing (Ballano, 2017; Simbre & Sta. Maria, 2019). Yet, studies reveal many relocation projects fall short of these standards, especially in distant sites lacking infrastructure and basic services (Zainul Abidin et al., 2019).

Theoretical perspectives clarify why relocation outcomes differ. Maslow's (1943) *Hierarchy of Needs* places housing at the foundation of safety and survival, necessary before families can pursue education, livelihoods, and self-fulfillment (Community Housing Industry Association [CHIA], 2022). Galster's (1987) psychological construct highlights that housing satisfaction reflects both objective measures, such as unit size and access to utilities, and subjective experiences like community belonging and livelihood opportunities (Riazi & Emami, 2018). Durkheim's (1893/1984) structural functionalism emphasizes the state's role in maintaining stability and equality through adequate housing, showing how weak infrastructure or inaccessible services disrupt social cohesion (Nickerson, 2023). Combined with Racelis' (1976) framework on participation, these perspectives stress that relocation housing must integrate physical, economic, social, and health dimensions to meet both material needs and social well-being.

Existing studies often focus on physical conditions but neglect coping mechanisms, demographic differences, and the role of institutional planning. By using mixed methods—surveys, interviews with the CHUDD, barangay officials, and field observations—this study compares the residents' lived experiences with legal standards (i.e., UDHA, BP 220), international guidelines (WHO, 2018), and theoretical models. This approach moves beyond measuring satisfaction alone, allowing analysis of why gaps emerge and how families adapt, providing lessons for future housing policy and program design.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the study according to the research objectives. Data were drawn from surveys of 218 household heads, interviews with the CHUDD and Barangay Balubal officials, and field observations in SMC-GK Village.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the distribution of the demographic profile of the respondents, which was collected during the study period.

Table 1.

Table of Distribution of the Demographic Profile of the Respondents (N=218)

Baseline Characteristics	N	%
Sex		
Male	34	15.6
Female	184	84.4
Age		
18 to 24 years old	22	10.1
25 to 31 years old	25	11.5
32 to 38 years old	35	16.1
39 to 45 years old	39	17.9
46 to 52 years old	27	12.4
53 to 59 years old	28	12.8
60 and above	42	19.3
Civil Status		
Single	24	11
Cohabit/Live-in	38	17.4
Married	128	58.7
Separated	3	1.4
Widow	25	11.5
Educational Attainment		
Elementary Level	17	7.8
Elementary Graduate	12	5.5
High School Level	31	14.2
High School Graduate	78	35.8
Vocational Training	7	3.2

Baseline Characteristics	N	%
National Certificate II	1	0.5
College Level	51	23.4
College Graduate	21	9.6
Employment		
Unemployed	135	61.9
Volunteer	3	1.4
Part-time	4	1.8
Contract	5	2.3
Employed	14	6.4
Self-employed	57	26.1
Household Income (in PHP)		
1,000 to 5,000	77	35.3
5,001 to 10,000	74	33.9
10,001 to 5,000	32	14.7
15,001 to 20,000	17	7.8
20,001 to 25,000	5	2.3
25,001 and above	13	6
Number of Household Members		
Alone	16	7.3
2 to 3	34	15.6
4 to 5	121	55.6
6 and above	47	21.6
Tenancy-Awardee (Is the house directly awarded to you?)		
No	21	9.6
Yes	197	90.4
Tenancy-Year Started		
2015 to 2017	189	86.7
2018 to 2020	23	10.6
2021 to 2023	6	2.8
Distance from Previous Residence		
Nearby Barangays	62	28.4
Far or City Proper Barangays	103	47.2
Very Far Barangays	44	20.2
Other Barangay/Municipalities outside Cagayan de Oro City	9	4.1

A total of 218 household heads from SMC-GK Village participated in the survey. Their characteristics reflect the typical profile of socialized

housing beneficiaries under the UDHA of 1992, which targets low-income families needing secure shelter after displacement by disasters or urban development (Ballano, 2017; Simbre & Sta. Maria, 2019).

Respondents were predominantly female (84.4%), while only 15.6% were male. Barangay officials explained that many men worked irregular jobs outside the community, leaving women as primary household managers. CHUDD officers added that female leaders became active in the homeowners' association (HOA), particularly in organizing water supply schedules and sanitation efforts. This reflects Racelis' (1976) observation that women often emerge as key actors in community life when household responsibilities extend beyond domestic roles.

The largest age group was 60 years old and above (19.3%), followed by those aged 39 to 45 years old (17.9%), and 32 to 38 years old (16.1%). Barangay records showed that many older residents had lived in disaster-prone areas along the Cagayan de Oro River before Typhoon Sendong, while younger families relocated from informal urban settlements. Field observations revealed that older households prioritized housing security and access to health services, while younger families expressed concern over employment and education differences consistent with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, where basic safety needs dominate before economic and social aspirations emerge.

Most respondents were married (58.7%), while 17.4% reported cohabiting, and 11.5% were widowed. Barangay staff noted that widowed households often depended on relatives or neighbors for daily support, whereas married households formed the core of HOA membership, consistent with UDHA's emphasis on family-centered resettlement (Ballano, 2017).

Educational attainment was modest: 35.8% were high school graduates, 23.4% had some college education, and only 9.6% completed college. CHUDD officers explained that limited schooling reduced access to stable employment, leaving many residents reliant on informal livelihoods. Galster's (1987) psychological construct of housing satisfaction suggests that while free housing improves physical security, education and income shape whether families perceive long-term benefits.

Employment data underscored these constraints. Unemployment reached 61.9%, with only 6.4% in regular work and 26.1% self-employed in vending, tricycle driving, or small-scale farming. Barangay officials reported that distance from the city proper increased transport costs and reduced job opportunities. Field visits confirmed that many residents abandoned city-based jobs due to long commutes, turning instead to home-based livelihoods. Ballano (2017) similarly argued that relocation without livelihood planning risks perpetuating poverty.

Income levels reinforced this picture: 69.2% of households earned below PHP 10,000 monthly, including 35.3% earning only PHP 1,000 to PHP 5,000. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) (2022) estimates that a family of five needs at least PHP 12,000 monthly to meet basic needs, indicating widespread poverty within the community. A small group (6%) reported incomes above PHP 25,000, often from overseas employment or government jobs, consistent with Zoleta's (2022) classification of emerging middle-income families.

Household size averaged five members, with 21.6% reporting six or more. Field observations documented water storage in multiple containers and shared sanitation facilities among larger families, raising health concerns identified by WHO (2018) in settlements with limited utilities.

Tenancy records showed that 90.4% were direct awardees, and 86.7% had relocated between 2015 and 2017. Barangay officials noted that after nearly a decade, residents had established routines, social ties, and organized HOAs, shifting the site from a relocation area to a functioning community (Srivarathan et al., 2022).

Relocation history explained many later challenges. Nearly half (47.2%) came from the city proper, 28.4% from nearby barangays, 20.2% from distant rural barangays, and 4.1% from other municipalities. CHUDD officials reported that families from far-flung areas faced higher transport costs, weaker social ties, and reduced access to hospitals and schools, shaping their satisfaction with relocation outcomes, patterns consistent with Van Dijk's (2022) findings on distance and livelihood recovery in resettlement programs.

Project records showed that the SMC-GK Village began after Typhoon Sendong displaced thousands in Cagayan de Oro. San Miguel Corporation donated construction materials, Gawad Kalinga assisted with labor, and the city government purchased the land. Homes met BP 220 standards, providing 24-square-meter units on 100-square-meter lots (Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board [HLURB], 2019). By the time of interviews, 350 families had received land titles, and the HOA was registered with the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development (DHSUD) under Certificate No. 12290 (DHSUD, 2023). Families affected by disasters, demolitions, and infrastructure projects were prioritized, while some landowners requested housing units instead of cash compensation for road construction affecting their properties.

Living Conditions

Table 2 illustrates the respondents' living conditions, focusing on the physical aspects of their housing, including factors such as space, durability, accessibility to utilities, and overall infrastructure.

Table 2.
Physical Condition of the Respondents

Indicators	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
1. The floor area of the housing unit is enough	3.20	0.60	Satisfied
2. The house is durable	3.03	0.62	Satisfied
3. There is a space available for a garden in our home	2.90	0.75	Satisfied
4. Access to electricity supply for the household	3.70	0.48	Strongly Satisfied
5. Clean water is accessible for house cleaning and chores	2.57	0.80	Satisfied
6. There is adequate drainage system in the area	2.22	0.71	Dissatisfied
7. There is enough outdoor space for physical comfort and mobility	3.40	0.61	Strongly Satisfied
8. Light posts in the neighborhood are light up regularly during the night	3.62	0.57	Strongly Satisfied
Overall	3.08	0.64	Satisfied

Physical Conditions: Housing Durability, Utilities, Water, and Drainage

Survey results (Table 2) showed moderate satisfaction with housing durability ($M = 3.03$) and electricity access ($M = 3.70$), suggesting that BP 220 construction standards on floor area and structural safety were largely achieved (Simbre & Sta. Maria, 2019). CHUDD officials explained that the program prioritized moving families away from disaster-prone zones into concrete, weather-resistant homes after Typhoon Sendong. Barangay council members added that HOAs organized minor repairs and maintenance efforts, helping preserve house durability over time. Field observations confirmed well-built units with durable walls and roofs, consistent with Maslow's (1943) emphasis on safety as a foundational human need.

However, satisfaction dropped sharply for water supply ($M = 2.57$) and drainage systems ($M = 2.22$). Residents reported irregular water delivery and long lines at communal taps, while barangay officials pointed out flooding during heavy rains due to incomplete drainage canals. CHUDD acknowledged that limited budgets delayed water and sanitation projects, with resources focused first on housing units. Field visits documented makeshift drainage channels dug by residents themselves and water storage in large containers, revealing coping strategies in the absence of formal infrastructure. These conditions fall short of WHO (2018) guidelines on adequate housing, which stress that safe water and sanitation are essential for health and well-being.

Table 3.
Economic Condition of Respondents

Indicators	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
1. We are allowed to engage in entrepreneurial activities	3.65	0.49	Strongly Satisfied
2. We are allowed to engage on more than one enterprise	3.59	0.55	Strongly Satisfied
3. Home fixture services are affordable	3.01	0.63	Satisfied
4. Household has access to internet in their homes	2.94	0.67	Satisfied
5. The household have appliances	3.39	0.64	Strongly Satisfied
6. Prices of the items sold in the neighborhood are reasonable	3.07	0.65	Satisfied
7. The fare cost to the destination is reasonable	2.29	0.72	Dissatisfied

Indicators	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
8. Household income improved this past two months	2.46	0.71	Dissatisfied
Overall	3.05	0.63	Satisfied

Economic Conditions: Income, Livelihoods, and Transport Costs

Economic conditions (Table 3) received the lowest satisfaction ratings, with household income improvement ($M = 2.46$) and transport costs ($M = 2.29$) as major concerns. Families earning below PHP 5,000 reported struggling with high commuting expenses to workplaces and schools. CHUDD officials admitted that while the relocation program ensured housing security, no accompanying livelihood plan or transport subsidy was provided. Barangay council members explained that residents relied on informal work such as vending, tricycle driving, or home-based businesses because of limited access to stable employment in the city center.

Field observations confirmed that families spent hours commuting, with some abandoning city jobs due to long travel times and high transport costs. These findings reflect Ballano's (2017) warning that relocation without integrated economic planning risks transferring poverty rather than alleviating it. From Maslow's (1943) perspective, economic struggles hinder residents from moving beyond basic survival needs, while Galster (1987) explains that satisfaction declines when housing benefits are offset by financial burdens like transport and job loss.

Table 4.
Social Condition of the Respondents

Indicators	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
1. The SMC-GK Village Homeowners Association is doing their job in the community	3.33	0.56	Strongly Satisfied
2. We celebrate or have parties together in special occasions	3.29	0.63	Strongly Satisfied
3. The SMC-GK Village Homeowners Association have regular assembly	3.56	0.51	Strongly Satisfied
4. We participate in Homeowners Association's programs, projects, and activities	3.25	0.62	Satisfied
5. People living in SMC-GK Village are friendly	3.30	0.57	Strongly Satisfied

Indicators	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
6. We practice <i>bayanihan</i> in the neighborhood	3.41	0.57	Strongly Satisfied
7. Barangay Balubal Administration holds visitation and implementing programs, projects, and activities with SMC-GK Village	3.36	0.70	Strongly Satisfied
8. Conflict between members in the community is common	3.31	0.55	Strongly Satisfied
Overall	3.25	0.59	Strongly Satisfied

Social Conditions: Community Participation and Governance

Social conditions (Table 4) scored moderately high ($M = 3.25$), as residents reported strong neighborhood ties and *bayanihan* practices. HOAs regularly organize clean-ups, security patrols, and cultural activities, fostering cooperation among households. Barangay officials confirmed that such initiatives improved safety and sanitation, while CHUDD praised residents for maintaining communal spaces despite limited government support.

However, interviews revealed limited participation in formal decision-making about livelihood planning, budgeting, and infrastructure development. CHUDD admitted that relocation timelines prioritized physical construction over participatory governance, leaving residents with little say in project design. Barangay leaders added that HOAs managed day-to-day activities but lacked channels to influence city-level planning decisions.

This reflects Racelis' (1976) observation that relocation often treats residents as passive beneficiaries rather than active partners. Durkheim's (1893, as cited in Nickerson, 2023) structural functionalism similarly emphasizes that institutions maintain social order more effectively when communities share responsibility in decision-making, suggesting the need for stronger participatory mechanisms in future projects.

Table 5.
Health Condition of the Respondents

Indicators	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
1. We practice proper waste segregation disposal	3.20	0.51	Satisfied
2. Household observes sanitation, exercise, and hygiene practices	3.27	0.50	Strongly Satisfied
3. Our garbage is regularly collected	3.20	0.51	Satisfied
4. There is enough population in SMC-GK Village	3.22	0.45	Satisfied
5. The household is able to have clean drinking water	3.28	0.50	Strongly Satisfied
6. The area outside our house is always clean	3.25	0.54	Satisfied
7. The community have regular clean up drive	3.04	0.41	Satisfied
8. The Barangay Balubal Health Center does regular monitoring and check-ups of the household	3.03	0.59	Satisfied
Overall	3.19	0.50	Satisfied

Health Conditions: Sanitation Practices and Access to Healthcare

Health conditions (Table 5) received mixed ratings. Household sanitation practices scored high ($M = 3.27$), with residents keeping surroundings clean through HOA-led clean-up drives and proper waste disposal. Field observations documented organized garbage collection points and community rules against open dumping, reflecting local commitment to environmental health.

However, access to health services ($M = 3.03$) remained a concern. Barangay health workers reported having difficulties in responding to emergencies because the nearest clinic required long travel times. CHUDD confirmed that plans for a local health station were approved but delayed due to funding constraints. Families from distant barangays faced particular hardship during medical emergencies, contrary to the WHO (2018) guidelines stating that health services should be accessible within or near settlements. From Maslow's (1943) perspective, this gap leaves essential safety and health needs unmet despite progress in sanitation practices.

Table 6.

One-Way Analysis of Variance in Physical Condition, Economic Condition, Social Condition, and Health Condition When Grouped with the Respondents' Demographic Profile

ANOVA TEST		F	p-value	Decision	Intepretation
Profile	Living Condition				
Age	Physical Condition	1.471	0.189	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	2.326	0.034	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Social Condition	2.424	0.028	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Health Condition	2.535	0.022	Reject H ₀	Significant
Sex	Physical Condition	0.487	0.486	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	0.955	0.329	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Social Condition	1.119	0.291	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Health Condition	3.580	0.060	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
Civil Status	Physical Condition	0.833	0.505	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	2.301	0.060	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Social Condition	5.894	<0.001	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Health Condition	3.614	0.007	Reject H ₀	Significant
Educational Attainment	Physical Condition	1.239	0.283	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	0.797	0.591	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Social Condition	0.758	0.623	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Health Condition	1.607	0.135	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
Employment	Physical Condition	1.172	0.324	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	2.531	0.030	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Social Condition	1.686	0.139	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Health Condition	1.756	0.123	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
Household Income	Physical Condition	0.51	0.768	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	5.383	<0.001	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Social Condition	3.146	0.009	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Health Condition	3.889	0.002	Reject H ₀	Significant
Household Members	Physical Condition	1.972	0.119	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	2.857	0.038	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Social Condition	1.86	0.137	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Health Condition	2.296	0.079	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
Recipient of the Housing Unit	Physical Condition	0.635	0.426	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	4.499	0.035	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Social Condition	0.053	0.818	Accept H ₀	Not Significant
	Health Condition	0.148	0.701	Accept H ₀	Not Significant

ANOVA TEST		F	p-value	Decision	Intepretation
Profile	Living Condition				
Year Started Residing	Physical Condition	0.596	0.552	Accept H_0	Not Significant
	Economic Condition	0.573	0.565	Accept H_0	Not Significant
	Social Condition	1.089	0.338	Accept H_0	Not Significant
	Health Condition	0.400	0.671	Accept H_0	Not Significant
Proximity to Previous Residence	Physical Condition	3.472	0.017	Reject H_0	Significant
	Economic Condition	9.470	<0.001	Reject H_0	Significant
	Social Condition	14.687	<0.001	Reject H_0	Significant
	Health Condition	4.253	0.006	Reject H_0	Significant

Note. Significant if $p < 0.05$ and Not Significant if $p > 0.05$

Significant Differences in Satisfaction Levels

Statistical analysis using one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in satisfaction levels across demographic groups (Table 6). These differences were most pronounced in income level, age, and distance from previous residence, with implications for physical, economic, social, and health conditions.

Income level showed the strongest association with satisfaction outcomes. Families earning below PHP 5,000 per month reported the lowest satisfaction with economic ($p < 0.001$), health ($p = 0.002$), and social conditions ($p = 0.009$). Interviews with CHUDD officials explained that the absence of livelihood programs forced low-income households to rely on irregular informal work, making it difficult to afford transportation, healthcare, and basic services. Barangay council members noted that households with stable income could contribute more to HOA projects, while poorer families often prioritized daily survival over community participation. These findings reflect Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, where unmet physiological and safety needs prevent families from achieving higher social and economic aspirations. Galster's (1987) psychological construct further explains that identical housing units produce differing satisfaction levels depending on the residents' financial capacity to sustain livelihoods and services.

Age differences also shaped satisfaction outcomes. Older households reported higher satisfaction with physical conditions ($p = 0.034$), especially housing durability, as they prioritized safety and permanence after being

displaced by disasters like Typhoon Sendong. Younger families, however, expressed lower satisfaction with economic ($p = 0.034$) and social conditions ($p = 0.028$) because livelihood opportunities and community facilities did not meet their long-term needs. Barangay officials observed that older residents valued home ownership and security, while younger families sought education, employment, and participatory governance; consistent with Maslow's (1943) stages where security precedes self-development, and with Racelis' (1976) view that meaningful participation sustains community integration over time.

Distance from previous residence significantly affected physical ($p = 0.017$), economic ($p < 0.001$), social ($p < 0.001$), and health conditions ($p = 0.006$). Families relocated from distant rural barangays reported greater difficulty accessing transport, schools, jobs, and healthcare compared to those from nearby areas. CHUDD officials admitted that site selection prioritized available land rather than proximity to employment or services. Field observations documented long commuting times, higher transport expenses, and reduced participation in community meetings among distant households. These gaps highlight Durkheim's (1893, as cited in Nickerson, 2023) concern that weak institutional planning undermines social stability when basic services and participation mechanisms remain inaccessible to parts of the community.

The analysis shows that income, age, and distance jointly shaped relocation experiences. Families with stable livelihoods, shorter commutes, and disaster-related displacement histories reported higher satisfaction, while younger, poorer, and more distant households struggled with economic, health, and participatory dimensions. These results confirm Ballano's (2017) and Van Dijk's (2022) findings that relocation projects fail when physical housing provision is not matched by infrastructure, livelihood access, and participatory governance—the core principles emphasized in UDHA, BP 220, and WHO (2018) housing standards.

Coping Mechanisms of Residents

Findings revealed that families in SMC-GK Village developed a range of coping strategies to address the gaps in services, infrastructure, and livelihood opportunities. These strategies combined household-level initiatives with community-led actions, reflecting both individual

resilience and collective problem-solving.

Water scarcity emerged as one of the most pressing issues. Residents installed large storage drums and scheduled water collection times, practices confirmed by barangay council members who noted that HOAs created informal water-sharing agreements to avoid conflicts. Field observations showed improvised rainwater collection systems attached to rooftops, reflecting local adaptation in the absence of a permanent solution. CHUDD officials acknowledged that while long-term water infrastructure was planned, budget constraints delayed its completion, leaving residents to bridge the gap through self-organization. These efforts align with WHO (2018) guidelines emphasizing that access to safe water is fundamental to health and well-being.

In the absence of adequate drainage systems, households dug shallow canals to divert rainwater from homes, while HOAs organized clean-up drives to prevent mosquito breeding. Barangay council members explained that these activities reduced flood risks during the rainy season, showing what Racelis (1976) described as “functional participation,” where communities collectively respond to environmental hazards even without institutional support.

Economic challenges also prompted creative coping measures. With limited job opportunities nearby, residents engaged in small-scale vending, backyard gardening, and shared transport arrangements to reduce commuting costs. Barangay officials reported that some families pooled resources for bulk rice purchases or used cooperative-style savings groups to handle emergencies. CHUDD interviews confirmed that these initiatives helped households survive income losses during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many city-based jobs were disrupted. From Maslow’s (1943) perspective, these economic coping mechanisms represent attempts to meet basic needs when institutional systems fall short, while Galster (1987) explains that financial insecurity lowers satisfaction even when housing conditions improve.

Health concerns, particularly the distance to clinics, were partly addressed through community health volunteers trained by barangay health workers. They conducted home visits, monitored sanitation practices, and coordinated referrals to nearby health centers. Field

observations documented first-aid kits in HOA offices and organized emergency transport pooling for sick residents. These measures reflect Durkheim's (1893, as cited in Nickerson, 2023) argument that social institutions, including local governance structures maintain stability when they work alongside communities to reduce health risks and improve collective well-being.

These coping mechanisms demonstrate that while residents actively responded to service gaps, their efforts remain stopgap measures. The lack of integrated infrastructure, livelihood programs, and healthcare access underscores Ballano's (2017) critique that relocation housing often provides shelter without ensuring long-term sustainability. Without institutional investment in water, drainage, health facilities, and transport systems, families bear the burden of filling service gaps themselves, limiting the transformative potential of relocation programs envisioned under UDHA and BP 220.

Comparison with Standards and Theories

The findings of this study reveal both successes and gaps when compared to legal standards and theoretical frameworks governing socialized housing in the Philippines.

The UDHA of 1992 and BP 220 require relocation sites to provide secure tenure, minimum floor areas, durable housing materials, and basic services such as water, electricity, drainage, and road access (Ballano, 2017; Simbre & Sta. Maria, 2019). Survey results and CHUDD records confirm that SMC-GK Village achieved compliance in housing durability and unit size, with homes meeting BP 220's minimum requirement of 24 square meters on 100-square-meter lots (HLURB, 2019). By the time of interviews, 350 households had received land titles, fulfilling UDHA's mandate for secure tenure (DHSUD, 2023). These achievements align with Maslow's (1943) foundational safety needs, as families displaced by Typhoon Sendong moved from flood-prone informal settlements into permanent housing.

However, results showed clear gaps in water supply, drainage, health access, and livelihood opportunities. Weighted mean scores for water ($M = 2.57$), drainage ($M = 2.22$), and healthcare access ($M = 3.03$) fell

below satisfaction thresholds, while economic outcomes like income improvement ($M = 2.46$) and transport costs ($M = 2.29$) scored lowest across all dimensions. CHUDD officials admitted that relocation planning prioritized land acquisition and unit construction over integrated infrastructure and livelihoods. Barangay council members confirmed that residents built makeshift drainage canals, organized water-sharing systems, and pooled transport costs to address these gaps, but such efforts remain temporary and uneven across households.

From a policy perspective, these findings demonstrate partial compliance with UDHA and BP 220 service provisions and conflict with WHO (2018) housing guidelines requiring safe water, sanitation, and accessible health facilities for all settlements. This mismatch echoes Ballano's (2017) observation that many relocation projects in the Philippines succeed in delivering physical housing but fail to ensure livable, sustainable communities.

The theoretical frameworks applied in this study help explain the implications of these results. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs shows that without reliable water, healthcare, and livelihoods, residents remain focused on survival rather than progressing toward social participation or self-actualization. Galster's (1987) psychological construct clarifies why identical housing units generated uneven satisfaction levels: families with better access to jobs, schools, and transport expressed higher well-being, while those facing economic and service barriers felt excluded despite receiving free homes.

Durkheim's structural functionalism (1893, as cited in Nickerson, 2023) highlights the role of institutions in maintaining social stability. In SMC-GK, the absence of participatory governance in project design weakened trust between residents and implementing agencies. Barangay officials observed that while HOAs managed sanitation and security, they lacked channels to influence decisions on livelihood programs or infrastructure priorities. This supports Racelis' (1976) argument that community participation must extend beyond maintenance activities toward real decision-making power for resettlement projects to succeed.

Finally, these gaps undermine the SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, which calls for inclusive, safe, and resilient housing.

Without integrated services, residents remain vulnerable to economic shocks, health risks, and environmental hazards—conditions that relocation programs were designed to prevent.

SMC-GK Village demonstrates that compliance with physical housing standards alone is insufficient. Sustainable relocation requires infrastructure, livelihoods, health services, and participatory governance aligned with UDHA, BP 220, WHO, and community development principles. This evidence strengthens calls for policy reforms integrating housing construction with long-term economic and social planning, ensuring that relocation projects genuinely improve quality of life rather than simply transfer poverty to new locations.

Conclusion

This study assessed the living conditions of 218 household heads in SMC-GK Village, a relocation site developed through partnerships between San Miguel Corporation, Gawad Kalinga, and the City Government of Cagayan de Oro. Using surveys, interviews with CHUDD officials and barangay council members, and field observations, the study evaluated physical, economic, social, and health dimensions of relocation outcomes and analyzed differences across demographic groups.

Results showed that housing durability and electricity access met BP 220 standards, fulfilling UDHA's basic requirement for safe and permanent shelter. Land titles for 350 households ensured secure tenure, addressing long-standing housing vulnerabilities among families displaced by Typhoon Sendong, demolitions, and urban clearing operations.

However, gaps in water supply, drainage, health services, and livelihood opportunities reduced overall satisfaction, particularly among low-income families, younger households, and those relocated from distant barangays. High transport costs, irregular water delivery, incomplete drainage, and the absence of nearby clinics limited the residents' ability to move beyond basic survival needs. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy explains this stagnation: without economic stability and reliable services, families remain focused on survival rather than social or economic development.

Statistical analysis confirmed significant differences by income, age, and distance. Low-income households reported the lowest satisfaction in economic, health, and social dimensions, while older residents prioritized safety and housing security over livelihoods. Families relocated from distant barangays struggled most with transport expenses, healthcare access, and community participation. These patterns support Galster's (1987) psychological construct, showing that identical housing units produce unequal satisfaction when economic and service conditions differ.

Despite these gaps, residents demonstrated resilience through coping mechanisms such as communal water storage, backyard gardening, transport cost-sharing, and HOA-led clean-ups. However, Durkheim's (1893/1984) structural functionalism and Racelis' (1976) emphasis on participation highlight that institutional responsibility cannot be replaced by community initiatives alone. Without integrated planning for livelihoods, health facilities, and participatory governance, relocation projects risk reproducing the very vulnerabilities they aim to address.

Overall, findings confirm that physical housing provision alone does not guarantee improved quality of life. Sustainable relocation requires infrastructure, livelihoods, health services, and community participation aligned with UDHA, BP 220, WHO standards, and SDG 11 goals for inclusive and resilient settlements.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is strongly recommended that the SMC-GK Village relocation program begin integrating livelihood programs at the planning stage. Rather than relocating families first and leaving economic opportunities to follow, the partnership between the local government, CHUDD, and relevant agencies (e.g., Technical Education and Skills Development Authority [TESDA], Department of Labour and Employment [DOLE]) should create vocational training, job linkages, and small business assistance programs so that families, especially the lower-income ones, can improve their incomes and reduce dependence on informal work.

In addition, the village must prioritize developing reliable water supply and drainage systems. The data revealed that residents suffer from

irregular water delivery and flooding during heavy rains; to remedy this, the local government and water authorities should fast-track permanent water connection projects and ensure drainage canals are completed. These infrastructure upgrades are essential, not optional, to fulfill standards under UDHA, BP 220, and WHO guidelines for adequate housing.

Healthcare access within the relocation site should also be improved. It would highly be beneficial to establish a local health station or mobile clinic to serve emergencies and routine health care, especially for elderly residents, mothers, and young children. The current distance to health facilities burdens many families with transport costs and delays, which undermines health outcomes and violates WHO standards for sanitation and access.

Transport challenges must be addressed through either subsidized commuting or improved public transport links between SMC-GK Village and city job and/or education centers. Many respondents report spending disproportionate shares of income on transportation; this not only lowers their economic satisfaction but also limits participation in social and health services.

Participatory governance should be institutionalized so that residents are not merely users of services but active contributors to decision-making. We recommend setting up mechanisms within the HOA and barangay council to involve residents in plans and budgets for infrastructure, livelihood, and welfare services. Following Racelis (1976), community participation builds social capital and increases trust and satisfaction.

Finally, there should be regular monitoring and evaluation of the project's performance against the standards of UDHA, BP 220, WHO, and SDG 11. A multi-agency oversight committee could be established, with representation from city government, barangay, CHUDD, and community representatives, to check compliance on dimensions—the physical, economic, social, and health—and ensure that service gaps are identified and corrected in a timely manner.

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Barriers to Pursue Higher Studies Abroad: A Study on Social Work and Social Sciences Students in Bangladesh

Umme Zarin Tasnim

ABSTRACT

Pursuing higher education abroad helps students to compete in a more challenging world and prepare for a future where they become more qualified professionals. Nowadays, a growing number of students desire to pursue higher education to enrich their knowledge and skills. Most often, in the developing world, studying in their home countries isn't enough to broaden their vision, strengthen skills, and build networks. However, pursuing higher studies overseas is rare in Bangladesh. The study seeks to investigate the constraints that discourage the students from studying abroad, and to propose possible methods to address these barriers. Using quantitative methods, data were collected from the students of Rajshahi University. Results showed that the willingness to pursue higher education abroad is more prevalent among students from wealthy or middle-class families compared to lower middle-class or poor families. Majority of students mentioned poor economic condition as the main hurdle to pursuing higher education abroad, along with lack of proper guidance. It is therefore recommended that the government provide national scholarships for academically-gifted students who lack the financial means to study abroad.

Keywords: higher education, barriers, scholarships, economic condition, capacity building

Introduction

In recent years, the aspiration to pursue higher education abroad has grown significantly among university students in Bangladesh. Studying abroad is commonly regarded as a pathway to higher education possibilities, cross-cultural experiences, the acquisition of global skills, and employment profiles (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; UNESCO, 2020). In a fast-moving world across the globe, knowledge economies are dominating, and international education is key to preparing students with the competencies necessary for building careers in world labor markets (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Yet with this huge emphasis, only a handful of graduates in Bangladesh can afford to study overseas. It shows that around 1.1 million students passed from higher educational institutions in the year 2021, but only 44,338 students chose to study abroad (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, as cited in Ananthanarayanan, 2023). This wide gulf is part of the larger systemic and socioeconomic obstacles that prevent most students from studying abroad.

One of the main challenges identified for international students is the high cost of tuition and living expenses, along with limited access to clear information about available scholarships, inadequate institutional support, complex visa procedures, and sociocultural barriers that hinder access to global education (British Council, 2018a; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). In Bangladesh, these difficulties are exacerbated by economic disparities, rural-urban gap in access to information, and lack of institutional capacity to guide students properly (Chowdhury, 2019).

The present study intends to explore these barriers in light of these achievements. While primary, secondary, and general level of education in Bangladesh focus on providing basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, it often fails to equip students with the skills of critical thinking, research, or with a global consciousness necessary for being successful in an international academic environment (World Bank, 2021). This gap may be closed by higher education outside the country, but in many cases, it is too expensive.

While the study of student mobility in South Asia has been gaining

attention among scholars, there are comparatively few empirical studies examining the barriers experienced by Bangladeshi students, specifically in fields like social sciences and its applied branch, social work. This study addresses that gap with respect to the international dimensions of higher education by exploring the awareness, motivation, and constraints related to the aspirations to go abroad of university students.

By highlighting these challenges, the research is intended to advise policymakers, university support systems, and learning and teaching development initiatives. These interventions could more effectively help students, particularly those from underrepresented communities, to overcome obstacles to global education. Improved access to overseas education not only benefits students individually but also contributes to creating a globalized and competitive national workforce (Knight, 2015; Ministry of Education, Bangladesh, 2022).

Review of Related Literature

Broader Picture of Social Sciences and Social Work Students Pursuing Higher Education Abroad

As the fact that higher education has become more internationalized, it provides more opportunities for students to gain global exposure, enhance research skills, and experience cultural diversity. The phenomenon of student mobility at the higher education level is an important factor in academic and professional growth (Altbach & Knight 2007). Students go on study abroad programs to have access to better academic resources, specialized knowledge not available at home institutions, and better job prospects in the current expanding global labor market (OECD, 2023).

The pattern is widely recognizable in diversified disciplines, but Bangladeshi students mainly engage in international education in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and business-related disciplines (Rahman, M. M. et al., 2021). Students with a background in social sciences, particularly those studying social work and general social science, constitute the other side of the coin, with a considerably lower presence in international mobility. The reason behind this disparity is examined in this section.

Financial Constraints

The main obstacle for social sciences students in Bangladesh is their financial condition. Freightening foreign student fees with the cost of living, travel, and criminally heinous application fees, studying abroad becomes an absurd impossibility for many. Although scholarships are available, scholarships and funding opportunities are not many and highly competitive, especially for non-STEM disciplines (British Council, 2018b). Government and institutional patronage for social studies scholars are also inadequate and most of the scholarships are channeled toward certain disciplines such as technical and business studies (R. A. Khan, 2020). Naturally then, large numbers of highly skilled individuals are deprived of access to international education by their financial profile.

Societal Stigma and Employment Perception

There's a ton of social sciences students who can embody these often-maligned groups: social sciences and social work graduates have an image problem when it comes to getting a job. The stereotype in Bangladesh is that employment opportunities are better or more lucrative for an engineering, medical, or business studies graduate, while a social science graduate may not find a good job or get a high salary (Haque & Akter, 2019). This attitude impacts the decisions of students and the expectations of families, leading many people to stay away from studying social sciences overseas let alone studying social work. The common misconception has often been that if you study social sciences or social work, you'll limit your job opportunities, and that story begets students who are not interested in and cannot afford to study these fields.

Institutional Support, Perception of Inadequate Guidance, and Support from the Institution

There is little academic and career advice received by not only social sciences and social work students with respect to international education relative to other second promotion courses. University support systems primarily cater to the students in technical and professional fields, and hence, better access to information regarding scholarships, visas, studies overseas are provided (M. A. Khan, 2020). As a result, social science and social work graduates need to negotiate international education from the

“back foot” with little institutional support, which complicates the process and creates obstacles.

Cultural and Familial Influences

In the field of social sciences, especially in social science studies and social work, there is a lack of conducive environment for these subjects due to cultural values which do not put much importance for any kind of higher education except engineering or medical sciences. In addition, it has been alleged that existing research regarding social sciences and liberal arts had numerous problems and resistance. Families tend to coerce students to choose degrees with more explicit economic rewards, which further marginalizes the social science disciplines in a theoretical and practical sense (Haque & Akter, 2019). This mindset not only restricts the number of students pursuing these subjects but suppresses their aptitude for international opportunities. A lot of students cross off studying abroad from their list entirely just because they don't think they are going to end up with a job or social status.

Academic Preparation and Global Compatibility

In Bangladeshi social science curricula, research papers that are focused on courses and international collaboration are generally very weak and this hinders students from attaining the admission requirements of renowned global universities (World Bank, 2021). In addition, international students face academic cultural shock from learning new methods of studying and teaching, research outcomes, academic writing styles, and ways of communication. These difficulties are even greater for those with little cross-cultural experience or English language-based training, which decrease their global program success rates even more.

In summary, social sciences and social work students in Bangladesh do have an interest in pursuing education abroad, yet, they confront a range of structural, financial, cultural, and institutional barriers. Addressing these issues will involve cooperation between policymakers, universities, and scholarship agencies to better democratize international education across the disciplines.

Disparity in Study Fields Among Bangladeshi Students Abroad

More than 50% of students with a social science background study abroad in STEM and business fields (ICEF Monitor, 2021). A similar pattern is observed in destination countries like the U.S., where most Bangladeshi students are concentrated in engineering (35%) and business (20%) programs with representation in social sciences in the range of 10% to 12% (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022).

The remainder of the debate about scholarship opportunities, though, demonstrates different academic priorities at play. According to the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (2020a), social sciences made up only 14% of Bangladeshi commonwealth scholarship holders and even less opted for social work or developmental studies. According to the British Council (2015), this minority represents less than 2% of the total number of Bangladeshi students studying abroad and there is limited diversity on Bangladeshi campuses and postgraduate programs.

The Need for Addressing This Gap

The global exposure of social sciences has the promising potential to further improve these challenges. However, this study has presented some comprehensive implications and linkages on policy formulation, and its recent relevance to the social research that will eventually achieve its objective in the national development policy and global disciplines. Participation in international social sciences programs can strengthen the policymaking framework in Bangladesh by enhancing research capacity, evidence-based decision-making, and the development of effective social welfare interventions (UNESCO, 2020). We need both funding and direction, and policy initiatives to develop more opportunities for students in social sciences to go abroad for their graduate studies.

Based on the overview of these barriers and points of potential solutions, this study seeks to shed light on the underrepresentation of Bangladeshi social sciences students in international education and possible approaches to address these challenges.

Statement of the Problem and Objectives of the Study

After reviewing the existing literature, there no research has been conducted on the barriers of pursuing higher education abroad experienced by students with a background in social sciences, such as students from social work. The present study examined the following objectives:

1. To explore the knowledge and interest of social science and social work students toward pursuing higher education abroad.
2. To address the barriers that prevent social science and social work students from seeking higher studies abroad.

Research Methodology

Participants and Procedure

A cross-sectional study design was used in the current investigation to determine the respondents' attitudes and other variables of interest (Kesmodel, 2018). This study was conducted by using a quantitative approach, where a questionnaire survey was utilized as the primary method, and literature review and observation were used as the secondary method (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A semi-structured questionnaire was used to conduct the survey in-person to examine the knowledge and interest toward pursuing higher education abroad and to identify the barriers that prevent them from seeking opportunities overseas. The research used a proportionate simple random sampling approach to recruit participants. Following Slovens' 1960 formula for the known population, where $N = \text{total population} = 360$, $e = \text{sampling error}$, for 95% confidence level, the sampling error is 0.05, the calculated sample size $(n) = [360 / \{1 + 360 \times (0.05)^2\}] = 189.47$. Therefore, the convenient sample size is approximately 200 from two departments: Social Work and Social Sciences at the University of Rajshahi which was selected using a convenient sampling procedure.

All correspondence with the participants was conducted in Bengali, the native language, with their informed consent. The data were collected in November 2023 and January 2024.

Analytical Strategies

The data aims to examine the knowledge and interest toward pursuing higher education abroad, to identify the barriers preventing students from seeking higher studies overseas, and to recommend strategies for overcoming these barriers, particularly for underprivileged students. First, the sample characteristics were explored by estimating descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum values. Then, higher statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS 23.0 software, adopting a general linear model to examine the main and interaction effects. Knowledge of the students was designated as an independent variable; interest of the students was analyzed as a dependent variable, and the barriers of pursuing higher education were examined as moderating variable. Furthermore, Microsoft Excel was employed to visually represent the interaction effect.

Ethical Issues

The study included a sample of the students of Bangladesh. As this research included human participants, all procedures were carried out in conformity with the Helsinki Declaration of 1964, as well as any subsequent updates or equivalent ethical norms. The Review Committee of the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Rajshahi in Bangladesh provided approval for the current study. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, comprehensive information regarding the purpose and methodology was provided to all students. Subsequently, their informed consent was duly obtained. The participants were continuously informed that their participation in the interviews was voluntary and that they were under no obligation to complete it. In addition, to mitigate the potential for reporting bias, their responses were collected anonymously and treated with utmost confidentiality.

Findings of the Study

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The evidence from the related variables in Table 1 indicates the financial limitations of university students in Bangladesh that cause obstacle for higher level studies in foreign countries. The sample consisted

of an equal proportion (50% female, 50% male). 48.5% of students came from households earning less than 20,000 BDT (Bangladeshi Taka) per month—suggesting that a substantial number of students come from low-income households with limited financial flexibility. The average monthly income is only 44.5% of people earning less than 5,000 BDT, severely challenging them to save for educational exchange programs. Only 12% earn on their own, and just 4.5% were awarded scholarships, demonstrating limited financial aid. In addition, 66.5% of students do not save money, and only 4.0% of students save expenses for further studies, while 84.5% of students have no savings. As a result, studying abroad is financially impossible for many.

The findings demonstrate that poverty, lack of financial support from family, and little or no personal savings are significant impediments to accessing international higher education opportunities for Bangladeshi students. As a result, financial limitations highlight the necessity of enhancing scholarship schemes, educational loans, and policy measures to mitigate the students' economic hurdles when seeking higher education abroad.

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variables	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	100	50
Female	100	50
Total	200	100
Monthly income of household (in BDT)		
Less than 20,000	97	48.5
Above of 20,000 up to 40,000	50	25
More than 40,000	53	26.5
Total	200	100
Monthly income or gotten money (in BDT)		
5,000	42	21
Less than 5,000	89	44.5
More than 5,000	69	34.5
Total	200	100
Source of expenditure		
Self-earning	24	12

Variables	Frequency	%
Family support	164	82
From scholarship	9	4.5
Total	200	100
Probability of saving money		
Can save money	40	20
Can't save money	133	66.5
Have to rely on loans	27	13.5
Total	200	100
If can save money, purpose of saving money		
None	169	84.5
For higher education	8	4
For running current education	9	4.5
For meeting personal interests	14	7
Total	200	100

Respondents' Knowledge and Sources of Information Regarding Studying Abroad

As presented in Table 2, many students in the field of education remain unfamiliar with scholarship opportunities due to limited access to reliable sources of information. According to the findings, 95.5% of students are aware of study abroad opportunities, while 4.5% do not know about such opportunities, thus they do not pursue it due to the lack of access to resources and guidance. 30.37% of students obtain information on their own (self-effort), 28.27% get guidance from teachers, and 20.42% were from the social work department. Still, institutional support is lacking as only 10.47% received some knowledge from their curriculum, while 10.47% relied on social media. A lack of higher education counseling puts students at a disadvantage because many rely on online information alone. Universities need to bolster career counseling, faculty mentorship, and study abroad workshops to help give students accurate, accessible, and comprehensive information.

Table 2.*Respondents' Knowledge and Sources of Information Regarding Studying Abroad*

Variables	Frequency	%
<i>Knowledge of the students regarding higher education opportunities abroad</i>		
No knowledge	9	4.5
Have knowledge	191	95.5
Total	200	100
<i>Source of acquiring knowledge</i>		
By self-effort	58	30.37
From Social Work curriculum	20	10.47
From Social Work department	39	20.42
With the help of the teachers	54	28.27
Via social media	20	10.47
Total	191	100

Respondents' Attitudes Toward Pursuing Higher Education

Table 3 shows the proportion of the students' interest in pursuing higher education, along with the primary constraint that has held them back from this pursuit. The results indicate that 50.5% of students want to study abroad and 49.5% do not want to study abroad, which means that only a few students are interested in this aspiration. For students who show "no interest," the main barrier is lack of exposure in science and social science students (49.0%), followed by financial limitations (43.5%), lack of proper knowledge and information (4.5%), and the last one is low confidence (3.0%). These findings indicate that economic difficulties and low academic potential for social sciences represent the greatest barriers. For those who have knowledge of studying abroad ($n = 101$), 91.1% have knowledge of available scholarships and 8.9% do not. Many of the students should at least be aware of financial aid options available, but a large percentage of those disinterested in pursuing higher education due to economic or academic barriers speaks to the need for both institutional support and funding opportunities, as well as career counseling, to help encourage more students, specifically those from a social science background, to study in universities abroad.

Table 3.
Respondents' Attitudes Toward Pursuing Higher Education

Variables	Frequency	%
Interest of the Students		
Not interested	99	49.5
Interested	101	50.5
Total	200	100
If not interested, constraints behind it		
Lack of opportunities for Social Science background	98	49
Poor economic condition	87	43.5
Lack of confidence	6	3
Lack of proper knowledge and information	9	4.5
Total	191	100
If interested, knowledge regarding scholarship opportunities abroad		
No knowledge	9	8.9
Have knowledge	92	91.1
Total	101	100

Discussion

These findings offer important information about the students' knowledge, interest in, and barriers to obtaining higher education abroad. The discussion complements the two objectives of the study, which are:

1. To know about students' knowledge and interest to study abroad.
2. Identification of factors that inhibit students from pursuing higher studies overseas.

In relation to Objective 1, which is understanding the students' awareness and interest in studying abroad, the results showed that 95.5% of students know about study-abroad opportunities, but a small percentage (4.5%) was unaware of it due to the lack of guidance and access to information about it. 30.37% of the students gathered information through their own efforts, 28.27% of the student's got information from their teachers, 20.42% of the students got information from their Social Work department, and 10.47% of the students were informed

from their curriculum, while the same percentage of students relied on social media. This implies that there is no structured institutional support in this field, and many students are left to fend for themselves with personal research and generalized sources. As Marginson (2018) explained, students from developing countries have relatively less access to study-abroad guidance compared to their counterparts in developed nations, which prevents them from making informed decisions. Students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle to find their way through the myriad of opportunities and challenges presented by international higher education without formalized academic counseling and structured scholarship information (Altbach, 2016). The study also revealed limited interest among students. Of those surveyed, only 50.5% of students showed interest in studying abroad, and 49.5% were uninterested. Poor socioeconomic conditions, as well as academic limitations have contributed to the low interest rate. Factors such as financial resources, exposure to the world of higher education, and supportive institutions have highlighted how they play a pivotal role in students' interests in these areas (OECD, 2019).

In relation to Objective 2, which focuses on identifying the barriers to higher education abroad, the findings reveal that financial constraints are the most significant challenge. Specifically, 48.5% of respondents come from low-income households earning less than 20,000 BDT per month, while only 12% reported being financially sustained. Moreover, 66.5% of students cannot save money, 4.0% of students save money for higher education, and 84.5% have no savings. These study-abroad opportunities, as previous studies suggest, remain inaccessible to students from low-income backgrounds due to financial constraints (British Council, 2018a). Furthermore, 49.0% of students cite limited availability of opportunities for social sciences as a significant challenge. This is representative of a wider issue in literature, where international scholarships and funding opportunities are often biased towards the STEM and business fields at the expense of the social sciences (OECD, 2020). Of these programs, Bhandari and Blumenthal (2011) noted that two thirds of scholarships and funding programs are taken up by students studying in STEM disciplines, providing the remaining third of scholarships to social science students. Similarly, M. A. Rahman et al. (2021) argued that students from non-STEM disciplines face extra challenges, such as the scarcity of finances available to fund these students, low support in hosts universities, and

uncertainties about their career prospects in social sciences abroad. The other main constraint is the lack of proper knowledge and information (4.5%) and low confidence (3.0%). According to research in countries where study-abroad guidance systems are not fully functioning, students turn to peer networks and social media, which can lead to the promulgation of misinformation, and a lack of clarity on scholarship opportunities and admission processes (ICEF Monitor, 2021). The absence of initiatives such as career counseling and institutional mentorship discourages students to a greater extent from applying to foreign universities (R. Khan, 2020).

In terms of recommendations on strategies for overcoming barriers and efforts to promote higher education opportunities, one must realize that these challenges are pervasive. Therefore, targeted policy interventions and institutional reforms to increase access to higher education abroad are needed, especially for underprivileged students. Structured career counseling, mentorship and shadowing programs, and scholarship workshops should be introduced to offer students awareness, as well as practical knowledge (Haque & Akter, 2019). It's also critical to expand financial aid programs. Scholarship opportunities should be increased by international organizations and local institutions, and low-interest student loans may be offered to individuals from low-income backgrounds (Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, 2020a, 2020b). They should also consider initiating partnerships with overseas universities for public institutions (British Council, 2015) to offer exchange programs abroad at a low cost and waive off tuition fees for disadvantaged students. Finally, the social sciences have an important role to play in higher education, particularly in the international level, working to bridge the divide in academic performance. Universities should be able to speak out in favor of equal funding opportunities for social sciences students, allowing disciplines beyond STEM to receive equal financial and academic recognition (UNESCO, 2020).

The results elucidate some of the critical barriers—financial hindrances, absence of institutional support, and limited opportunities—faced by Bangladeshi students in pursuing higher studies abroad, particularly in the field of social sciences. Giving students access to scholarships, implementing structured counseling systems, and financial support for those from disadvantaged backgrounds are ways in which policymakers and universities can help to overcome these issues. In the absence of such

interventions, higher education mobility will continue to be a privilege enjoyed by the rich, furthering educational inequality in Bangladesh.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has some clear limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample was limited to only fourth year and master's students from only two departments (Social Science Studies and Social Work) of the social sciences background. Therefore, future studies should use more representative samples from other students of different semesters or year level from more departments of social sciences background. Second, this study consisted of a cross-sectional design, and thus the results should not be interpreted as conclusive proof of the causal relationship, but rather associations. Third, the conclusions of this investigation were derived from data that was self-reported by the participants. Subsequent research endeavors may utilize objective measurements to verify the hypotheses stated in this research.

Conclusion

Results of this study raise awareness of the fact that although Bangladeshi social science and social work students express need for exposure to study-abroad education opportunities, numerous barriers, notably financial considerations, lack of sufficient institutional direction, and little consciousness for social work as a profession, persist in hampering their desire to make it a reality. Although they are motivated, many students from low middle-income families do not have access to the resources and systems required to compete in the field of international education. Moreover, even though there are some scholarships and programs offered all over the world, even to Bangladeshi students, knowledge and access are rare. Underrepresentation of Bangladeshi social science students in international education suggests urgency of integrating policy, scholarship, and institutional practice to support outbound studies. Expanding access to accurate information, strengthening academic advising, and raising the professional profile of social work in the country are crucial measures to empower these students. If these issues can be mitigated, Bangladesh can utilize those students to contribute to global research and policy, as well as national development through increased academic and professional mobility. The importance of eliminating systemic barriers to award

scholarships to capable and worthy individuals who may have unavoidable life circumstances should not be underestimated.

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The Realities of 10 Hmong LGBTQ+ Individuals in the United States: Thriving Alongside Culture, Tradition, and Hmong Identity

Pa Nhia Xiong

ABSTRACT

The Hmong people, a stateless ethnic group, migrated to the United States (U.S.) five decades ago following the Secret War in Laos. Despite resettlement, they continue to uphold their cultural values, beliefs, and traditional shamanistic practices over time. In Hmong society, children are expected to carry on the family lineage and maintain familial honor. However, identifying as LGBTQ+ is often perceived as one of the greatest sources of shame, which can lead to family rejection, homelessness, and, in some cases, suicide.

Homosexuality is largely considered foreign to the Hmong community, with no direct linguistic translations for LGBTQ+ identities. Historically, Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals have been ostracized for being perceived as defying cultural, religious, and familial expectations. They are often seen as incapable of continuing their bloodline, reinforcing their marginalization. Existing theoretical frameworks fail to fully capture the unique experiences of queer Hmong individuals, necessitating the development of Hmong Critical Race Theory (HmongCrit) and Queer Hmong Epistemology. These emerging perspectives provide culturally relevant approaches to understanding intersectional identities within the Hmong community.

This qualitative study amplifies the voices of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals through narrative inquiry, highlighting the lived experiences of 10 participants. Findings emphasize the urgent need for culturally sensitive research, advocacy, education, and support networks to promote justice and human rights. The study calls for the

extensive development of resources that empower Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals and foster safe spaces for future generations, ensuring visibility and protection within both the Hmong community and broader society.

Keywords: stateless, queer Hmong, culturally sensitive, shamanism

Author's Note

As a Hmong mother of a queer child, my journey has been shaped by both love and deep cultural reckoning. I write from a deeply personal and evolving place of transformation. Growing up in a traditional Hmong household and living within a cultural context where queerness has been ingrained in me as nonexistent, foreign, or shameful, I found myself at a dead end—initially unprepared and uncertain about how to start a conversation and support my queer child. My queer child is the grandson of two respected Hmong shamans—spiritual leaders whose roles are deeply rooted in healing through rituals. Because shamanism is strictly gender-specific, my child's queerness placed him in a painful conflict between spiritual lineage and self-identity. I watched him silently carry the fear of losing not only the love and protection of his parents, siblings, and grandparents, but also the spiritual connection to his ancestors. He feared being unrecognizable in the eyes of the people and spirits who gave him life.

I witnessed my child suffocate under the weight of expectations to be in heterosexual relationships, get married, and have children, while he struggled to reconcile his truth with a cultural identity that offered him no language, no space, and no refuge. While he feared being abandoned by his family and community, I feared for his well-being, his spirit, and his future; most importantly, I feared losing him. I wanted to protect him, but I too felt unprepared and lost in a cultural framework that had no roadmap for queerness.

Being Hmong already carries its own layers of complexity: a history of forced migration and genocide, statelessness, spiritual obligations, and communal belonging. When queerness enters that space, the silences grow deeper, and the consequences become more isolating. This lived

experience drives my scholarly and community work. My positionality in this work emerges from personal experience and communal responsibility to academics and activists. It is about making visible the realities of queer Hmong individuals, who are not outside our culture, but deeply within it. My hope is to carve out spaces for them to be seen, heard, and loved—not in spite of being Hmong, but as an integral part of what it means to be Hmong—and share it with the scholars in academia.

I found a significant gap in the literature addressing the unique experiences of Hmong families with queer children. There is a notable absence of research that centers the emotional realities, needs, challenges, and resilience of queer Hmong individuals within the context of their own cultural community and sociopolitical landscape. Despite my standing as an educated Hmong individual with visibility in both community and academic spaces, I realized that I was replicating the very silences and erasures I had long sought to challenge. This personal experience fueled a profound shift in my purpose—as a Hmong parent, scholar, social justice advocate, and member of the Hmong community. I have witnessed firsthand the emotional, cultural, and spiritual tensions that queer Hmong individuals navigate, not because they reject their Hmong identity, but because they are so deeply rooted in it.

Introduction

Following the aftermath of the Secret War in Laos, the Hmong people, a stateless ethnic group, resettled in the United States (U.S.) five decades ago as refugees escaping war and genocide. Despite the pressures of assimilation, many Hmong families have steadfastly preserved their cultural heritage, including traditional values, beliefs, and religion such as shamanistic practices. Central to Hmong culture is the expectation that children will continue the family lineage and uphold familial honor. However, for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+ (LGBTQ+), this expectation often becomes a source of profound tension within a Hmong family, clan, and community. Within Hmong society, queerness is commonly regarded as shameful, foreign, and incompatible with cultural norms and traditions, which may result in family rejection, homelessness, and in extreme cases, suicide. This paper explores several critical questions:

1. How do Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals navigate their identities within the constraints of a culture that lacks linguistic and conceptual frameworks for queerness?
2. What are the social and emotional impacts of being queer in a Hmong community that ties individual worth to heteronormative family roles?
3. In what ways can culturally grounded frameworks better support and understand queer Hmong experiences?

In this social development journal, the researcher aims to amplify the voices of 10 queer Hmong individuals who do not seek separation from their communities, but instead yearn to be embraced, seen, heard, and loved as they are in their own Hmong skin without comparing them and their unique experiences to western or other Asian cultures. My goal is to contribute to the lack of scholarship that acknowledge the resilience, complexity, and humanity of queer Hmong experiences. It reflects my mission to create safer spaces for queer Hmong individuals, their families and communities, and to disrupt the narratives that render them invisible. By bridging personal insight with a few scholarly inquiries on queer Hmong experiences and frameworks, I seek to expand a body of knowledge that affirms queer Hmong individuals as integral, valued, and vital members of our collective future within and outside of their Hmong community.

This researcher argues that prevailing theoretical frameworks inadequately account for the intersectional struggles of queer Hmong individuals. To address this gap, the paper advances and contributes to the Hmong Critical Race Theory (HmongCrit) and Queer Hmong Epistemology as necessary, culturally grounded perspectives for interpreting these unique lived realities of queer Hmong people. Through narrative inquiry, the voices of 10 Hmong LGBTQ+ participants are amplified, revealing stories of resilience, identity conflict, and cultural navigation, negotiation, and integration. The findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive research, advocacy, and culturally responsive support systems that affirm queer Hmong identities within and outside of the U.S. Ultimately, this paper seeks to contribute to a broader movement for visibility, protection, and justice within the Hmong community and in wider society.

Who are the Hmong People?

The Hmong are considered a stateless people who originated from China and later migrated to various Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma, in search of asylum during the 19th century (Chiang et al., 2015; Xiong, 2020). Over time, the Hmong people continued to face war and genocide in Southeast Asia, leading to their resettlement in the U.S. and other parts of the world in the mid-1970s. As a result, many people remain unfamiliar with Hmong history, culture, and language.

The Hmong people possess a unique cultural identity and language, referring to themselves as “Hmong,” which translates to “free people” (Vang & Flores, 1999, p. 9). Historically, the Hmong have lacked a sovereign nation, as they have been forced to migrate due to slavery, ethnic persecution, war, and genocide (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). Although Hmong individuals continue to seek answers regarding their origins, the exact location of their ancestral homeland remains a subject of scholarly debate. Some scholars hypothesize that the Hmong originated from Siberia, while Hmong oral traditions trace their lineage back to China more than 5,000 years ago (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). According to Hmong legend, the last Hmong king was assassinated by the Chinese dynasty in the 18th century, followed by efforts to annihilate the Hmong population. This massacre prompted the majority of the Hmong to flee to Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma. Those who remained in China were pressured to assimilate by abandoning their traditional attire; those who resisted were ostracized (Faderman & Xiong, 1998).

While in Laos, the Hmong settled in the high mountains, at elevations of up to 5,000 feet, forming small, self-sustaining villages where they continued their agricultural and hunting practices (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). Laos was home to approximately 60 distinct Southeast Asian ethnic groups, with over 80 languages and dialects spoken. Despite this diversity, the stateless Hmong people maintained a strong communal identity through shared religion, language, cultural traditions, intricate hand-stitched embroidery, and a collective history of persecution, which distinguished them from other ethnic groups.

The Hmong are traditionally an agrarian and collectivist society, structured around clan-based communal living rather than individualism. Historically, the Hmong people recognized 12 original clan surnames: Chang, Hang, Her, Kong, Lee, Lor, Moua, Thao, Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang (Hmongs and Native Americans, 2012). Over time, the number of recognized clan surnames expanded to 21, a change that scholars attribute to spelling variations of the original names. Clan surnames play a fundamental role in Hmong identity, serving as a marker of blood lineage and ancestral heritage. Individuals with the same last name are considered kin and are prohibited from dating or marrying one another. Traditionally, Hmong men and women retain their surname for life; however, when married, the woman keeps her surname linking her to her family's lineage socially, but is spiritually recognized and tied to the man's clan. The children all adopt the man's surname.

In Hmong society, the clan surname serves as an identity card, linking individuals to their familial history, ancestral traditions, linguistic dialect, social status, and spiritual beliefs (Hmongs and Native Americans, 2012). Historically, Hmong marriage has been defined as a union between a man and a woman, with the primary purpose of ensuring lineage continuity across generations. However, there has been limited discourse and educational efforts on the experiences and identities of queer Hmong individuals. As the global Hmong diaspora continues to evolve, there is a growing need for scholarly engagement and cultural understanding regarding the emerging visibility of queer Hmong identities within and beyond the community.

Overview of the Literature

Historically, LGBTQ+ individuals have faced systemic discrimination and dehumanization due to their gender identity and sexual orientation. However, societal awareness and support for the LGBTQ+ community have grown in the U.S. and around the world, leading to the implementation of policies aimed at protecting their rights. Although significant progress has been made in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, much work remains to be done within the Hmong community. The experiences of queer Hmong individuals remain underresearched due to a lack of scholarly interest in their narratives (Lee, 2024). Within Hmong culture, identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, or any other

member of the LGBTQ+ community is largely forbidden because it goes directly against the Hmong clan system, familial structure, and spiritual beliefs. Hmong youth who come out often face shame, abandonment, and exclusion not only from their families but also from their entire clan and community. As Lee (2024) aptly states, “Queerness and Hmongness were always positioned at odds with one another, known as two clashing cultures. . .” (p. 4).

Being Hmong and Queer

Nearly 50 years have passed since the Hmong people migrated to the U.S. following the Secret War in Laos. While many younger Hmong individuals have assimilated into mainstream American culture, a significant portion of the community continues to uphold traditional values, beliefs, and religious practices, such as shamanism. Shamanism, a dominant religious practice among the Hmong, does not traditionally accommodate LGBTQ+ identities within its spiritual framework. Hmong beliefs dictate that spirituality is gender-specific and that gender roles extend into the afterlife through reincarnation. As a result, LGBTQ+ individuals who do not conform to traditional male or female roles are often perceived as having no place or purpose within their community. They are deemed not only worthless in this life but also without significance in the afterlife.

A significant challenge in addressing LGBTQ+ issues within the Hmong community is the absence of vocabulary in the Hmong language that directly translates to terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning. As a result, discussions surrounding LGBTQ+ identities are considered taboo and, in most cases, nonexistent. Additionally, in traditional Hmong shamanism, spirituality is inherently gendered, and reincarnation is believed to reinforce binary gender roles. According to Nagaraj et al. (2013), an individual’s moral actions in their previous life determine whether they are reborn as a human, animal, or spirit. However, for queer Hmong individuals who do not conform to male or female binaries, there is no defined place for them within the Hmong spiritual world, leading to their exclusion both in this lifetime and the afterlife.

The Hmong are a close-knit community in which children are

expected to honor their family's name, maintain a good reputation, and avoid bringing shame to their parents and ancestors. One of the most dishonorable actions a Hmong child can take is to come out as LGBTQ+. As an indigenous ethnic group deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions, the Hmong have endured significant trauma due to their forced migration and separation from loved ones. The fear of losing a family member, either through separation or death, remains a central concern for Hmong parents. Consequently, when a child comes out as LGBTQ+, parents may perceive it as equivalent to mourning their child's death due to the fear of discontinuing family and clan lineage, causing spiritual repercussions from their ancestors.

Coming out as LGBTQ+ is not only considered a disgrace within Hmong society but can also be life-threatening. Some Hmong LGBTQ+ youth who have come out have been disowned by their parents, families, clans, and communities. Others who remained in their homes have endured physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Many of those disowned by their families have faced homelessness or, in extreme cases, have died by suicide due to the shame imposed upon them or the pressure from their parents to break up a same-sex relationship.

It is crucial that Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals are acknowledged, heard, and protected in society. Their voices must be amplified to educate parents, communities, professionals, and society at large. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for research, particularly in California, to document the lived experiences of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals and examine how their sexual orientation intersects with cultural values, beliefs, and spirituality.

The Hmong "Coming out" Experience

Xiong (2019) emphasized that the coming out process for Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals can be a deeply traumatic experience, often resulting in homophobic violence and being disowned by their family and clan. Masterson (2017) further noted that Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals struggle with cultural separation, which can lead to "depression, loneliness, bitterness, and a longing to escape through internalized racism" (para. 6). In Hmong culture, it is expected that children live with their parents under one roof until they marry and start their own families. However, this

expectation is often unrealistic for Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals, forcing many to lead secret lives away from home (Masterson, 2017). Traditional Hmong culture has historically not accommodated LGBTQ+ identities (Mayo, 2013).

Due to the lack of resources in the Hmong community to support queer Hmong and Asian and Pacific Islander individuals and their families, the first and only LGBTQ+ nonprofit organization, Shades of Yellow (SOY), was established in Minnesota in 2003. SOY provided safe spaces for queer Asian individuals and created a platform for awareness, protection, and education through its website, community events, and YouTube videos (Masterson, 2017). According to Mayo (2013), SOY's efforts gave queer Hmong Americans hope for greater acceptance, tolerance, and understanding. However, due to a lack of funding, SOY was forced to close, leaving the Hmong queer community without a dedicated safe space and support network.

Although a handful of researchers have conducted studies on the Hmong LGBTQ+ community, the majority of these scholars are not of Hmong descent. Additionally, most studies and participants are based in the Midwest and East Coast. Research on the Hmong LGBTQ+ community remains particularly limited in California, the state with the largest Hmong population, where Hmong scholars have lagged in addressing this critical topic.

Hmong History, Culture, and Language

It is important to note that the Hmong written language was not developed by Hmong people; it was developed in the early 1950s by three missionaries: Rev. Yves Bertrais, Rev. G. Linwood Barney, and Mr. William Smalley, with the intent of converting Hmong people from Shamanism to Christianity (Panoo, 2023). Given the complexity of the Hmong language, it is crucial to recognize that there is no direct translation for the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. Historically, LGBTQ+ identities were not acknowledged within Hmong society, as homosexuality was considered foreign to the Hmong people. Consequently, no words in the Hmong language accurately define or describe homosexuality (Masterson, 2017).

Dr. Brian Xiong, an educator and researcher in Minnesota, identifies as a gay Hmong man. However, self-identification was not a straightforward process for him. Xiong (2019) stated that one of his greatest challenges was that “there is no word for ‘gay’ in the Hmong language” and “no such word exists” to describe his sexual orientation (p. 1).

The Hmong social structure is strictly patriarchal and clan-driven. In the Hmong culture, marriage serves the purpose of preserving the clan’s bloodline, with heterosexual unions expected to produce offspring. According to Masterson (2017), Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals are often viewed as failing to contribute to the continuation of their family lineage, making them defiant in the eyes of their clan due to their attraction to the same sex. Xiong (2019) further explained that Hmong parents feel a deep sense of shame when their children do not carry on the family lineage, as this exposes them to negative scrutiny from their clan members. Consequently, Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals are often ostracized for being perceived as different and for failing to uphold their cultural, religious, and familial obligations (Masterson, 2017).

Over the years, many Hmong children born in the U.S. have assimilated into American culture with varying degrees of difficulty, while others have rejected certain Hmong cultural values and beliefs in the process. Many continue to struggle with identity and acceptance in both the Hmong and American cultures. However, it is evident that the first generation of Hmong American LGBTQ+ individuals faced significantly greater challenges compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Masterson, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Building upon queer theory, Ferguson (2004) introduced the Queer of Color Critique, which examines “social formations” to explore intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class outside the constraints of White nationalist norms and practices. Muñoz (1999) further critiques mainstream culture’s depiction of queerness, noting that it is often perceived as a “White thing” due to the normative influence of Whiteness (p. 9). Central to these discussions is Crenshaw’s (1991/1994) groundbreaking concept of intersectionality, which illuminates how multiple forms of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect to shape both structural inequities and political realities, mainly in the court of law.

Crenshaw's intersectionality theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of various social categories and highlights how these intersections contribute to overlapping systems of oppression and privilege in the legal settings. In moving away from the normative frameworks imposed by Whiteness, intersectionality serves as a vital lens to understand how marginalized identities experience unique challenges and resistances within broader systems of power.

In recognizing this, Xiong (2020) introduced Hmong Critical Theory (HmongCrit) as a framework to analyze Hmong experiences and histories. HmongCrit emphasizes the importance of understanding Hmong culture, language, religion, spirituality, rituals, and clan systems in order to appreciate their contributions to U.S. history and discourse. According to Xiong (2020), HmongCrit enables scholars and educators to recognize the distinct historical contexts, challenges, outcomes, and experiences of the Hmong people, rather than generalizing all Asian ethnic groups and assuming that they all have the same lived experiences and privileges. By applying a Hmong-specific lens, researchers can better understand the experiences of forced migration and the resilience of Hmong people. Despite their exclusion from U.S. history and educational systems, HmongCrit equips professionals with the tools to appreciate the richness of Hmong culture, resilience, and its enduring legacy. This can extend to other identities that stem from the Hmong people. For instance, the intersections of being Hmong, a stateless people, a refugee, a first-generation Hmong American woman, low socioeconomic status, and identifying as queer adds layers of complexity. However, all of these intersections do not qualify as protected classes in the U.S. legal system compared to Crenshaw's intersectionalities of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Expanding on these frameworks, Lee (2024) proposes a new theoretical model, the Queer Hmong Epistemology, which addresses the erasure of queer Hmong visibility in both community and academic spaces. Lee's model is important to center in researching Hmong LGBTQ+ people in the 21st century because Lee is one of the first queer Hmong researchers writing through the lens of his queer Hmong community and his own experiences and beliefs simultaneously. He writes how he and his participants have always believed other queer Hmong people exist even though never seeing them while growing up, and argues that the absence

of visibility does not equate to nonexistence. Instead, queer Hmong epistemology challenges communities to acknowledge queer Hmong individuals as integral members, cultural preservers, spiritual healers, and protective ancestors across space, place, and time. Lee (2024) also critiques the Western concept of “coming out” as a means of asserting LGBTQ+ identity. Queer Hmong epistemology shifts this perspective from viewing queerness as coming “out” to queerness as “acting,” meaning what directly challenges patriarchal clan structures and gender roles in the Hmong community. Essentially, Queer Hmong epistemology suggests queer Hmongness is historically and subsequently embedded in Hmong culture and traditions whether or not explicitly named as LGBTQ+ or queer.

With these theoretical models, Ferguson’s *Queer of Color Critique* (2004) and Lee’s *Queer Hmong Epistemology* (2024) offer a theoretical reframing of how to research queer individuals in the U.S. They suggest we move away from approaching queer research as purely Western and White, and add nuance by carving space for queer people of color and even queer Hmong people. These models lay the groundwork for the researcher’s approach in interviewing queer Hmong participants from conceptualizing this research, drafting research and interview questions, how the researcher conducts the interviews, and analyzing the data. Crenshaw’s intersectionality framework (1991/1994) and Xiong’s *HmongCrit* (2020) model offer tools on how to conduct interviews and analyze participant responses in terms of identity formation, placement within systems of oppression, and historical context. These models promote participants to speak about their identities and experiences as nuanced and multidimensional, permitting them to be authentic in their responses without separating identities for the sake of “identity research.” All together, these four theoretical frameworks and models allow the researcher to approach, conduct, and analyze the research holistically to accurately represent the queer Hmong stories of these 10 individuals.

Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative method approach for this study, utilizing individual interviews. Narrative research was used to conduct this study to gather participants’ personal stories of their lived experiences as a queer Hmong, their identity awareness, and their life before and after coming out. According to Creswell (2013), narrative study voices the

individuals' lived experiences "within their personal, social, and historical context" (p. 75). Clandinin and Connolly (2000) further elaborated that "narrative inquiry is stories lived and told" (p. 20). Furthermore, Creswell (2013) highlighted that narrative research is used to examine "life events," "turning points," or "epiphanies" gathered from participants' stories (p. 75). Narrative research is vital to addressing issues related to race, discrimination, and marginality and how these issues impact one's culture (Creswell, 2013). This approach is most effective in capturing the participants' lived experiences, culture, and history (Creswell, 2013).

This qualitative study focused on the interviews of 10 Hmong adults who self-identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Eight of 10 participants reside in California while two reside in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling because the Hmong LGBTQ+ community is hidden and sacred, in which access was limited and trust must be established beforehand as a non-queer Hmong individual and researcher. Interviews were conducted via in-person or virtually (via Zoom) depending on the participants' preference. The interviews lasted between 90 to 120 minutes using an interview guide that consisted of 15 open-ended questions with follow-up questions as needed. Each interview was semi-structured, permitting participants to speak openly without restrictions, regardless if they directly answered the questions. Interviews were in English, Hmong, or both languages depending on the participants' preference. After completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed and translated the interviews and analyzed the data to collect significant themes, ideas, and unique experiences.

The participants' responses were first analyzed through open coding to identify initial patterns and meaningful themes. This was followed by axial coding to organize and group these themes into broader categories that captured the significant experiences of Hmong LGBTQ+ participants, particularly in relation to their "coming out" narratives. To further refine and visualize thematic relationship, clustering analysis was employed to explore how certain themes appeared together and to identify patterns in how they were connected. The combined use of open coding, axial coding, and clustering analysis provided a structured framework for interpreting the data and developing grounded theoretical insights into queer Hmong experiences. Creswell (2013) recommended that the researcher actively involve the participants throughout the study. Therefore, the researcher

and participants may negotiate or clarify the meaning of life stories and experiences, which adds “a validation check to the analysis” (Creswell, 2013, p. 75). The researcher also conducted follow-ups and member checks with participants to clarify statements and ensure that the given information was accurate (Creswell, 2013).

This qualitative research captured the authentic voices of 10 Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals and provided a deeper understanding of their unique experiences, cultural loyalty, and challenges and needs as a vulnerable population.

Results

The 10 participants in this study were Hmong adults who self-identified as queer. To ensure the anonymity of participants, each individual was assigned a unique pseudonym for the purpose of this study. Eight of the 10 participants were born in the U.S., while two were born in Laos and Thailand. Their ages ranged from 22 to 45. Five participants currently live with their parents, while the other five live independently outside of their family’s home.

Regarding religious affiliation, two participants declared their faith as shamanism, five as Christian or Catholic, and three as having no religious faith. Three participants—Sia, Yia, and Xee—grew up in traditional households that practice Shamanism; however, they no longer feel a sense of belonging to the religion due to their queer identity. Sia stated, “I grew up in a very religious home. I still consider myself to be a spiritual person, but as of now, I’m not a Catholic or Christian. I don’t practice Shamanism anymore.” Xee considered herself to be an atheist and Yia converted from shamanism to Christianity.

The majority of participants disclosed that they moved out or away from home to go to college in order to further explore their sexual identity and find a more LGBTQ+ friendly community. Teng, Yia, Ker, Sheng, Houa, Chao, and Tou expressed that they did not have a strong family support and safe environment to come out and explore their sexual identity. Teng felt that “Fresno is not a safe space and not accepting. Fresno is super hypermasculine and homophobic.” Ker is the only son and after he came out to his parents in high school, he “felt like the black sheep in the family

. . . [and] didn't have the support [he] needed as a gay Hmong man so [he] had to leave to find that support on [his] own." Tou confirmed that "college became a safe space for me to be queer, to be free." Houa came out to her parents at age 15 as bisexual and they were not accepting of her sexual identity. Houa said, "After that, I felt closed off from them for a long time. . . . I moved away for college . . . a few hours away, but enough to miss each other. We reconnected during my college years." All except one participant had graduated from college; three earned a master's degree, six obtained a bachelor's degree, and one is still pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Through the analysis of data collected from personal interviews using narrative inquiry, four key themes emerged as follows, highlighting the unique experiences of queer Hmong individuals in the process of coming out: (a) No Formal Conversation of "Coming Out," (b) To be Queer Hmong Means to be Educated and Financially Independent, (c) Queer Hmong Preserving Parents' Face and Reputation, and (d) Selflessness: Choosing Grandparents' Love Over True Identity.

No "Coming out" Conversation in Hmong Language

As previously mentioned, it is important to recognize that the Hmong written language was not developed by Hmong people, but rather by three missionaries in the early 1950s, primarily as a tool for religious conversion from Shamanism to Christianity. Due to the linguistic and cultural complexity of the Hmong language, there are no direct translations for terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning. Historically, LGBTQ+ identities were not explicitly acknowledged within traditional Hmong society, as same-sex relationships and gender nonconformity were often viewed as foreign concepts or nonexistent. As a result, the Hmong language lacks specific vocabulary to define or describe non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities.

Participants whose parents and grandparents were not fluent in English faced greater challenges in expressing their sexual identity and navigating coming out conversations in the Hmong language. All participants disclosed their queer identity to friends and siblings before coming out to one or both parents; only one participant has not come out to his parents. Anticipating the worst possible outcome, such as rejection, they sought acceptance from their peers and siblings first to ensure they

had a place to stay if their parents disowned them. In some cases, after coming out to their parents, participants continued to experience pressure to date, marry, and have children in accordance with heterosexual norms. Those with more traditional or older parents struggled to initiate a coming out conversation due to the lack of terminology in the Hmong language to define homosexuality. Tou has not openly come out to his parents because he is “not ready to have a conversation” with his parents. Tou questions, “How would we be in a conversation together if there are no Hmong words to accurately describe my sexual identity?” Houa related that she has not come out to her grandmother saying, “I feel that if my parents, who are younger in the mid-forties, can’t even understand, I’m hesitant to tell my grandma who’s much older from the older generation.” Bao reiterated that if she was to tell her grandparents, they would be confused and not understand what queer is and emphasized,

The lack of queer representation in the Hmong community and the conversations around that is a problem. We don’t even have the language for it and language is an incredibly imperative way of literally influencing your worldview and the way you think because you think in words and the languages that you know. So when your language doesn’t have the vocabulary for the queer people and the experiences they go through, they don’t exist essentially.

During the time that Teng was struggling with his sexual identity, he had a difficult time conveying his feelings and emotions and what he was going through in Hmong. Teng said,

I told my parents that I’m not going to church anymore. I didn’t know how to explain it to my parents, so I had my older sister help me translate to them that I was having thoughts and feeling the sin of being gay. My parents still wanted me to go to church to be saved.

Sheng shared that her parents are more modernized and accepting of her sexual identity; therefore, her coming out conversation with her parents was in English. Sheng has been in a relationship with her partner for many years, so she felt comfortable bringing her partner to their family gatherings. However, she still finds it difficult to appropriately introduce her partner in the Hmong language. Sheng would introduce her partner to the elders as “*Tus no yog kuv tus phooj ywg zoo*” which translates to “This

is my best friend.”

It is vital to underscore the deep linguistic and cultural barriers faced by queer Hmong individuals in articulating and asserting their sexual and gender identities within their families and communities. Because Hmong people’s vocabulary is limited and the Hmong written language was developed by non-Hmong missionaries in the 1950s primarily for religious conversion, it lacks the linguistic capacity to express LGBTQ+ identities. Traditional Hmong society historically did not acknowledge non-heteronormative sexualities or gender nonconformity, often regarding them as foreign or nonexistent. For example, Houa’s parents and relatives told her,

You’re too young. How do you know this? You must be indoctrinated because we moved to an all-White town and you want to be like White people now. [Her parents and relatives] said that when they were living back in Laos and Thailand, this never existed and how come it existed all of a sudden now in this day and age.

This absence of language and cultural recognition presents significant challenges for queer Hmong individuals during their coming out journeys, particularly with parents and grandparents who are not fluent in English.

Participants often disclosed their identities to friends or siblings before approaching their parents, anticipating rejection and fearing familial disownment. For many, the lack of equivalent Hmong terminology to describe their experiences created emotional distance, miscommunication, and misunderstanding. While some participants with more modern or English-speaking parents encountered some sort of acceptance, they also struggled with how to present their partners in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways, often defaulting to “best friend” when introducing partners to Hmong elders.

The absence of queer representation and language within the Hmong community contributes to the invisibility of LGBTQ+ experiences. As Bao previously pointed out, when there is no vocabulary for queer people, they are invisible. This erasure underscores the urgent need to create space for new narratives, vocabularies, and cultural understandings that affirm and legitimize queer Hmong identities, not just in English, but in Hmong

language and cultural discourse. By doing so, the community can begin to foster inclusion, acceptance, and belonging for queer Hmong individuals across generations within the U.S. and across the globe.

In using HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology, we can better understand how the absence of queer vocabulary in the Hmong language reflects historical shifts rather than a lack of queerness in Hmong life. The Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), developed by missionaries, was a starting point for literacy and cross-cultural communication, but it did not capture the full complexity of Hmong identity, including diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. HmongCrit helps us see how oppression, migration, colonization, and adaptation shaped what was preserved and what was left unspoken. At the same time, Queer Hmong Epistemology highlights the lived experiences, creativity, and agency of queer Hmong individuals who are actively redefining language and cultural understanding. Rather than erasure, these frameworks illuminate the evolving nature of Hmong culture and the growing efforts to create space for queer identities, which are rooted in love, kinship, and the continuity of tradition across generations.

Queer Hmong Redefining Education and Financial Dependency

In the traditional Hmong culture, success is often defined through educational attainment, financial independence, and the ability to contribute to the well-being of one's family and community. Hmong parents place a high value on raising children who are academically accomplished and economically self-sufficient, with the expectation that adult children will provide financial support not only to their aging parents but also to siblings and the broader Hmong community. This collectivist orientation reflects the Hmong community's deep-rooted emphasis on interdependence, reciprocity, and familial duty.

However, for Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals, the meaning and implications of education and financial independence are shaped by additional layers of complexity. While they are equally encouraged to pursue success, many queer Hmong individuals internalize these expectations not solely as a means of honoring familial obligation, but as a necessary strategy for survival and self-preservation. For Yia, he worked hard to earn a master's degree and has a well-paid career, which provides

financial stability for him. Yia described how he mentally prepared himself to finally come out to his parents and siblings at age 30,

It was 30 years in the making. I was already in my 30s, already had a job, already secretly married my partner, already had a group of close friends, already built a safe support net . . . so I got to the point of where if my family rejects me, I have a place to go, a family that I've formed through friendship.

For some, financial independence becomes a prerequisite for leaving their parents' homes that may be unwelcoming or emotionally and/or physically unsafe due to rejection, shame, or hostility. The pressure to achieve higher education and financial independence are not only about fulfilling familial pride, but also about securing the autonomy needed to navigate life without the traditional safety net of their own parents and family. Teng knew that education and financial stability were key to being independent away from his unaccepting parents. Teng explained, "I earned a bachelor's degree, completed law school, and is currently preparing for my California Bar Exam. I have a full-time job and live on my own with roommates." Consequently, the pursuit of education and economic stability carries additional pressure and emotional and social meanings for queer Hmong youth compared to their heterosexual counterparts. As Bao tried to understand why families would disown their queer children, she stated,

I have accomplished so much in my life. I've been the one that is more involved at family events . . . in their eyes, I'm praiseworthy. . . . I've done all these things my whole life and you've loved me for it, but what about queerness changes what I've already done and who I've always been? It's important for families to consider why they suddenly have a change of heart toward a queer person when it's still the same person they've known their whole life.

Participants reported that from a young age, they recognized the necessity of education and financial independence in order to live authentically. Many internalized the belief that being different or identifying as queer could lead to rejection or disownment by their loved ones. Houa recalled, "When you're young, finance is something that can be held over your head...you're relying on these caretakers to care for you until you're able to care for yourself. Don't come out until you are absolutely

ready and financially stable.” Nine of the 10 participants obtained college degrees and are employed professionals who are financially independent. Among them, three own homes and live with their partners. Those who still reside with their parents have established professional careers and do not rely on their families for financial support; instead, they financially contribute to their parents and household expenses. Sheng, who identifies as a lesbian, acknowledged that her experience as a queer individual would differ from that of her siblings. She also expressed concerns that her parents and relatives would treat her differently, ultimately providing her with less emotional and financial support.

I knew I had to work harder than my siblings who are not queer.
... I needed to be financially stable. ... I moved away for college.
... I had to get a college degree so I can make more money ...
so I can move out and live on my own even if it goes against my
culture or my parents' wishes. I just had to survive on my own
because I knew that I was going to find my wife and marry her
someday.

While all Hmong children may view success as a way to give back to their families, some queer Hmong individuals are forced to view it as a critical tool for navigating potential isolation and creating alternative pathways to safety, acceptance, and self-determination. This divergence reveals how cultural expectations around success intersect with queerness in ways that reframe traditional Hmong values of collectivism, highlighting the tensions between individual survival and communal belonging for LGBTQ+ members of the Hmong diaspora.

HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology offer critical insight into how queer Hmong individuals uniquely navigate the cultural expectations of success. While non-queer Hmong children are often raised with the expectation that their educational and financial achievements will serve the family and community, queer Hmong individuals may experience these same goals through a different lens. For many, becoming educated and financially independent is not only about fulfilling cultural pride, it is also about gaining the autonomy to live authentically in environments that may not be fully accepting. These frameworks highlight how queer Hmong individuals anticipate the possibility of rejection or misunderstanding and prepare for independence at an earlier age. Education and financial stability become tools of resilience and survival, to provide the means to

maintain the love and peace while living with their family, or move out, create chosen families, and protect their well-being if familial support is withdrawn. Yet, rather than abandoning their cultural values, queer Hmong often reinterpret them. They continue to care for their families, attend community events, and uphold their heritage, while also creating new forms of kinship and self-determination that honor both their queerness and their Hmong identity.

Queer Hmong Children Preserving Parents' Face and Reputation

In the Hmong culture, children are socialized from an early age to uphold their family's honor, safeguard their parents' reputation, and maintain the collective dignity of their clan. This strong sense of filial piety and communal accountability is deeply embedded within Hmong values, where a child's actions are perceived as direct reflections of parental success or failure. Within this Hmong framework, conformity to cultural norms is expected, while any deviation, especially with regard to gender and sexual identity, is often seen as a threat to familial and clan integrity. Among the most stigmatized acts a Hmong child can commit is to openly identify as queer, as such disclosures not only challenge heteronormative assumptions, but also disrupt long-standing beliefs around family roles, legacy, and cultural continuity.

This study reveals that queer Hmong individuals continue to internalize and uphold these cultural expectations and mindset to protect their parents' reputation, even as they struggle to live authentically. Participants consistently emphasized their efforts to protect their parents from public shame, particularly within the Hmong community, by remaining discreet, selectively navigating community spaces, and in many cases, avoiding large family gatherings altogether to prevent others from disrespecting their parents, grandparents, ancestors, and clans. For example, Houa expressed deep concern that her queer identity might undermine her academic and professional achievements and simultaneously "soil [her] parents' reputation." Her remarks underscore the dual burden queer Hmong individuals carry, the pain of concealing their identities and the emotional labor of shielding their families from judgment rooted in cultural and communal surveillance, in which her parents would be judged as bad parents. These tensions are intensified by the historical and political backdrop of the Hmong refugee experience. As Houa further articulated,

For Hmong parents, their first instinct is to protect their child no matter what people say but at the same time, Hmong refugee parents were taught that reputation and what the world and the community think about you supersedes how you love your children and family because it matters how outsiders see you. At the same time, queer children do not want to come out to the community because they also want to protect their parents and their reputation. It hurts me when people talk badly about my parents so I will protect my parents. My parents did everything for me, sacrificed for me. How dare people say that my parents aren't good parents just because I'm queer.

In this sense, love and support become dependent on how well a child represents their family through the lens of communal perception and collective honor. Participants like Xee and Tou echoed similar sentiments, expressing reluctance to be visible within their families for fear that their queerness might tarnish the public image of their parents, particularly when their parents hold respected positions within the clan system. Although Tou no longer attends family gatherings, he still fears that his parents' reputation may be damaged by others who are homophobic in the Hmong community. Tou mentioned, "My dad is well-known in the community, someone important amongst the family clan. I don't want to see him get backlash or disrespected, it's unfair to him." By removing themselves from environments where they face judgment, they have learned to disregard negative remarks and prioritize their own well-being. Many continue to exist quietly in the shadows as a means of shielding their parents and grandparents from societal scrutiny while finding peace in living life on their own terms. As Xee stated:

My parents are well-known in the community. . . . I don't want to ruin their reputation. I'm scared about what people will think of them if our relatives know that I'm queer. My cousins are already wondering why my hair is short like a boy . . . why I wear baggy clothes, why I don't come around to large gatherings anymore, why I'm not married and have kids yet because I have a master's degree. I'm ok with not attending events anymore. . . . I don't want to deal with that.

Despite the marginalization that queer Hmong individuals face, many

participants in this study described their self-imposed withdrawal from community life as a form of agency, self-preservation, and respect for their parents. For some, distancing from judgmental environments created space for healing and self-acceptance.

These narratives demonstrate how queer Hmong individuals must constantly negotiate between authenticity and obligation, self-care and cultural loyalty. They also exposed how silence became a strategy of protection, for themselves and their families, highlighting the complex emotional terrain in which love, shame, and duty are deeply entangled. As José Esteban Muñoz (1999) reminds us in *Disidentifications*, queer people of color often survive by tactically engaging with cultural codes that deny them full recognition. Through strategic withdrawal, quiet resilience, and selective participation, queer Hmong individuals continue to resist erasure while seeking ways to exist meaningfully within and beyond the boundaries of their cultural worlds.

Applying HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology is vital for making visible the complex ways that queer Hmong individuals navigate cultural and familial expectations in a Western context that often misunderstands or overlooks their experiences. HmongCrit offers a lens that situates queer Hmong identity within the historical and political trauma of war, displacement, and racialization in the U.S., highlighting how Hmong values around family honor, obedience, and clan reputation are not simply cultural, but are deeply shaped by intergenerational survival strategies. Meanwhile, Queer Hmong Epistemology centers the knowledge, resilience, and emotional intelligence that queer Hmong people develop to negotiate their queerness in ways that protect their parents from shame while still embracing personal authenticity. In Western discourse, coming out is often framed as liberation through visibility, but for queer Hmong individuals, silence, strategic absence, or selective disclosure can be acts of deep cultural love and survival. These frameworks challenge Western binaries of acceptance versus rejection and instead, uncover how queer Hmong individuals remain loyal to their families while resisting heteronormative norms through quiet, culturally situated forms of resistance. By engaging these frameworks, Western scholars can better understand and appreciate that queer Hmong people are not merely victims of tradition, but active agents in reshaping what kinship, success, and identity can look like within and beyond themselves and their cultural

communities.

Negotiating Grandparents' Love and Coming out

Throughout Hmong history and cultural traditions, grandparents hold a sacred and revered position within the family structure. Elders are not only seen as sources of wisdom, but are also honored as the foundational pillars of the family lineage, the creators of life, who carry spiritual, cultural, and ancestral knowledge. Within the multigenerational Hmong household, grandparents are often co-parents and primary caregivers, especially for first- and second-generation Hmong children in the U.S. whose parents had to work long hours in labor-intensive or low-wage jobs to support their families following their resettlement as refugees. This intergenerational caregiving model, deeply embedded in Hmong collectivist values, stands in contrast to Western frameworks that often downgrade grandparents to secondary or auxiliary roles. This caregiving arrangement is rooted in Hmong collectivism and a survivalist ethic developed through war, displacement, and statelessness, resisting Western notions of nuclear family structures and the reduction of grandparents to passive “babysitters.” Instead, in Hmong families, grandparents are central figures whose emotional support, protection, and wisdom shape the lives and values of their grandchildren from the day they were born.

From a HmongCrit lens, the intergenerational relationship between Hmong grandparents and grandchildren must be understood within a context of racialized displacement, cultural preservation, and generational survival. HmongCrit recognizes that Hmong families are entangled in systems of racialization, war trauma, and structural invisibility in both U.S. institutions and broader discourses of the Western identity. The love between Hmong grandparents and grandchildren, then, is not merely emotional, but also political and cultural, that reflects an embodied form of resistance and resilience. Grandparents, often displaced elders who survived the Secret War in Laos, refugee camps in Thailand, and American resettlement, become vessels of cultural continuity. Their love is not only unconditional, but also protective, serving as a shield against historical erasure and cultural loss.

HmongCrit asserts that this grandparental love is a form of generational armor passed onto children navigating a racialized U.S.

society that often fails to see or value them. The bond between Hmong grandchildren and their grandparents is characterized by a unique form of unconditional love, one that is tender, nurturing, and deeply spiritual. Participants described their grandparents' affection as softer and more patient than that of their parents, often interpreting it as a second chance for grandparents to express love, gentleness, and affirmation that may have been constrained in their parenting years due to war, displacement, and poverty. Houa reflected on this, stating, "It is like they got a second chance of raising children so they're nicer and more loving." Grandparents often serve as cultural anchors, bridging traditional Hmong customs with the realities of growing up in the U.S., and their presence within the household conveys a sense of continuity, legacy, and emotional grounding.

Within this relational structure, Queer Hmong Epistemology brings to light the tensions, silences, and contradictions that queer Hmong grandchildren experience as they navigate their identities in the shadows of cultural expectations. Queer Hmong Epistemology recognizes that queerness, while often untranslatable in Hmong language and tradition, is not absent, and therefore, it is embodied, lived, and negotiated through everyday acts of survival and relational care. Participants in this study disclosed that while they deeply cherish the love of their grandparents, they consciously choose not to reveal their queer identities. This silence is not simply avoidance; rather, it is an epistemological act of care and protection, rooted in culture and intergenerational loyalty. Sheng, for example, expressed, "coming out to them would be like dropping a bomb on them," highlighting not only the emotional weight of the decision but the cultural stakes involved in disrupting traditional gendered and spiritual roles that grandparents uphold. She explained that her closeness to her paternal grandparents is too precious to risk, saying she is "not ready to have the line to be cut between [her] and [her] grandparents."

Despite this deep love, all participants in this study reported withholding their queer identities from their grandparents. This choice is driven by profound respect, love, and concern for their grandparents' emotional and physical well-being. Participants expressed fear that disclosure would not only challenge their grandparents' worldview, one shaped by traditional norms and spiritual beliefs, but also potentially rupture the loving relationships that have sustained them throughout their lives. For Sheng, Houa, Xee, Tou, Bao, and Chao, the decision to remain

silent is not rooted in shame about their queer identity, but in the desire to protect a cherished bond with their aging grandparents. Participants emphasized that their grandparents, having survived war, grief and loss, and forced migration, deserve peace and emotional ease in their later years. Tou, whose bond with his grandmother is marked by deep affection and reverence, stated, “She’s been through so much in her life...surviving the war... raising my father and his siblings and grandchildren. She’s old. I don’t want to burden her with the stress of me.” His wish to come out before his grandmother passes away is blocked by the deep fear of losing her love if she were to misunderstand or reject his identity. Similarly, Houa and Xee described their decisions not to disclose their identities as conscious acts of love and sacrifice, choosing peace over disruption, and connection over confrontation. As Houa stated, “If that’s the one thing I have to sacrifice to keep the peace in my family, then I’m okay with it.” Xee echoed this sentiment, affirming that “maintaining a peaceful relationship with them is for the best...it serves me some positive benefits and serves them a good grandchild.”

This sentiment illustrates how queer Hmong knowledge is relational and context dependent, where it is shaped not through declarations of identity but through careful navigation of familial love, respect, and emotional preservation. Queer Hmong Epistemology centers this nuanced silence not as weakness, but as a form of strategic intimacy, where queer individuals prioritize emotional safety and the preservation of intergenerational relationships over visibility. Therefore, the love between Hmong grandparents and grandchildren must be understood not only through emotional or cultural lenses, but through the intertwined frameworks of HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology. These frameworks reveal how love, silence, identity, and resistance co-exist within queer Hmong experiences, where the act of protecting one’s grandparents from cultural rupture is a deeply loving and cultural decision. As participants find ways to live authentically while preserving ancestral bonds, they embody a distinctly Hmong queer resilience, one shaped by love, complexity, and survival. Their silence is not evidence of personal denial, but rather an embodiment of cultural love, one that prioritizes the emotional security of elders over personal disclosure.

Ultimately, the stories of these participants demonstrate how queer Hmong individuals continue to navigate their identities within a deeply

relational and culture-bound framework. Their love for their grandparents remains steadfast, even as they suppress parts of themselves to preserve that love. In doing so, they embody a form of resilience that speaks not only to their strength, but also to the profound emotional intelligence and cultural fluency required to exist at the intersection of queerness and Hmong traditions.

Discussion

Section 1: Early Research on the Hmong

In acknowledging the Hmong people's unique history, familial structure, and multi-layered intersectionality, it is evident that they are a resilient community that has survived the deadliest war in American history and is thriving after resettling in the U.S. Despite their status as a stateless people, Hmong individuals have demonstrated remarkable adaptability, integrating into diverse cultural, national, and global landscapes while maintaining their traditions and cultural heritage.

However, in the 21st century, there remains a lack of written and recording form of documentation of Hmong people's existence and history of statelessness, persecution, genocide, and forced migration experience. When the first Hmong families resettled in the U.S. in the mid-1970s and then a bigger wave of Hmong refugees surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars had a fascination with this increasing population in the U.S. since the absence of knowledge about the Hmong stemmed from their lack of having a centralized home country to refer back to. The U.S. government assumed that the Hmong people were Laotian or Thai due to their homeland in Laos and later in the refugee camps in Thailand. Therefore, early scholarly work about the Hmong people was written by non-Hmong researchers. As new refugees in the U.S., the Hmong people did not speak, read, write, and understand the English language. The non-Hmong scholars heavily relied on Hmong refugee students and children with minimal education in the U.S. to translate while conducting research; therefore, the Hmong stories, experiences, and way of life have been misinterpreted and lost in translation in early published scholarly work.

The distinct worldview and way of life of the Hmong people have given rise to culturally specific phrases, metaphors, and expressions that

hold meaning only within the Hmong context. When U.S. scholars used the Hmong refugees as interpreters for research purposes in the earlier days, many of the interpreters spoke limited English. Moreover, when they translated interviews conducted in Hmong into English, and those translations were further shaped by non-Hmong researchers or authors during the writing process, the original meaning and theoretical insights often become distorted or illegible to Hmong audiences. This process risks erasing the cultural logic and epistemologies embedded in the original narratives. As a result, the research may no longer reflect an authentic understanding of the Hmong experience. Instead, it becomes centered on how non-Hmong researchers interpret or frame Hmong stories, shifting the focus away from the Hmong themselves and toward an outsider's attempt to make sense of their lives through a Western lens.

Section 2: Hmong LGBTQ+ Absence in U.S. Queer and Ethnic Scholarship

Over the past three decades, queer studies and ethnic studies have increasingly examined the intersections of race, culture, and sexuality. Central to this expansion is the queer of color critique, a framework that challenges the Whiteness of mainstream queer theory and the ethnocentrism of ethnic studies. Scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz (1999), Roderick Ferguson (2004), and Cathy J. Cohen (1997) have emphasized that queer identities are deeply shaped by systems of race, class, coloniality, and heteropatriarchy. Their work critiques the universalizing tendencies of LGBTQ+ discourse, arguing that queerness cannot be fully understood apart from race, class, coloniality, and heteropatriarchy.

Other scholars such as Ho and Blackwood (2022) have critically expanded queer frameworks by examining how power, intimacy, citizenship, and sexual identity operate across diverse Asian contexts, including Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and the U.S. These contributions are part of a broader project to reframe “Queer Asia” not as an imitation of Western queer theory, but as a method and critique grounded in local genealogies and cultural specificities (Chiang & Wong, 2017; Yue, 2017). Drawing on Chen's (2010) “Asia as method,” such scholarship seeks to decenter Euro-American epistemologies and instead, elevate theories and practices emerging from within Asia itself. However, despite this regional turn, the majority of this work continues to center dominant or nationally recognized Asian groups, leaving

stateless, refugee, and indigenous populations, such as the Hmong, largely absent from academic discourse. As Gopinath (2005) notes, mapping queer geographies across Asia requires attention to transnational and alternative forms of subjectivity. Yet, Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals whose identities are shaped by forced displacement, ancestral obligations, clan-based kinship, and spirituality remain undertheorized and excluded even within these progressive scholarly conversations.

This study calls attention to fill the gap in queer Hmong research by advancing HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology as necessary frameworks to make visible the lived experiences and systems of Hmong LGBTQ+ people. These frameworks insist on the inclusion of stateless and minoritized Asian communities in academic and activist discourse, expanding what counts as “Queer Asia” and challenging scholars to recognize how epistemic erasure persists, even in decolonial projects that aim to center Asian voices. By integrating HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology into academic discourse, we can begin to develop frameworks that authentically reflect the realities of queer Hmong individuals.

Section 3: Hmong Intersectionality Contributions to Existing Scholarship

Additionally, the intersection of the Hmong identity with queerness remains underexplored, largely due to the absence of theoretical frameworks that capture the complexity of being both Hmong and queer. Existing theoretical models fail to encompass the nuanced experiences of queer Hmong individuals, necessitating the development of new perspectives such as HmongCrit (Xiong, 2020) and Queer Hmong Epistemology (Lee, 2024). These emerging frameworks allow for a culturally relevant understanding of Hmong identity while centering the lived experiences of queer Hmong individuals and their reimagination of a community that accepts them as cultural preservers, healers, protectors, and human rights advocates.

Hmong LGBTQ+ experiences provide a critical yet underexamined lens through which to extend and complicate intersectionality theory. Emerging from a stateless, clan-based society characterized by deeply embedded expectations surrounding lineage, gender performance, and spiritual continuity, Hmong cultural frameworks produce distinct forms

of tension for queer individuals navigating multiple and overlapping sites of marginalization. While intersectionality has traditionally illuminated the intersections of marginalized identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, it often operates within a U.S. epistemological framework through legal disputes with a marginalized person against the state, government, or other systems of power. The existing intersectionality framework neglects culturally specific modalities of oppression, particularly those rooted in ancestry, spirituality, and collective familial obligations. For Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals, identity formation is shaped not only by structural racism and heteronormativity in U.S. contexts, but also by intra-community imperatives to preserve clan honor, perform gendered rituals, and maintain ancestral and spiritual ties. In this context, intersectionality reads as a marginalized member, the queer Hmong person, against their governing body which is the Hmong 18 Clan System and patriarchal family structure. Integrating Hmong cultural contexts into intersectional analysis compels scholars to move beyond rigid structural categories and consider the cultural, spiritual, and diasporic dimensions of identity. In doing so, it extends intersectionality to engage with more cultural systems beyond the U.S. institutions, where queerness is negotiated not solely through institutional power, but also through kinship systems, ritual practices, and cultural survival.

The narratives shared by participants in this study reveal how existing critical race and queer theories fall short in accounting for the specific cultural and historical experiences of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals. While often grouped under the broad category of Asian American, the Hmong people's statelessness, wartime displacement, genocide, and clan-based cultural systems set them apart from other Southeast Asian groups such as Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, or Thai communities. The participants' stories highlighted the complex ways in which identity is negotiated not only through race, gender, sexuality, and nationhood, but also through ancestral ties, spiritual expectations, and obligations to uphold familial structures and lineages. These dimensions remain largely absent in mainstream frameworks.

Section 4: Cultivating and Developing Hmong-Centered Frameworks and Models

In America, queer Hmong people have the freedom to be openly queer

as a constitutional right. However, we (Hmong community, researcher, etc.) must still understand or recognize that queer Hmong people also operate within the Hmong family structure and clan system that looks negatively upon queerness, as we worry about birthing for future generations. HmongCrit offers a vital model for centering these nuanced experiences as these relate to the Hmong identity. It recognizes that to be Hmong is already complex enough with a multiple situated identity, one shaped by the trauma of statelessness, refugee displacement, and clan-based cultural expectations. HmongCrit holds space for the internal conflicts that arise from navigating ancestral responsibility, gender performance, and Western social systems, which often operate in contradiction. HmongCrit ensures that a Hmong person's identities and experiences are considered holistically, even when discussions around their intersectional identities and experiences are dominated by non-Hmong or Western discourses. For this reason, it discourages non-Hmong discourses to separate a Hmong person from their Hmongness.

Building on this, Lee (2024) introduced Queer Hmong Epistemology as a critical framework that foregrounds the voices, knowledge, and worldviews of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals. This epistemology affirms that queer Hmong people do not merely inhabit marginal positions; instead, they produce knowledge that challenges dominant logics of normativity and universality. In alignment with Muñoz's (1999) notion of *disidentification*, Hmong queer individuals often creatively and critically engage with the expectations of both their cultural and national communities, not wholly assimilating, yet not entirely rejecting. Their identity work resists fixed categories and instead forms what Muñoz (1999, p. 4) calls "survival strategies within the cultural logic of heteronormativity and racialization." Similarly, Cohen's (1997) critique of mainstream queer politics as overly narrow and assimilationist applies here; Queer Hmong Epistemology refuses the idea that queerness must align with Western frameworks of visibility, individuality, or liberal identity politics. Instead, it honors silence, relational duty, and spiritual belief as valid modes of surviving, resisting, and thriving in the Hmong community and the U.S.

By paying attention to storytelling, ritual memory, spiritual symbolism, and embodied practices, Queer Hmong Epistemology legitimizes ways of knowing that are often dismissed in dominant academic discourse. It recognizes that queerness, for Hmong individuals,

is not only a matter of sexual orientation or gender identity, but is entangled with spirituality, kinship, and the afterlife. Together, HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology push intersectionality beyond structural analysis, urging scholars to consider how statelessness, cultural epistemologies, and ancestral ties shape the meaning and expression of queerness. These frameworks not only center Hmong voices, but also contribute to the larger queer of color critique by illustrating the transformative potential of theorizing from the margins of the margins. Queer Hmong Epistemology recognizes these expressions not as deviations from normativity but as legitimate, situated forms of theorizing. It values the ways Hmong queer individuals navigate rejection and resilience, invisibility and emergence, and silence and survival. Together with HmongCrit, it builds a culturally grounded, intersectional framework that not only centers Hmong voices but expands what counts as theory and whose knowledge is seen as valid in academic and community discourse.

Conclusion

Being Hmong is, in itself, an intersectional identity, one that is shaped by the convergence of marginalized culture, ethnicity, language, religion, social class, generational status, and ancestral ties. As a stateless people with a history of genocide, forced migration, and resettlement, Hmong individuals often navigate complex layers of identity that include expectations tied to familial and clan structures, spiritual practices, and cultural preservation. These dimensions are further compounded by socioeconomic challenges, religious obligations, and intergenerational dynamics, particularly within Hmong refugee contexts. For many, to be Hmong is to constantly negotiate belonging and legitimacy within systems of power along lines of identity formation, making Hmong identity inherently intersectional, even before additional aspects of identity such as queerness, gender, or class are considered. This notion of Hmong identity being inherently intersectional therefore remains constant across the global Hmong community, but differs in the context of where they relocated geographically across the globe.

Despite ongoing efforts to foster inclusivity in the U.S., Hmong LGBTQ+ identities remain taboo within Hmong communities, academic discourse, and professional spaces. The lack of language and terminology in Hmong to describe queerness and LGBTQ+ identities creates significant

barriers for queer Hmong individuals in communicating with their parents, grandparents, and elders. Without culturally specific models or guidance, queer Hmong individuals must navigate their identities in isolation, often reimagining and creating new spaces where they can exist within, rather than outside of the Hmong cultural norms. However, these efforts remain constrained by an unspoken cultural norm that queerness is incompatible with dominant Hmong traditions. Unlike Western narratives of coming out, the experiences of queer Hmong individuals are shaped by complex familial and generational hierarchies that extend beyond immediate family units to include clan structures and communal reputation. The coming out process for queer Hmong individuals is not merely a personal act of self-identification but a deeply communal negotiation of belonging, survival, and familial duty.

Despite these challenges, the narratives of queer Hmong individuals reveal a profound commitment to family, cultural preservation, and ancestral reverence. Their queerness does not negate their Hmongness; rather, it redefines and expands it. While previous studies have focused primarily on the struggles and marginalization of queer Hmong individuals, the findings in this study highlight their resilience, agency, and deep familial loyalty and contributions. Their lived experiences echo the courage of their Hmong ancestors, especially the Hmong soldiers who made immense sacrifices and those who died during war to pave the way for the Hmong people to have a better life in America. For many queer Hmong individuals, choosing to remain in the shadows of their parents and grandparents is an act of bravery and selflessness, a form of cultural preservation that prioritizes family honor over personal visibility. This tension between visibility and familial duty underscores the urgent need for further research, advocacy, and culturally specific resources that support queer Hmong individuals and their families while respecting the collectivist values of the Hmong community.

Recommendations

In moving toward a more inclusive and culturally grounded scholarship, it is essential for both queer and non-queer Hmong scholars, as well as non-Hmong researchers, and community partners and allies to engage deeply with Hmong epistemologies such as HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology to develop culturally relevant and sustainable

resources. These frameworks not only center the lived experiences of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals but also preserve the cultural integrity of their stories and wishes for the future. As Chao powerfully stated, “We need to unpack all of the hurt and fear from the Hmong community and forgive and move forward together.” This call to action reflects a communal desire for healing and understanding. Xee emphasized the importance of cultural transformation through empathy and education: “Help Hmong people to process and normalize LGBTQ. Help them understand that it is ok to love their child regardless of their sexual orientation . . . acceptance is acknowledging that LGBTQ exists in the community, it shouldn’t need to be shunned.” These testimonies speak to a need for not only visibility but active normalization of queer identities within Hmong families and communities. Tou’s reflection illustrates the generational potential for change:

I think my siblings felt bad . . . they know it’s not easy to be queer.
I think that by me sharing my identity with them, I hope that
they do better as allies who don’t have to navigate the culture in
the community as an outcast.

To honor these narratives, scholars must shift away from Western-dominant frameworks that often erase or misinterpret Hmong experiences, and instead root their analyses in community-based, culturally fluent approaches that allow Hmong people to define themselves on their own terms.

Lastly, to foster culturally responsive social development, funders and Hmong-serving organizations must invest in healing spaces specifically for queer Hmong individuals and their families and community. Currently, very few Hmong-led organizations throughout the U.S. are equipped with the funding or structure to support queer Hmong healing and community-building. Participants consistently emphasized the value of culturally affirming spaces. For example, Sheng shared that organizations like Youth Leadership Institute and Fresno Barrios Unidos in California gave her “a sense of belonging.” Houa found support through Gender and Sexuality Alliance networks and the Hmong National Development Conference, saying, “I met other queer Hmong youth and adults who kept me going.” Teng added, “Having queer friends from community organizing work and a queer therapist really helped me in my healing journey.”

These reflections show that healing happens in safe community spaces. Funding must prioritize queer Hmong-led healing circles, mental health access, and leadership development. As Chao expressed, “We need to unpack all the hurt and move forward together.” These investments are not optional, they are essential for the Hmong American community’s future of transformation and long-term inclusion.

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Empowering Tribal Communities: An Overview of Farmer Producers Organizations (FPOs) in Andhra Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

The Farmer Producing Organizations (FPOs) have been perceived as a magic bullet to the farmers' problems in Andhra Pradesh, India. The federal and provincial governments of India are both promoting FPOs as a new institutional arrangement to revolutionize farming. FPOs are considered to be a vital mechanism that address issues of agricultural productivity, market access, and sustainable practices. Therefore, it revitalizes agriculture by infusing new technology among marginalized groups. The tribals are one of the most backward communities in terms of modern developmental indicators and although underdeveloped, their agricultural systems and patterns are organic and sustainable. Moreover, their potential has not been tapped due to the lack of market access and restricted use of modern technology. If FPOs are able to foster new technology and give market access, the tribal farmers' productivity may increase manifold.

In this backdrop, the study delves into the distinctive challenges faced by tribal farmers and explores if the formation of FPOs serves as a catalyst for socioeconomic development. It also tries to explore what qualitative changes FPOs are able to bring to the life of a farmer's family. Furthermore, the study examines collaborative efforts between FPOs, government agencies, and NGOs. It also assesses the availability of credit for the members of FPOs. Additionally, it touches upon the role of FPOs in facilitating newer technology and climate-resilient agricultural practices among tribal farmers. The study concludes by presenting ways forward and the future of FPOs among tribal communities.

Keywords: tribal, Farmer Producing Organizations, FPOs, participation, agriculture, community

Introduction

The practice of sharing labor among farming communities has been a widespread feature in Indian agricultural practices. Farming requires multiple hands and skills, therefore, mutual aid was embedded into it in the absence of mechanization. Mutual aid entailed farmers getting together to support one another from planting to harvesting. Together with facilitating effective task completion, this combined effort help farmers feel more united and it also fostered community cohesion. In traditional Indian society, the practice of mutual aid is not limited to agriculture and it has been part of social and cultural aspects of daily life. Historically, farming communities often sold their agricultural produce to their neighbors or townspeople through local markets like *santa*. Transactions were initially composed of goods, and services were done through a barter system in the absence of a well-developed currency and market. As formalized market systems develop with the passage of time, it enabled farmers to reach broader markets and trade their products for currency. In the changed economic scenarios, mutual aid metamorphosed into a mutually benefitting economic system where individuals are interested in mutual help only if it is economically beneficial to them.

It is also important to note that there has been tremendous change in the demography of the region and it has fragmented the land abysmally, resulting in tiny landholdings. Statistics from the 2010–2011 Agricultural Census of India indicate that the number of landholdings is increasing and has nearly doubled during the last 20 years (Government of India, 2015). Due to increased fragmentation and subdivision, farmers with marginal landholdings face a variety of issues such as feasibility and profitability in farming activities. They also face issues related to credit and market access, and technology adoption added further challenges. This made agriculture an unviable option for small landholding owners. Therefore, it was realized that collectivizing farmers into producer companies may help small and marginal farmers in reaping the benefits of economies of scale, as well as collective bargaining (Rondot & Collion, 2007).

Background and Rationale of the Study

The districts of the study, namely Alluri Sitharama Raju, Parvathipuram

Manyam, Vizianagaram, and Srikakulam of Andhra Pradesh are predominantly populated by tribal communities. Their agricultural practices are archaic yet sustainable, though they have limited market access in the changing economic order. Their agricultural produce is unique in the sense that they are completely natural and have high market demand. As most of the tribal communities in the study do not meet the standard human development indicators, they are not able to leverage the best market prices of their agricultural produce on their own.

In order to bridge this long-standing gap, the Government of India at the national level, and the Government of Andhra Pradesh at the state level, are promoting a new institutional arrangement known as Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs). It is a collective model aimed to improve agricultural productivity by infusing newer technology and facilitating equitable market access. The process of FPOs include aggregation of produce, input procurement at reasonable rates, fair market access, and nurturing the entrepreneurial capacities of the tribal communities. However, despite the huge push by the government, the success of FPOs, especially among tribal communities, depends on the uniqueness of the product, local culture and dynamics, and educational level and awareness of tribal farmers. A national paper by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) titled *Status, Issues & Suggested Policy Reforms* (2019) discussed the processes of formation, issues, and required changes to make FPOs more convenient for the communities.

Despite government efforts in promoting and incentivizing FPOs through various initiatives and programs, there is limited research that is focused on the tribal communities of Andhra Pradesh. Therefore, the study seeks to fill the gap by offering the holistic perspectives of the nature, functions, and processes of FPOs, as well as the socioeconomic impacts, including enhanced bargaining power and overall well-being of tribal communities of the four districts of Alluri Sitharama Raju, Parvathipuram Manyam, Vizianagaram, and Srikakulam of Andhra Pradesh.

Tribal Communities in India

India has the second largest tribal population in the world, and the tribal communities have been an integral part of Indian society, having been mentioned in ancient texts like Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The

tribal population in India is diverse, forming distinctive rich traditions, customs, and lifestyles. Despite their presence in various parts of India, they possess common traits and are more homogeneous and self-contained than the non-tribal social groups. The concentration of tribal communities may be found in Northeast and Central India.

When the country got independence in 1947, the Constituent Assembly debated the issues of tribals in detail. The framers of the Indian Constitution had a divided opinion related to the development of tribals in India. Therefore, they added elaborate protective provisions for tribals in the Indian Constitution. Under the Constitution of India (1950), Scheduled Tribes are groups listed in the Constitution as tribes and thus enjoy special protection. Article 342 states that the President, by public notification, would “specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities . . . be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union territory.” Over 700 communities have been identified as Scheduled Tribes under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution (National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, n.d.). As per the 2011 census, tribal communities constitute 8.61% of the total Indian population. Tribal groups in India are at different stages of social, economic, and educational development. While some tribal communities have adopted the mainstream way of life, 75 Primitive Tribal Groups are unable to meet various indicators of human development (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2024).

The study was conducted in Andhra Pradesh, a province of India. It constitutes 5.53% of the tribal population as per the 2011 census. The region of Eastern Ghats is especially considered to be the house of various tribal groups (Venkatanarayana, 2013) and most of these tribal communities depend on collecting forest produce. Gradually, they are moving from shifting cultivation or *podu* to settlement agriculture. Traditionally, they have been in agriculture for their survival and self-consumption. In changing contexts, their aspirations cannot be catered to based on traditional agricultural models. Therefore, they are also shifting to commercial crops though their methods of cultivation are still largely organic. The tribals in the study area produce turmeric, ginger, pineapple, custard apple, plantain, mangoes, red gram, and corn. Like any other communities in the region, the tribal communities are also changing due to the influence of liberalization, globalization, and privatization. Though

due to the lack of credit and market access, they are not able to realize their full potential. Moreover, institutional lenders are not interested in facilitating credit to them as they often lack the required documents.

Necessity and Significance of FPOs for Tribals

A Producer Organization (PO) is a legal entity formed by primary producers (i.e., farmers, milk producers, fishermen, weavers, rural artisans, and craftsmen). It is a registered organization owned and controlled by farmer members themselves, and it aims to ensure better income for the producers through collectivization. FPOs assist farmers to increase their revenues and protect them from eventualities of weather and market conditions through group action. As small producers do not have the volume of products individually, they have no bargaining capacity to negotiate prices. Besides, marketing of the agriculture products itself is a specialized domain, which tribal farmers are not adept at. Therefore, the purpose of FPOs is to meet the common needs of its members by providing required services to them. If tribal farmers become members of POs, they may be able to access these facilities through the power of collectivization. Gradually, FPOs caught the government's attention due to its potential to transform the lives of farming communities. For the first time, FPOs were introduced by the Indian Government in 2002 with the amendment of the Companies Act 1956 (Department of Agriculture and Cooperation [DAC], 2013, as cited in Kumar et al., 2022). Usually, services offered by the FPOs in India include: (a) supply quality agriculture inputs like seed, fertilizer, and pesticides at competitive rates, (b) required machinery and equipment, (c) value addition, storage, and transportation of produce, (d) diversify income generating activities, (e) technical support and marketing of produce, and (f) better and remunerative prices of agricultural produce (Small Farmers' Agri-Business Consortium [SFAC], n.d.).

In view of the above services offered by FPOs, both federal and provincial governments are encouraging the formation of FPOs through various agencies. Government intervention vis-à-vis FPOs is also supported by civil society organizations in India. The Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (DAC), Ministry of Agriculture, and the Government of India act as nodal agencies for the development and growth of FPOs. The Small Farmers' Agri-Business Consortium (SFAC), a society under DAC, is providing support for the promotion of FPOs to state governments.

SFAC is an autonomous society promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers’ Welfare, and the Government of India (SFAC, n.d.). This government support triggered the mobilization of the farmers for aggregation across the country to augment the farmers’ income. DAC and its associated agencies are supposed to work with NABARD and other financial institutions to direct short- and medium-term credit for working capital and the infrastructure investment needs of FPOs.

Seeing the encouraging results of the intervention of FPOs among farming communities, the Government of India has launched a new Central Sector Scheme titled “Formation and Promotion of 10,000 Farmer Produce Organizations (FPOs)” with a clear strategy and committed resources to form and promote 10,000 new FPOs in the country with a budgetary provision of Rs 6865 crore (Government of India, 2021).

Since farmers belonging to the tribal communities are already at the receiving end, FPOs offer a powerful and sustainable solution to the multi-layered challenges that they face. By addressing issues such as market access, storage, and financial inclusion through collective action, tribal FPOs can help farmers unlock the full potential of their unique products. These interventions can lead to higher incomes, greater market stability, and long-term economic empowerment for the tribal communities.

Services Provided by FPOs

Table 1.
Services Provided by FPOs

Types of Services	Particulars of Services Provided
Organizational Services	Organizing farmers, catalyzing collective action, building capacities, establishing internal monitoring systems
Production Services	Input supply, facilitation of (collective) production activities
Marketing Services	Transport and storage, output marketing, processing, market information and analysis, branding, certification
Financial Services	Savings, loans, and other forms of credit, financial management
Technology Services	Education, extension, research
Education Services	Business skills, health, production
Welfare Services	Health, safety nets
Management of Resources	Water, pasture, fisheries, forests, soil conservation

Note. Adapted from Hellin et al., 2009; Markelova et al., 2009; Narrod et al., 2009; Rondot & Collion, 2007.

Various Tribal Groups in the Study Area

There are various tribal groups where data was collected for the purpose of the current study. These tribal groups are:

1. **Savara:** Traditionally, *podu* or shifting cultivation has been the mainstay of the Savara people. They depended on “slash and burn cultivation” (swidden) which does not require any sophisticated technological input. Nowadays, they prefer settled cultivable land near hill streams than cultivation in *podu* plots. Most of the Savara people living around Seethampeta in Srikakulam districts possess small plots of land on the hill terrains to cultivate paddy and cashew. The Savara’s economy is not market-oriented. Rather, it is a subsistence economy, oriented towards the survival of household members. Their system of production, distribution, and consumption cater to day-to-day needs of the people for their sustenance and survival.

Gutthi Pani (group work), a kind of work culture among the Savaras, is one of the indigenous knowledge systems prevalent even today. A family is helped by community members by extending their labor. The elders of the tribal community assign a number of people to work in the land of a particular family. The family that gets the help of the labor force from the community must provide a meal for all of them, and at the end of the day, each laborer is given nominal wage. Thus, the community supports the individual family with a collective labor force. The process of decision-making under the *Gutthi Pani* is more democratic, which facilitates social solidarity. A tangible expression of compassion and solidarity intertwined in this indigenous practice of group work among the Savaras is in fact praiseworthy (Gnana, 2019).

2. **Konda Reddy:** *Konda Reddy* means rulers of hills. *Konda* means hill in Telugu language, which is spoken in the province of Andhra Pradesh. They mostly live on both sides of the Godavari River in East and West Godavari districts. They usually live in hilly tracts

and cleared forest areas. The main occupation of the Konda Reddy is agriculture, as well as allied crafts. They practice permanent field agriculture and shifting cultivation in the hilly areas on both sides of Godavari River. They cultivate a variety of cereals, millets, vegetables, and pulses in the *podu* along hill slopes and also in plains (Ravishankar, 2024).

3. **Jatapu:** Jatapu tribal people are the inhabitants of Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa provinces of India. Their substance is based on cultivation. They depend mainly on slash and burn cultivation carried out on the hills around their habitat, and also practice low land paddy cultivation (*garavu*) near foothills. The main occupation of some of these Jatapu tribes is agriculture. Their main produce includes *chodi* or *ragi* (*Eleusine Coracana*) and crops like *samalu* (*Panicum Milare*), *gantelu* (*Pennisetum Typhoides*), *jonnalu* (*Sorghum Bicolor*), and *korralu* (*Setaria Italica*). The commercial crops like cashews (*Anacardium Occidentale*), mangoes (*Mangifera Indica*), chillies (*Capsicum Annum*), and tobaccos (*Nicotiana tabacum*) are cultivated, and beedi leaves (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) are also cultivated in a few pockets (Sudhanarao, 2017).
4. **Kondh (Dongria Kondh or Jatapu Kondh):** Kondh tribes primarily inhabit the hill regions of the Eastern Ghats in Manyam Parvathi Puram. They are known for practicing *podu* agriculture. Their economy is largely subsistence-based, dependent on agriculture, forest products, and occasional wage labor.
5. **Gadaba:** Parvathi Puram and parts of Visakhapatnam are homes of Gadaba tribes. Traditionally, they have been into terraced paddy cultivation and collection of minor forest produce. They also practice animal husbandry.

Review of Literature

FPOs in tribal areas, like KASAM in Odisha, enhance farmers' income through better pricing, marketing infrastructure, and access to government schemes, despite facing communication and input supply challenges (Mahapatra et al., 2023). According to Mathuabirami and

Kalaivani (2021a), FPOs in tribal areas empower farmers by facilitating access to credit, quality inputs and market linkages, enhancing their economic status, and collective bargaining power. In addition, FPOs can empower small farmers by improving marketing systems and fostering self-reliance through organized group approaches like Farmer Interest Groups (Mathuabirami & Kalaivani, 2021b). As per Katiki (2022), FPOs increase their income and empower farmers through collective input pooling and diversified actions, significantly impacting the economic and social well-being of tribals. Padaliya et al. (2022) concludes that FPOs enhance livelihoods in tribal areas by improving income, employment, and access to resources, thereby addressing challenges faced by small and marginal farmers. Krishnan et al. (2021) found that each of the four FPOs underpinned by the new business model had adopted various innovative practices through collaboration with stakeholders that had economic, environmental, and social outcomes. Tribal farmers are taking a keen interest in millet crops as they have limited access to credit and technology. Amid these constraints and the lack of an irrigation system, they prefer traditional crops. Seeing their interest in millet cultivation, NABARD has formed several FPOs to encourage millet cultivation in the region. These FPOs are engaged in millet-based business activities such as input supply, procurement, providing custom hiring services, processing, and marketing of the millets, among others (Rao, 2023). Hema et al. (2025), in their work *Tribal Farmer Producer Organizations Constraints in Turmeric Value Addition*, outlined five different dimensions of constraints (i.e., personal, operational, infrastructural, economic, and marketing), for which FPOs are sought for. It also highlighted the social norms of members in joining FPOs, as well as the severe constraints, namely, land alienation, adoption of local varieties, less know-how on recommended practices, lack of drying yards, lack of package machinery, contract-based agreements, poor access to institutional credit, and side-selling of farmers (Hema et al., 2025).

Thereby, FPOs have been instrumental in the reduction of transaction costs and the number of intermediaries leading to the realization of a higher proportion of producer's share in various areas (Manaswi et al., 2020). Although there has been significant literature available about various other tribal groups and regions where FPOs have been in operation and able to transform lives, it is important to note that there has not been work focusing on the specified tribal groups that is the central to this

study. It is also appropriate to consider that every tribal community in India are distinct in their own perspective, and they have a specific culture and dynamic. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that while FPOs might have a good impact on one tribal community, it might have no impact on another.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the potential of FPOs as a catalyst for socioeconomic development of tribals.
2. To assess the level of the participation of members of the tribal farmer's FPOs in the routine and strategic activities.
3. To examine the collaborative effort between FPOs, government agencies, and NGOs.
4. To understand the role of FPOs in facilitating newer technology and climate-resilient agricultural practices.
5. To delve into the distinctive challenges faced by tribal farmers.

Methods and Materials

As the study aims to provide a holistic perspective of the methods, processes, and impact of FPOs among tribal communities, it adopts the mixed method approach. Integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches for the study helped in gaining the multidimensional perspectives of the impacts of FPOs in the lives of tribal communities.

Study Area

The study comprised the districts of Vizianagaram, Srikakulam, Alluri Sitharama Raju, and Parvathi Puram Manyam in the province of Andhra Pradesh. The data were collected from the 100 respondents who are members of the FPOs in the tribal inhabitants of selected districts. Table 2 provides the distribution of samples collected across the districts.

Table 2.*Distribution of Samples Collected Across the Districts*

Sr. No.	Districts	No. of FPOs
1	Vizianagaram	32
2	Srikakulam	4
3	Alluri Sitharama Raju	26
4	Parvathi Puram Manyam	32

Sampling Technique

The study adopted a multi-stage purposive sampling method to choose the appropriate areas of the study. In the first stage, four districts, namely Vizianagaram, Srikakulam, Alluri Sitharama Raju, and Parvathi Puram Manyam were purposively selected based on the concentration of Scheduled Tribe populations and the operational presence of active FPOs. In the second stage, the active FPOs were identified in all four districts: Vizianagaram (32), Srikakulam (4), Alluri Sitharama Raju (26), and Parvathi Puram Manyam (32). In the third stage, a sample of 100 FPO members from tribal communities was identified randomly and proportionately from each district.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data for the study were collected through a structured interview schedule, which included both qualitative and quantitative parameters with the FPO members. The parameters like socioeconomic profile of members of FPOs, access to credit, market linkage, capacity building, and technological upgradation formed part of the schedule.

The secondary data were collected appropriately from various government reports like NABARD and SFAC, and academic papers like journal articles.

Tools for Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations) through SPSS. On the other

hand, the qualitative data from structured interview schedules were analyzed thematically.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained during the study.

Results and Discussion

Data in Table 3 highlights that the majority of the respondents were women farmers who are also members of FPOs. The women farmers play a vital role in agriculture activities in the tribal areas. Majority of the respondents belongs to the mid-age group and the overall mean age is 41.4 years old.

Table 3.
Mean Age of Respondents (N=100)

	Responses	Mean Age (years)	Median (years)
Male	45	41.2	40
Female	55	41.5	40
Overall	100	41.4	40

Table 4.
Gender-wise educational status (N=100)

	Male		Female		Total	
	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
Illiterate	12	27%	36	65%	48	48%
Below 10th Class	17	38%	16	29%	33	33%
Above 10th Class	16	36%	3	5%	19	19%
Total	45	100%	55	100%	100	100%

As shown in Table 4, the education levels of the respondents are skewed. Nearly half of the respondents (48%) were illiterate and majority of them are women (65%) as compared to men (36%). Literacy rates among tribes were also generally low. Overall literacy rate among the respondents was less in comparison to other areas and to the state average.

Table 5.
Landholding Size in Guntas (N=100)

	Responses in Guntas	Responses in Acres
Minimum	3	0.1
Maximum	440	11
Average	118	3.0

Land Size Holding	Responses	%
Less than 1 acre	14	14%
1 acre to 2 acres	33	33%
2 acres to 3 acres	14	14%
3 acres to 5 acres	28	28%
5 acres and above	11	11%

Table 5 depicts that the landholding size among almost half of the respondents (47%) is only up to two acres. It is interesting to note that only 28% of respondents have landholdings up to three to five acres. Tribal areas often have unique landholding patterns and shapes because of their cultivation practices, cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts. Often, tribals have been practicing *podu* cultivation and very few of them prefer settled agriculture. Only 11% of the respondents have more than five acres of land. Land size in the tribal areas bears less significance in terms of productivity as these are uneven and hilly terrain lands, making it more difficult to cultivate.

Governance and Organizational Activities of FPOs

Table 6.
Awareness About General Body Meeting and Participation

	Male (N=45)		Female (N=55)	
	Yes	%	Yes	%
Awareness of FPO Board Meeting	41	100%	46	85%
Participated in Board Meeting	38	93%	45	83%

Table 7.

Space to Speak, Decision-Making and Involvement of Day-to-Day FPO Operations

Questions	Male (N=45)		Female (N=55)		Total (N=100)	
	Yes	%	Yes	%	Yes	%
Do you get enough space to speak and propose your ideas in a general body meeting?	37	82%	45	82%	82	82%
Do you participate in the business planning and crucial decision-making of the FPO?	32	71%	44	80%	76	76%
Are members involved in day-to-day operations of FPO?	28	62%	37	67%	65	65%

In terms of awareness about general body meetings and participation in board meetings, men were more aware (100%) and participative (93%) compared to women with 85% and 83%, respectively (Table 6). However, it is surprising to note that women are significantly participative in general body meetings, business planning, and day-to-day operations of FPOs compared to men (Table 7).

In terms of participation, tribal women were significantly more participative than tribal men. Both male and female have equal space to speak in general body meetings of FPOs, and Table 7 showed that women were more active when it comes to the FPOs' business planning, decision-making, and day-to-day operations. Results also showed that tribal women contribute more to agriculture than men.

Table 8.

Various Agricultural Support Services Provided by FPOs (N=100)

Services	Responses	%
Procurement of Produce	98	98%
Procurement of Seeds	94	94%
Weed Management	94	94%
Inter-cultivation	92	92%
Field Demonstration	91	91%
Seed Treatment	91	91%
Grading	91	91%
Field Inspection	89	89%

Services	Responses	%
Extension Meeting	88	88%
Climate Change Adaptation	86	86%
Climate Change Mitigation	85	85%
Ploughing	79	79%
Time of Sowing	79	79%
Spacing	78	78%
Bio-Fertilizer	75	75%
Bio-Fertilizer 2	72	72%
Soil Testing	68	68%
New technology on irrigation and optimum use of fertiliser	61	61%

Individual farmers became members of the FPO because they expected something in return. FPOs were able to extend various services that make life easier for the tribal farmers. In total, 98% of the respondents accessed services related to procurement of agricultural produce and 94% of them received input seeds by FPOs and other agencies (Table 8). When it comes to the use of newer technologies, only 61% of the respondents found FPOs useful. Another 68% responded that soil testing was facilitated by FPOs.

Table 9.
Access to Credit

	Frequency	%
Bank	5	5%
Cooperative Bank	2	2%
From FPO	35	35%
Local Money Lender	5	5%
Self	53	53%
Total	100	100%

It is understood that FPOs play a significant role in providing finance and market access to farmers. However, it is surprising to note that the majority (53%) of the farmers manage their finances on their own (Table 9). Only 35% of the respondents receive finance-related support from FPOs. Another important fact is that only 7% of them opt for institutional borrowings, and as many as 5% of the respondents manage their finances from local money lenders with higher interest rates despite being a member

of FPOs, making them vulnerable.

Table 10.

Procurement and Marketing of Agriculture Produce (N=100)

Options	Responses	%
Yes	94	94%
No	6	6%

Providing market access to tribals and ensuring reasonable prices for their produce are critical aspects for which FPOs are known for. As shown in Table 10, the study found that 94% of the respondents avail market support in getting reasonable prices for their produce. It was also observed that during post-harvest, there is a drastic fall in the prices of agricultural products due to the abundance of produce. The FPOs play a crucial role in arresting the fall of prices and maintaining the market price. After every crop, the broker tries to create an environment so that farmers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds sell their products for lower than the market price. Hence, FPOs play a significant role in rescuing the farmers and helping them get the appropriate prices for their produce.

Table 11.

Payment of Produce in No. of Days (N=94)

Options	Responses	%
Same day	32	34%
Weekdays	43	46%
15 days	17	18%
One month	1	1%
More than one month	1	1%

For farmers coming from a lower socioeconomic background, it is very crucial that they receive payment on time because many of them mainly depend on agricultural work. If they don't get paid on time, the burden of the capital investment increases. Therefore, the role of FPOs is crucial when it comes to facilitating payments for produce on time. Table 11 shows that 34% of the members of FPOs get paid for their produce on the same day, whereas 46% of them were paid in a week's time.

Challenges Faced by Tribal Farmers

1. **Lack of storage and cold chain infrastructure:** Highly perishable goods, such as pineapple, jackfruit, and custard apples may be damaged if they do not reach markets on time. Improper storage causes non-perishable goods like cashew, ginger, turmeric, and tamarind lose their quality, which lowers their market value.
2. **Limited knowledge on value addition:** Products like ginger, turmeric, millets, and tamarind can fetch significantly higher prices if they undergo basic value addition. However, due to the lack of processing knowledge and skills, most tribal farmers sell raw products, through which they are not realizing their proper prices.
3. **Transportation issues and poor market connectivity:** Tribal farmers stay in remote locations that have poor infrastructure and transportation. Therefore, FPOs become very significant for them in creating market linkages. In this situation, they are compelled to depend on intermediaries who take advantage of their limited access to the market.
4. **Lack of processing machinery and skills:** Many of the unique crops grown by tribal farmers (e.g., bamboo products, turmeric, and ginger) require basic or semi-advanced processing to meet market demands. Due to the lack of machinery and technical know-how, these products don't often meet the standards required for larger markets and consequently compelling them to sell at lower prices.
5. **Lack of working capital and access to credit:** Due to a lack of working capital and restricted access to credit, tribal farmers often sell their produce immediately after harvest, and they receive very low prices for their unique products. If they wait for favorable market conditions, they may get higher prices and can earn good profit.

Table 12.
Challenges in Agriculture Faced by FPO Members

	Frequency	%
Lack of produce certification	8	8%
Lack of storage facilities	12	12%
Lack of updates on market prices	7	7%
Low price for produce	19	19%
Market linkages	24	24%
Unstable market linkages	3	3%
Produce quality	10	10%
Transportation	9	9%
No response	6	6%
Others	2	2%
Total	100	100%

Despite the robust support provided by the FPOs, it was found that there are still challenges that the FPOs need to resolve. For instance, although the products of the tribal groups are unique and fully organic, the FPOs could still not mark the prices appropriately as there was no certification for their produce. In addition, due to the lack of proper inventory management and timely transportation, the quality of produce lowers day-by-day. By the time the products reach the markets, the quality was already compromised, and it consequently leads to lower prices. On the other hand, it was highlighted in Table 12 that 24% of the respondents perceive that the FPOs were unable to facilitate appropriate market linkages for them.

Conclusion

As tribal communities are still in the early phase of human development, they need more support when it comes to earning and sustaining a livelihood through agriculture. However, the challenges they face, ranging from low market access, inadequate storage, to poor value addition, can be effectively addressed through FPOs. Not only will FPOs enable the tribal farmers to earn higher incomes by directly accessing better markets and adding value to their unique produce, they will also improve the health and nutrition of these communities by encouraging the consumption of their own nutritious crops. Through FPOs, tribal

farmers can achieve economic empowerment, improved health outcomes, and sustainable development, creating a more prosperous future for their communities.

Agriculture is the backbone of the tribal communities in Andhra Pradesh. Due to the lack of access to education, they were not able to avail government services as bona fide beneficiaries, especially for services meant for them. On top of that, they also do not have a government-issued land title for their properties. Additionally, they opt for noninstitutional lending as well, making them more vulnerable as interest rates are high. In these scenarios, the role of FPOs becomes very significant for tribal communities.

Recommendations

Though there is partial support that the FPOs extend to tribal communities, the study suggests that the culture and traditions of the tribal communities are unique and still rooted to local values. Therefore, FPOs need to customize their approach when it comes to extending support, especially to tribal communities. Whatever is working for non-tribal communities will not necessarily work for tribals given their distinct contexts and requirements. The findings suggest that there is a very low institutional credit facility even after FPOs work for the tribal community. Therefore, policymakers must pay attention to this issue to alleviate the overall productivity, and to avoid the exorbitant interest rates by the local money lenders. It is interesting to note that the overall participation of the members of FPOs were satisfactory, but their participation in the overall management of FPOs and crucial decision-making were low, as members are illiterate or semi-literate. Therefore, it is essential to conduct capacity building activities to FPO members. As NGOs who facilitate the FPOs are experts in helping and aiding marginalized communities, they must find suitable ways to support the tribal farmers through FPOs as it will help in creating an inclusive and participatory governance of FPOs.

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Digitalization, COVID-19, and the Future of Women Workers in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Even before the pandemic, digitalization had been rapidly changing life for all workers, women and men, inside and outside the workplace. Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, it has presented opportunities and threats, tending to reproduce inequalities based on gender, class, caste, ethnicity, nationality, and other differentiating factors. Using desk review, key informant interviews, and participant observation, the study looks in general at the experiences of female workers in the Philippines during the pandemic but focuses in particular at their COVID-related adaptations at the formal, informal, and gig economies. Examining the responses of organized women workers to the impact of digitalization during the pandemic reveals their exercise of agency and collective action. Adapting the future of workers approach—which reframes the discourse away from technology and brings it back to people and their perspectives on the changes in work—and a gender perspective, the research argues that harnessing the benefits of digitalization for the future of women workers in the Philippines depends on effective regulation and positive action. The paper makes recommendations to create an enabling policy environment for all citizens, especially women workers, in the digital world and to fulfill human rights towards realizing digital, gender, social, and economic justice.

Keywords: future of work, digitalization, COVID-19 pandemic, women workers, Philippines

Introduction

Even before the pandemic, digitalization had been rapidly changing life for all workers—women and men, inside and outside the workplace (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018; Picot & Spath, 2020). Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, it has presented opportunities and threats, with the latter tending to reproduce inequalities based on gender, class, caste, ethnicity, nationality, and other differentiating factors (UN Women & Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2022).

This paper contributes to a robust literature on the responses of organized women to the gendered impact of digitalization during the pandemic. While the literature is substantial on the regional scales, little has been written on the Philippine case and thus the study focuses on this experience. The research remains exploratory as data gathering during the pandemic presented limitations, but the findings nonetheless can serve as take-off points for further study.

Using desk review, key informant interviews, and participant observation, the study looks in general at the experiences of female workers in the Philippines during the pandemic but focuses in particular at their COVID-related adaptations at the formal, informal, and gig economies. Examining the responses of organized women workers to the impact of digitalization during the pandemic reveals their exercise of agency and collective action. Adapting the future of workers approach—which reframes the discourse away from technology and brings it back to people and their perspectives on the changes in work—the research argues that harnessing the benefits of digitalization for the future of women workers in the Philippines depends on effective regulation and positive action, such as government subsidies and support by the private sector and civil society.

The next section reviews the related literature and reveals the gap in assessing the Philippine case. The succeeding section explains the theoretical framework of the study and describes the methodology. The main section discusses the findings and analysis by exploring the experiences of organized women workers during the pandemic in relation to digitalization. The paper's conclusion summarizes the findings and provides a tentative set of recommendations.

Review of Related Literature

Well before the onset of the pandemic, a digital gender divide limited the possibilities for women to benefit from digitalization. Indicators such as access to a phone, a computer, and the internet reveal gendered disadvantages (Picot & Spath, 2020).

While digitalization opens up opportunities for women, the existing gender division of labor still presented limitations. Thus, in India, the advent of online payments is a boon to small enterprises, many of which are owned and operated by women, and who may have been unbanked and unable to benefit from modern finance (Picot & Spath, 2020). Yet, due to the wide digital gender divide in the country—with only 15% of women being internet-enabled and only 25% owning a smartphone compared to 41% of men (GSMA Intelligence, 2021)—male entrepreneurs instead of females may gain more from digitalization. Some 30% of micro and small businesses are owned by women in Asia (ILO, 2018). But only 17% of females had internet access across South Asia (ILO, 2018). These bare both the possibilities and limits of digitalization for improving women's outcomes.

The rise of the platform economy may be an advantage to women as it affords them livelihood and income generating engagements even though they are mainly at home fulfilling family and community responsibilities (Partenio, 2020). Yet, the technical skills required of platform work presents a barrier to many women (Picot & Spath, 2020). Thus, on the one hand, the number of women engaged as drivers in Grab, a popular Southeast Asian ride-hailing app, rose by 230% in 2017 year-on-year (Grab, 2018). But on the other hand, the freelancer status of employment might mean the maintenance of gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Further, vulnerable work conditions persist in app work without lightening the double burden of women (ILO, 2018; Picot & Spath, 2020).

Jobs that are lower on the pay and skill scale are most at risk of being lost due to the fourth industrial revolution (ILO, 2018). Unfortunately, these are also the occupations and industries, such as retail and manufacturing, and administrative and clerical work, that are disproportionately feminized (Picot & Spath, 2020; Wesley & Midgley, 2019).

In India, Thailand, and the Philippines, there is an above average number of female researchers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020). However, women are underrepresented in the upper levels of management in STEM disciplines everywhere (Thornton, 2019). Thus, it is imperative to promote and incentivize girls and women to enter STEM for them to take up emerging jobs in technology and gain the dividends from automation and digitalization (ILO, 2018).

The pandemic and its attendant lockdowns have affected sectors in the Philippines that are tightly integrated in the global economy, such as business process outsourcing and export processing zones, where women workers are predominant. There has been a sharp rise in unemployment and underemployment and an ominous decrease in the labor force participation rate (de Vera, 2020), especially for women (Cabegin, 2020). There also has been a large shift from formal to informal work (ILO, 2020a, 2020c; International Trade Union Confederation [ITUC], 2021). Informal workers have fared much worse than formal sector employees who have been partly shielded by social protection safety nets (ILO, 2020b). With women accounting for the majority of informal workers, they have been rendered worse off than men by the pandemic's impacts (Velasco, 2022). Online work, such as online selling and platform work, has prospered and became the recourse for many laid-off workers (LinkedIn, 2020).

Because of the pre-existing digital gender gap, the acceleration of digitalization due to the pandemic has worsened outcomes for women (Jiexi, 2021; Nortajuddin, 2020; Rahmadani et al., 2021; Sey, 2021). Restrictions on mobility in the first two years of the pandemic made it difficult for women workers in the informal economy to collect emergency cash assistance. Many of them do not have digital bank accounts and lack access to mobile money transfer services (Ratan et al., 2021; WIEGO, 2020).

The increasing prevalence of work-from-home arrangements may have allowed more women to enter the labor market. Likewise, jobs in online platforms in such lines as transcription or tutoring may have favored women. E-commerce also allows unemployed or underemployed women to acquire gainful employment (ADB, 2021). On the other hand,

working from home blurs the boundaries between work to earn an income and domestic work and so, in most cases, it aggravates the burden of unpaid care work of women. Confinement in the home, coupled with misogyny in cyberspace, have rendered many women and girls vulnerable to gender-based violence (Fitzgerald, 2021; Julliand et al., 2021).

Although the pandemic has spurred positive impacts for women in the digitalization rush (Human Resources Online, 2021), the general trend is that the COVID-19 crisis has widened the gender gap at global, regional, and national levels (Dalal & Mathews, 2021; WEF, 2021). Whether the positive or negative effects will continue to predominate will depend on effective regulation and positive action, ranging from digital skills trainings at the micro level to digital access and rights at the macro scale (Colclough, 2021; ILO, 2018; Picot & Spath, 2020; Zuboff, 2019).

A search on EBSCO using the setting “all time” and the keywords with Boolean operators “Philippines AND (woman or female or women or females) AND (pandemic or epidemic or outbreak or COVID-19 or coronavirus) AND (digitalisation or digitalization or digitization or digitisation or digital transformation)” yielded only three references with none relevant to the study. While not exhaustive, the result suggests that the Philippine case is understudied. Thus, the current research fills in the gap.

The literature review bared that digitalization has impacts on the formal, informal, and platform economies and so it is important to look at these three sectors. The study sought to answer this key question: What do the COVID-related adaptations of women workers in the formal, informal, and platform economies reveal about the contradictory impact of digitalization and the enabling role of regulation?

To supplement the main research question, the study has the following specific objectives:

1. Examine how women’s agency and the collective actions of women’s and workers’ organizations have favorably influenced the way digitalization affects women’s participation in the labor market.

2. Describe good practices implemented by trade unions, informal workers' associations, and women's rights organizations to narrow the digital gender divide and enable women to harness the benefits of digitalization.
3. Draw policy recommendations that can realistically respond to the challenges posed by digitalization to the attainment of women workers' rights.

Framework and Methodology of the Study

Understanding the connection between digitalization, COVID-19, and gender inequality is sharpened by key analytical ideas from the future of workers approach and a gender perspective. Deploying these analytical concepts aids in unpacking the digital gender gap and enlarges the context for understanding the impact of the pandemic on women workers in the formal, informal, and platform economies.

The future of workers approach (Gupta et al., 2018; Schulze-Cleven, 2021), reframes the discourse away from technology and brings it back to people, particularly workers, and their views on changes in the world of work. It provides an important perspective in analyzing the impact of digitalization during the pandemic on the labor market prospects of women workers in the formal and informal economies. The approach emphasizes human agency amidst digitalization and emphasizes the crucial social issues of inequality, exclusion, informalization, and insecurity that cannot be resolved by technological change alone.

The popular narrative on the future of work tends to slide to technological determinism. The pessimistic interpretation predicts the disruption of workplaces and the abolition of work due to accelerated automation and robotization, especially with the advent of artificial intelligence and machine learning. The optimistic view asserts that the most pressing social issues, such as climate change, can be solved by technological fixes (WEF, 2016). The future of work discourse, however, narrows the scope too much to the role of technological disruption to the neglect of human agency.

For Schulze-Cleven (2021, p. 25), the future of workers approach

“advocates for revaluing workers, exploring possibilities through collective agency and appreciating reproductive work as a crucible of innovation.” Changes brought about by technology on the lives of working people are indeed important but no more than other crucial trends in society. A perspective focusing on the future of workers necessarily looks at the possibilities of workers exercising collective agency to change the balance of power.

Moreover, Schulze-Cleven (2021) insisted on highlighting the role of paid and unpaid domestic care and community work as essential to any interrogation of the reality of work at present. Transforming the gender division of labor inside and outside the home is a necessity to enable women and men to share household and care responsibilities and enjoy the benefits of gainful employment in an equitable manner.

Employing a gender perspective necessarily involves using key analytical concepts, such as the gender division of labor and occupational segregation. A closely related concept is intersectionality, or how gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, location, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and other differentiating factors impinge on women’s perceptions and realities of digitalization during the pandemic (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2020). As Bachelet (2021, para. 5) succinctly described when analysing the global reality of digital exclusion:

The offline population is disproportionately poor, rural, older and female. Women and girls form the majority of the estimated 3.7 billion unconnected people in the world. Those who are subjected to intersecting and multiple forms of discrimination are even less likely to be online.

A gender perspective reveals the male domination in the ownership, control, and management of digital technologies. The STEM disciplines, which are the source of digital expertise and innovation, are predominantly male fields of knowledge and practice with only 36% of STEM graduates being women and out of which a bit less than half are actually employed in STEM fields (Mondares, 2025). Algorithms used in artificial intelligence have been found to be gender-biased.

Work from home and repeated lockdowns have intensified the

multiple burdens on women and appear to have further entrenched the gender division of labor (UN Women, 2020). Work from home provides some flexibility on the part of wives and mothers to juggle their time between their paid work and their unpaid care work. Still, online work from home often is just an updated version of the traditional, insecure, and unprotected forms of home-based, often subcontracted work that grassroots women continue to undertake because it is compatible with household work.

Despite the daunting and immense challenges posed by digital exclusion amid the pandemic, many women have responded to these challenges with creativity, resilience, and solidarity. Empowerment anchored on women's agency and participation in various forms of workers' and gender-based organizations, often working in tandem with other stakeholders, remains a beacon of light in these challenging times. As these organizations weave together the strands of digital, gender, social, and economic justice (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2020), it becomes even clearer that human rights and freedoms comprise the foundation of women's entitlements and the types of work they want to pursue in the digital future.

The future of workers approach and a gender perspective guided the study in critically understanding the possibilities of digital technology to both improve and worsen the lives of women in their various roles in the household, community, workplace, and society.

The study employed a qualitative method through semi-structured key informant interviews of mostly female but also a few male leaders of Homenet Southeast Asia, Homenet Philippines, PATAMABA, Rosario Workers Association (RWA), United Cavite Workers Association (UCWA), Partido Manggagawa, Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa (SENTRO), and Kapatiran sa Dalawang Gulong (KAGULONG). They shared their experiences, advocacy campaigns, and good practices as well as proposed policy recommendations. Respondents gave their consent to reveal their names but their members' identities—who were mentioned in their stories—were anonymized. The interviews were conducted through Zoom and phone as the study was conducted in 2021 during the pandemic. Participant observation was also used as the authors were, separately, members of

Homenet and Partido Manggagawa. The authors' own insights informed the questions for the semi-structured interviews and were used to validate data gathered from respondents.

Findings and Analysis: Response of Organized Women in Informal, Formal, and Platform Economies

Home-Based Women Workers Confront the Crisis

As soon as the pandemic struck and lockdowns were imposed, there was no alternative but to explore existing means of communication, such as mobile phones and internet services, to provide home-based workers organized by PATAMABA and Homenet Philippines with updated news, knowledge, awareness, and motivation to engage in collective responses. Soon, meetings, webinars, and assemblies mediated by Zoom became the principal mode for re-establishing social connections beyond the household and for continuing work that was rudely but unsuccessfully interrupted by the pandemic.

Ana (not her real name) is an active member of a PATAMABA chapter in Sta. Cruz, Laguna. She is an informal worker, a self-employed entrepreneur who sews and sells rags for household use. When the pandemic struck, Ana and her fellow PATAMABA temporarily lost their livelihoods due to the COVID-19 lockdowns. The stores from where they bought cloth and other sewing materials shuttered. Public transport was prohibited and so they could not market their products. Other members of the same chapter who were home-based workers and engaged in manufacturing of rice cakes and other foodstuffs were similarly affected.

However, their chapter was a recipient of PATAMABA training sessions on business development and building a savings and loan association before the pandemic. Thus, they had the skills, knowledge, and attitude on how to navigate the transition to online selling. With moral and material support from Homenet Philippines, Ana and her colleagues were able to shift to sourcing materials and sewing face masks using the internet. Still, this was not without challenges. "Signal was sometimes weak and so internet connection was spotty. Worse, we were forced to walk at times to consummate transactions as the limited transport options were very expensive," Ana related.

Nonetheless, their sense of organization, the skills trainings they acquired, and experience as a cohesive group facilitated their adaptations. They pooled part of the emergency COVID-19 cash assistance that they received so their chapter could set up a mini-wet market in the vicinity of their houses as the lockdown eased. This hybrid livelihood—engaging in online and traditional vending—augmented their incomes amidst the difficulties of the pandemic.

Josephine Parilla of Homenet Philippines explained that the experience of Ana and her fellow home-based workers was replicated in many instances across other PATAMABA chapters across the country. Online selling became the usual recourse of most members. Homenet Philippines provided concrete solidarity, ensured lessons learned were disseminated, and advocated on a societal level.

There are similar examples of capacity-building, organization-strengthening, and networking through digital means from other country Homenets (Homenet organizations). In the Philippines, home-based work leaders of Homenet Philippines and PATAMABA used digital technology to do participatory action research on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in four localities. They conducted and attended online training and webinars on social protection advocacy, youth entrepreneurship, e-marketing, and other topics in cooperation with regional and international organizations, such as Homenet Southeast Asia, Asian Solidarity Economy Council, Asia Monitor Resource Centre, and Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). Due to COVID-19-imposed restrictions on face-to-face organizational meetings and assemblies, Homenet Philippines conducted its fourth congress and elected a new set of officers via Zoom.

All the country Homenets belonging to subregional networks, like Homenet Southeast Asia and Homenet South Asia, look for inspiration to the “mother” of all Homenets—the more than 1.9 million-strong Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) based in Ahmedabad, India, and in existence since the 1970s. SEWA has been “handholding” or providing steady and consistent support to its members to clamber up digital platforms knowing that these are new and strange vantage points for the empowerment of grassroots women. Through such careful and patient

capacity-building, its members are slowly able to stay connected, access important information, develop and expand markets for their products and services, and engage in business-to-customer transactions. Beyond handholding, SEWA, which runs its own bank, is engaged in large-scale financial inclusion initiatives by building and expanding networks of grassroots banking correspondents called *saathis*, lately with support from the State Bank of India (Ratan et al., 2021).

SEWA led efforts for the establishment of Homenet International, built from existing subregional and regional home-based workers' networks in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It was supposed to be launched in Nepal in early 2020, but due to COVID-19, it was launched virtually via Zoom in February 2021. Homenet International now regularly organizes global Zoom-based celebrations and webinars with multiple-language translation channels for consolidating, capacitating, and inspiring home-based workers all over the world. This example illustrates how the use of digital technology can be maximized for the empowerment of grassroots women.

Displaced garment workers, mainly women, in the Philippines became home-based workers engaged in value chains for local apparel manufacturers. Situated at the lowest end of the garment supply chain, these workers are paid at piece rates, without benefits and lack social security. This situation was forced on them since they could not find work in the export processing zone due to being blacklisted as unionists. Nonetheless, they found a certain autonomy because they can work at their own pace and without a boss. They own, individually or collectively, high-speed sewing machines due to investments using the separation pay they received when they were terminated as export processing zone workers.

A group of them is composed of former union members who had been fired by their Korean employers in order to bust their fledging organizations. Their unions are affiliated to RWA, a legitimate labor organization that is registered with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and whose mission is to organize workers in the Cavite Economic Zone, the biggest government-operated export processing zone in the Philippines.

When the pandemic struck, many value chains were disrupted, and thus many of these Cavite home-based workers faced loss of their livelihood. To adapt, they made ready-to-wear clothes and washable face masks but started selling them online using social media platforms like Facebook. Unlike Homenet, this was without any institutional support. Thus, they had difficult barriers to surmount—mainly lack of training in forming a small business as well as in online marketing, and most importantly in generating capital—because the shift was made as an individual or small group effort. RWA had neither the material resources nor the expertise in digital skills to support the home-based workers. Thus, the groups of home-based workers have remained dispersed and without coordination despite doing the same kind of work and facing the same predicament.

The group Partido Manggagawa discussed with the workers the option of pooling part of their cash assistance so they can form an informal cooperative for a livelihood project. Partido Manggagawa sought the support of other groups so that training in digital skills can be provided to the workers, as well as additional capital. RWA's Jessel Autida said that this is in response to the lessons from the experience of the home-based workers who faced challenges in transitioning to online selling without any institutional backing.

The future of workers approach shines a light on the contradictory experiences of home-based workers of PATAMABA and RWA. On the one hand, the vulnerabilities they suffer due to the informality of their livelihood was exacerbated by the pandemic. On the other hand, the exercise of agency by organized women to respond to the extreme challenges they faced amidst COVID-19. The future of workers lens provides a more granular understanding of the lived experiences of informal women workers. Reframing away from the mainstream future of work narrative rebalances a one-sided view that either treats digitalization as a blessing or a curse. In reality, as the stories of home-based workers reveal, technological change amidst a pandemic brings challenges that can be overcome through collective action and adaptation. Still, as Ana's story shows, collective strength cannot completely overcome structural barriers like poor mobile phone signal for rural areas.

Nonetheless, the contrasting experiences of the members of

PATAMABA and the RWA reveal the material difference that a more cohesive organization provides. PATAMABA was better prepared to face the disruptions brought by the pandemic unlike RWA. A more robust institutional scaffolding afforded PATAMABA and Homenet Philippines members better outcomes. Though delayed, RWA was basically traversing the same path as PATAMABA with their plan to pool their members' small surplus for a cooperative livelihood project.

Unionized Women Cope With the Pandemic's Impact

Workers of several garment factories in the Cavite export processing zone sought the assistance of RWA for their labor cases after suffering from pandemic-related closures. Likewise, workers at an apparel firm in Bulacan and a glass firm in Laguna approached Partido Manggagawa, according to Judy Miranda, Secretary General of the group. With guidance from organized groups, workers called the attention of DOLE, which called for mediation meetings, but employers invariably did not even bother to attend. Subsequently, complaints regarding illegal dismissal, non-payment of wages, and separation pay were lodged with the labor court.

While the cases were being heard, UCWA and Partido Manggagawa empowered the workers through labor education and union formation. The workers participated in a rights advocacy project with the Danish Trade Union Development Agency on promotion of decent work and freedom of association. The increased awareness among the workers of their labor and human rights led to their active participation in several labor activities. Levy Equipado of UCWA stated that among these activities was a protest at the DOLE national office just before International Women's Day in 2021. The women's rally was timed for a dialogue with labor officials. Although without any previous experience in social dialogue, the women garment workers tabled their demands and negotiated with DOLE officers. The labor officials promised to look into their cases and offered to provide immediate assistance through the government's cash-for-work program.

Judy Miranda described how unions in the Philippines, as elsewhere, adapted to the extended and strict lockdowns by shifting their work and activities online. The labor coalition Nagkaisa conducted an online rally

on Labor Day in 2020 that gathered several thousand participants over Zoom and Facebook Live. Labor education as well as organizational meetings went virtual. The shift faced difficulties at the start because many workers, especially members belonging to the informal economy, were not familiar with Zoom or had no access to Zoom-enabled gadgets. But as the pandemic progressed and the lockdowns extended, a combination of training and practice proved useful in getting more members onto Zoom for meetings, webinars, and online events.

Aside from digital skills, access was also a major concern. Most trade union members from both the formal and informal economies do not have internet connections at home due to their prohibitive costs. Purchasing a mobile data package is expensive for many people. Thus, trade unions have provided communication allowances to some members, especially to women in the informal economy, who could not otherwise afford to participate in online meetings. As a result, attendance in labor meetings and webinars became more consistent. Local unions also did the same thing to incentivize membership participation.

Judy Miranda explained that Partido Manggagawa, which is a member of the Nagkaisa labor coalition, took it a step further by convening small groups of informal workers and union members in backyard open-air settings as hubs. In these hubs, small groups were able to participate in online events using just one smartphone connected to a mobile data package.

Partido Manggagawa also launched a weekly podcast during the pandemic with women workers as the main target audience. The podcast started in 2021 and discussed topics as varied as expanded maternity leave, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and COVID-19-related labor issuances. The podcast is shared on social media and is boosted on Facebook to reach a wider audience.

Similarly, SENTRO, another constituent organization of Nagkaisa, has been hosting a twice-a-week radio show for workers, according to CJ Castillo, a member of the union. Started in 2016, the radio program continues to this day. To adapt to the lockdown and social distancing protocols, hosts pre-recorded the show and then sent the episode to the radio station for airing. The recording is also shared on social media to

reach more members and the public too.

The stories of the respondents who were export zone workers, mostly engaged in apparel manufacturing, suggest an experience that is different from the findings of studies that predict significant job losses as a result of technological innovations. Gurumurthy and Chami (2019) cite that 57% of jobs to be lost by women will be a result of automation in labor intensive manufacturing in garments, footwear, electronics, and auto industries. Similarly, ILO (2018) predicted mechanization will displace low-skilled work in manufacturing. The Philippine case does not appear to be an outlier as other studies of mass terminations during the pandemic point to economic losses, if not union busting as causes (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2020, 2021; Kyritsis et al., 2020). One way to understand this is that “job automation takes place only where it is both technically and economically feasible” (African Development Bank [AfDB] et al., 2018, p. 49). Thus, paradoxically, the low technology character of garment manufacturing in the Philippines made it resilient to digital job displacement. This aligns with the future of workers approach which rejects the monocausal view of digitalization but opens to a multivariate causality—that workers’ woes owe more to employer exploitation, state abuse, and other sociopolitical factors.

Similar to home-based women workers, unionized women in export zones also exercised agency by forming unions, for some of them; and for all of them, by launching protests and lobbying authorities for the redress of their grievances.

While home-based workers shifted to online selling, unionized workers navigated a steep learning curve to online modalities of education and advocacy. Further, the digital divide created extra challenges as women workers had to be supported by subsidies for mobile load and internet access, or by the formation of hubs to compensate for members who lack smartphones.

Outbreak of Protests and Organizing by Platform Workers

Straddling the twilight zone between the formal and the informal economies, the gig economy was both disrupted and enabled by the COVID-19 crisis. Constructed on the ramparts of digital technology,

firms and workers engaged in the platform economy arguably had better chances of navigating the labor market troubles created by the pandemic. An estimated 1.3 million to 1.5 million Filipinos, many of them women, engaged in the gig economy and online freelancing prior to the pandemic, in such jobs as web designing, multimedia content and editing, advertising, accounting, IT networking, engineering, architecture, data science and analytics, film, animation, and game development (Ofreneo, 2019). These jobs were reported as least affected by the pandemic (Piadano & Lirio, 2021).

The pandemic generated an outbreak in grievances and even protests among platform workers, specifically food-delivery riders. Among app workers, food-delivery riders have been the most militant in terms of engaging in organizing into associations or unions and mobilizing actions and protests (Trappmann et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, several high-profile protests broke out among workers in different food delivery and courier apps, who had a visible role as essential workers during the pandemic. In November 2020, some 700 riders of the food delivery app Foodpanda held a protest in the form of a unity ride that ended at the national office of DOLE. The riders were protesting the reduction in pay and new rules that endanger their safety (Partido Manggagawa, 2020). About one in 10 of the participants in the protest were women, according to Don Pangan, KAGULONG leader. Then in 2021, a group of 300 Foodpanda riders from Davao City organized another mass action to protest low pay. However, before the group could stage its offline action, Foodpanda jumped the gun and suspended them for 10 years (Mendoza, 2021). Similarly, riders in the courier app Lalamove also organized a protest by going around Manila to highlight their demand for higher pay and for scrapping the delivery bag rental fee. The protesting riders were also terminated by the app company (Sandoval, 2021). All these labor disputes led the Philippine government to issue an “advisory” on July 2021 that sought to clarify the applicability of labor regulations to app riders and their employment status (DOLE, 2021). But since the advisory merely reiterated the vagaries of existing government rules and app practice, it really did not resolve anything.

Workers in ride-hailing, courier, and food delivery service are predominantly men, and women are an exception. The few female riders

face discrimination from fellow riders, app users, and the platforms, which are definitely not equal opportunity employers. Patriarchal traditions and beliefs continue to be barriers to female jobs in transport (Sil et al., 2023). Maui de Jesus, coordinator for KAGULONG's women's collective stated that women riders face sexist remarks on the job that belittle their abilities. Among these are snide remarks like, "Are you capable of such a job?", "How many hours can [you] manage working as a rider?" or "You are too pretty to be a rider." De Jesus also recalled that female riders also had to navigate gender stereotyping and being labelled lesbians. In one egregious incident during the pandemic, female rider and KAGULONG member Bea (not her real name) was confronted at a checkpoint near the boundary of Marikina and San Mateo after delivering a package and was asked by a male police officer to remove her helmet and reveal her long hair to prove that she was a woman rider. She refused since the helmet also doubled as a protection against COVID-19.

The motorcycle riders' rights group KAGULONG was founded in 2020 in response to the discriminatory COVID-19 protocols issued by the government. KAGULONG's initial demand was the repeal of a policy banning riding in tandem, which is commonly a male driver and the female partner in the pillion seat. Riding in pillion was the recourse of many couples when public transportation was banned but women workers needed to go to work. In the course of the pandemic, KAGULONG initiated the formation of a women's committee and all-female riders' clubs. It also engaged in advocacy around violence against women and children along with awareness-raising about human rights among riders.

The gender dimensions of work in the platform economy come out clearly in the Philippine case. Correlating with the literature, jobs in digitally-enabled platforms opened labor market opportunities for women. Yet, its precarious nature and decent work deficits led to a rise of riders protests during the pandemic. The minority of female riders faced sexual harassment and gender stereotyping, a problem not confronted by male counterparts.

Platform workers exercised agency by forming associations, launching protests, and lobbying for reforms, such as better pay. The formation of KAGULONG was one response of aggrieved riders. It is noteworthy that KAGULONG's birth was occasioned by the demand for the lifting of

the ban on pillion riding, a reform that had a distinct gender dimension during the pandemic period. Since then, KAGULONG continued to integrate women's concerns and advocacy despite male dominance within the riding community. Still, it remains to be seen whether KAGULONG's push for female involvement and leadership are scalable and replicable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study contest the mainstream future of work account that the changes wrought by the fourth industrial revolution will usher in a brave new world for workers, in its optimistic sense, or tip the world to a dystopian future, in its pessimistic version. Instead, the Philippine case shows that digitalization can be a force for good, only if purposive regulation and action are undertaken to mitigate the risks, including surmounting gendered barriers. Across the different sectors within the informal, formal, and gig economies, women workers in the Philippines have faced difficult challenges in navigating the disruptions brought about by digitalization and the pandemic. In certain circumstances and for a select number of women, digitalization and even the pandemic may have opened up livelihood possibilities and improvements in working conditions. But the gender division of labor remains well-entrenched inside and outside the home, creating hindrances for improved outcomes for women amidst changes in the world of work as a result of digitalization and the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis like no other that the world has ever seen, claiming the lives of millions, and triggering economic losses in the billions of dollars. Nevertheless, it also has moved organized forces of grassroots women into action to address the pandemic and spur livelihood recovery. This was done using digital instruments to raise awareness, coordinate solidarity-based activities at many levels, and build online commercial markets necessary to survive the crisis and overcome its negative effects. Women workers generally do not sit idle as their lives are wracked by crisis after crisis. They resist when they can, and they adapt as best as they can to changing conditions. They grab at viable alternatives when they are presented, or create them when there are none. Women workers in the Philippines exercised agency by creating adaptations to the crisis of the pandemic and utilizing the benefits of digitalization. Outcomes are improved for women workers when they act collectively

and leverage their organized power.

Given the results of this study, a multistakeholder approach is necessary to build synergy among the various social actors, focusing on creating an enabling policy environment for women workers in the digital world. The main players are trade unions, informal workers' associations, and women's and other organizations of the marginalized who are the claim holders in terms of demanding respect, protection, and the fulfilment of human rights towards eventually realizing digital, gender, social, and economic justice. The principal duty bearer is the State, which is obliged to provide an enabling environment for the progressive realization of human rights.

The following are the recommendations of the study for women's organizations, trade unions, and informal workers' associations:

1. Develop knowledge and awareness regarding urgent digital issues, such as internet access and gadget ownership, with a human rights and gender perspective. Consider how they can be concretely addressed through collective action, as evidenced by good practices.
2. Provide capacity-building opportunities for union members, informal workers, women, and other marginalized groups in the use of digital tools and data analytics for organizing, awareness-raising, advocacy, networking, and participation in social dialogue and policy-making bodies at various levels.
3. Facilitate access to and use of e-wallets, e-commerce and marketing facilities, e-portals for job placements, local digital supply chains, and alternative state-provided and/or non-profit platforms that enable workers in both the formal and informal economies, farmers, women entrepreneurs, and producers to recover and sustain their incomes and livelihoods.
4. Campaign for the digital rights of all citizens, especially women and workers, that ensure privacy rights, governance of big data, and the eradication of gender-based and other forms of violence in the cyberspace while ensuring freedom of expression.

5. Increase networking among women's rights organizations, trade unions, informal workers' associations, youth groups, coalitions of older persons, and other marginalized sectors, which can in turn create forums for advocating universal and gender-responsive social protection and services to effectively respond to the impacts of the pandemic, accelerated digitalization, the climate emergency, and other crises of global proportions.

Meanwhile, the study proposes the following reforms for action by the government:

1. Provide digital public goods and services for all people, with a focus on ensuring that women and girls can acquire digital skills, education in STEM and new technologies, internet access, and gadget ownership.
2. Ensure data governance at the national level, effective regulation, and fair taxation of big technology companies.
3. Institute robust and gender-responsive social protection mechanisms, such as income and job guarantees, and unemployment insurance to mitigate the impact of the pandemic-related economic, health, and social crises on working people (especially working women).
4. Foster participatory mechanisms that will enable organized workers in both the formal and informal economies as well as women's rights and other civil society organizations to represent themselves in policymaking on digital concerns.

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Religious Institutions as a Community Development Resource: A Case Study of the Role of Religious Institutions in Tri-People Community Peacebuilding in Upi, Maguindanao del Norte

Michael BJ S. Abellana

ABSTRACT

Religion, especially indigenous faith systems, remains understudied and often sidelined in community development due to its perceived divisiveness. Yet in Upi, Maguindanao del Norte, religious institutions have become key actors in sustaining peace. This study examines how Upi's tri-people religious institutions (Teduray, Christian, and Muslim) shape community-based peacebuilding and contribute to a shared vision of development. Using qualitative methods, including key informant interviews and focus group discussions, the research documents 40 faith-led initiatives across eight peacebuilding categories. Findings show that religious institutions build both bonding and bridging social capital, and are capable of enhancing the effectiveness of community development strategies and methodologies. The study also identifies prerequisite key elements that would make religious institutions effective peacebuilding resources in a tri-people context. The research also yielded the UPI (Upi's Peacebuilding Initiative) framework—a context-sensitive model for leveraging religious institutions in peacebuilding. Finally, it shows that religious institutions can be a resource in community development, especially in community peacebuilding.

Keywords: Community development, community peacebuilding, religion and development, religion and peacebuilding, tri-people, religious institutions, indigenous faith, inclusive development

Introduction

For many years, the connection between religion and development received little attention in academia and development journals (Jones & Petersen, 2011; Lunn, 2009; Rakodi, 2012; Ver Beek, 2000). As a case in point, out of the 415 theses and dissertations of the University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD) from its establishment as an institute in 1967 up until June 2021, there are only three (0.7%) that discuss faith, five (1%) on spirituality, and none on religion.

While interest grew in the late 20th century, studies remain limited, especially regarding indigenous faith systems. Indigenous peoples' beliefs are viewed as non-scientific. "Development experts," whom Denis Goulet (1980) described as "one-eyed giants," perceive non-scientific ways of rationality to be retrograde.

Another factor behind this scholarly underrepresentation is the prevailing notion that religion fuels violent conflict and should therefore be avoided in development discourse. However, religion is interwoven in the lives of people. Therefore, not talking about religion in the field of community development would waste the potential resource that community development practitioners, scholars, and policymakers can utilize to understand, organize, and mobilize communities to act towards positive change.

These expose the existing gap, which is the limited literature on the connection between religion and development, and the minimal exploration of how religion can be maximized as a resource in community development.

Acknowledging this gap becomes more important when viewed in the context of the Philippines. Maguindanao, located in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, was recently divided into Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte—both under the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). From 2011 to 2022, it recorded the highest violent conflict incidents and fatalities among BARMM's five provinces (Lara, Jr. & de la Rosa, 2022). Among these was the Maguindanao Massacre, or Ampatuan Massacre, where 58 victims were

found in mass graves.

Yet, within this conflict-ridden province, the municipality of Upi stands as a peaceful oasis. A tri-people community composed of Teduray indigenous faith believers, Christians, and Muslims, Upi has flourished despite religious diversity. It has achieved first-class municipality status and garnered national and international recognition for good governance and innovation.

This study, which the researcher conducted from 2018 to 2024, seeks to address these gaps by examining how religious institutions have shaped Upi's community peacebuilding efforts and the outcomes that followed. It identifies lessons, insights, and implications relevant to the theory and practice of community-based peacebuilding as an area of concern in community development, and contributes to the still limited body of work in the emerging field of religion and peacebuilding.

Multi-Causal Violent Conflict

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of human interactions, but it is not inherently negative. According to the book published by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), "conflicts can be waged violently, as in a war, or nonviolently, as in an election or an adversarial legal process. When channeled constructively into processes of resolution, conflict can be beneficial" (Snodderly, 2011, p. 14). Conflict turns into violent conflict when opposing parties use violence to achieve their goal (Deutsch, 1973; Gurr, 1970).

Violent conflicts are classified into horizontal and vertical types. Horizontal conflicts occur between groups of similar standing, such as rival families, ethnic groups, and political factions. Vertical conflicts involve power struggles between hierarchical groups, such as armed insurgencies or terrorist actions against the state. Understanding these distinctions is essential in addressing conflicts effectively.

The causes of violent conflict are multi-dimensional and interconnected. International Alert (2018) categorizes them into seven themes:

- **Shadow economy issues:** illegal trade and crimes (e.g., illegal drug and illicit firearm trades, and kidnap-for-ransom).
- **Common crimes:** criminal offenses that are typically considered frequent or usual (e.g., robbery and damage to properties).
- **Identity issues:** arises from differences in social, cultural, religious or political identity between individuals or groups (e.g., ethnic and religious disputes).
- **Political issues:** conflicts that arise from differences in political beliefs, ideologies, or interests between individuals or groups (e.g., rebellions and election-related violence).
- **Governance issues:** violent struggles for government resources and rents, including conflicts due to bidding processes, violent responses to lawful actions and processes, and other government-related transactions and/or development projects.
- **Resource issues:** disputes over land, water, and natural resources
- **Undetermined causes:** most common manifestations of these violent conflicts of which the causes are left unknown are shooting, murder, and clash/encounter.

These factors often overlap, intensifying conflicts. When multiple causes contribute to a single conflict, it is classified as **multi-causal violence** (International Alert, 2018). For example, ethnic and religious differences may intensify disputes over land and water, leading to violent clashes. In the Philippines, nearly half of all conflict-related deaths in 2016 and more than half from 2017 to 2020 were attributed to multi-causal violence (Lara, Jr. & de la Rosa, 2022).

Given its complexity, addressing multi-causal violence requires a holistic and context-sensitive approach. Peacebuilding efforts must consider the interplay of various conflict drivers and tailor strategies accordingly. Properly identifying the type and root causes of violent conflict is crucial in designing effective and sustainable peacebuilding interventions.

Addressing Multi-Causal Violent Conflict Through Peacebuilding

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 aims for significant progress in global peace by 2030, yet data show increasing violence worldwide (Peace Direct & Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019;

United Nations, 2022). In 2016 alone, violent conflicts reached a 30-year high, with over 560,000 deaths due to violence and terrorism (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). The economic impact of violence totaled USD 14.96 trillion in 2020, with most costs linked to military and security spending (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021). Beyond economic costs, conflicts disrupt social cohesion and community trust, leading to long-term psychological trauma and social instability (Adams, 2017).

While military power can repel a military danger, it cannot solve or maintain peace if there are deep underlying political, social, economic, or governance issues (Dumasy, 2015). Peace can only be achieved by changing people's relationships, which entails understanding the root causes of the conflict and addressing them (Lederach, 1997).

Peacebuilding addresses the root causes of conflict by transforming relationships and structures that perpetuate violence. According to Lederach (1997), peacebuilding is defined as one that "encompasses, generates and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict towards more sustainable, peaceful relationships." The ultimate goal of peacebuilding is to confront and transform the relational, structural, cultural/ideological, and perpetual conditions that create or perpetuate violence and to create sustainable peace (Coronel-Ferrer, 2005). It includes measures to prevent conflicts from recurring by strengthening national capacities for conflict management (United Nations, 2010). Recognizing its importance, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2282 in 2016, urging member states to support peacebuilding efforts (UN Security Council, 2016).

Local Peacebuilding

Local peacebuilding refers to "peacebuilding initiatives owned and led by people in their own context" (Peace Direct & Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019, p. 3). This local peacebuilding is also called by other scholars as community-based peacebuilding or community-based approaches for peacebuilding (Akande et al., 2021). It encompasses both small-scale grassroots initiatives and larger-scale operations.

Peace Direct and Alliance for Peacebuilding (2019) further

differentiates peacebuilding efforts as **locally implemented** (externally designed and executed by locals), **locally managed** (external strategies transferred to local control), and **locally led and owned** (local individuals and groups develop the strategy and determine priorities while outsiders provide or assist with resources). These approaches aim to improve international interventions while ensuring legitimacy and local participation in peace efforts.

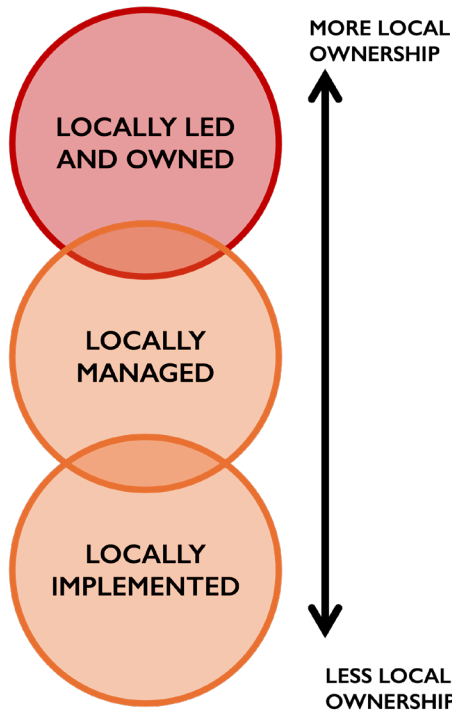


Figure 1. *Types of Peacebuilding Efforts*

Note. Adapted from Peace Direct & Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019.

The emphasis of local actors in peacebuilding is essential, as they offer valuable insights into conflict resolution beyond state-level interventions. Their involvement fosters trust between international organizations and local communities, enhancing rehabilitation efforts.

A successful example of local peacebuilding is the Citizens Theatre movement in South Sudan, initiated by the South Sudan Theatre Organization (SSTO) (Christian Aid, 2018). This community-led forum

promotes dialogue and problem-solving on social, cultural, and political issues. It has trained hundreds of young facilitators, strengthened inter-ethnic networks, improved mental health, and even influenced the national education curriculum by integrating drama as a tool for peace.

Religion as a Resource in Peacebuilding

Avoidance of Religion

Religion is often avoided in academic studies due to its association with conflict, perceived irrelevance in secular societies, and the belief that it should remain a private matter (Jones & Petersen, 2011; Peace Building Initiative, 2008). Historical events like the Crusades and modern extremist attacks reinforce its controversial nature. Additionally, religion is often viewed as outdated or separate from tangible development efforts, making it difficult to integrate into mainstream academic and policy discussions (Tamas, 1999).

From Avoidance to an Increase in Interest

Interest in religion and development grew in the late 20th century, gaining traction among policymakers, professionals, and academics (Ager & Ager, 2016; Jones & Petersen, 2011). The role of religion in peacebuilding gained prominence after the 9/11 attack in the United States, prompting research on religious extremism and faith-based peace initiatives (Alger, 2002; Omer et al., 2019). Appleby (2000) explored religion's dual role in fostering both violence and peace, while Johnston (n.d.) identified conditions where faith-based interventions mediate conflicts effectively. Appleby (University of California Television [UCTV], 2014) later argued that religion and peacebuilding could be considered a distinct academic field, a view further supported by the Oxford University Press's 2015 publication of the first handbook on *Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*.

Religion as Social Capital

Putnam's Social Capital Theory (1995) asserts that social networks hold value with religious social capital, fostering connections, trust, and reciprocity (Maselko et al., 2011; Putnam, 1995). It includes **bonding** (within religious communities), **bridging** (between different

religious groups), and **linking** (connections with higher authorities or organizations) social capital (Maselko et al., 2011; Woolcock, 2001). Smidt (2003) highlights the durability of religious social capital, emphasizing how faith-driven commitment fosters volunteerism, charitable giving, and civic engagement, particularly among resource-poor citizens. Religious institutions such as churches, mosques, and temples serve as social hubs, strengthening community trust and cooperation (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

Religious Institutions Engaging in Faith-Based Peacebuilding

Bouta et al. (2005) examined the role of 27 Christians, Muslims, and multi-faith organizations in peacebuilding, identifying six key activities:

- **Advocacy:** promoting social justice, empowers marginalized groups, and challenges unjust structures;
- **Mediation:** facilitating communication between conflicting parties to foster peaceful resolutions;
- **Observation:** monitoring conflicts to prevent violence and human rights violation;
- **Education:** raising awareness of systemic inequalities and equipping communities with peacebuilding skills;
- **Transitional Justice:** holding perpetrators accountable for war crimes and human rights abuses to support post-conflict recovery;
- **Intrafaith and Interfaith Dialogue:** fostering understanding within and between religious groups to mitigate tensions and contribute to peace processes.

They found that faith-based organizations play a critical role in transforming attitudes, challenging stereotypes, and promoting reconciliation (Bouta et al., 2005). Their influence extends to shaping policies, advocating interfaith dialogue, and mobilizing communities towards democracy, human rights, and social justice. Raj (2017) further highlights the impact of spirituality in strengthening community resilience, citing how faith-driven initiatives in Bato, Camarines Sur, enabled fisherfolk to organize disaster preparedness and recovery efforts.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used for this research can be summarized by the diagram in Figure 2.

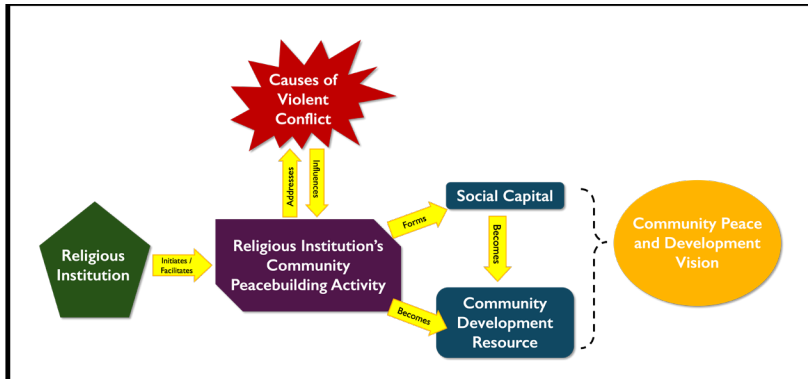


Figure 2. *Religious Institutions as a Community Development Resource in Peacebuilding Diagram*

This research posits that religious institutions can initiate, facilitate, and/or influence community peacebuilding that yields results such as social capital, which becomes a community development resource. The community peacebuilding activities themselves become community development resources. The community peacebuilding and social capital of religious institutions contribute to the formation or attainment of a community peace and development vision.

Religious Institutions

Religion refers to (a) a religious or spiritual belief of preference, regardless of whether or not this belief is represented by an organized group or (b) affiliation with an organized group having specific religious or spiritual tenets. For this research, the Teduray faith shall be referred to as a religion.

Taking off from this, religious institutions refer to organizations created to serve as a formal structure for the practice of religious beliefs, rituals, and traditions within a community. The religious institutions in Upi can be clustered into three: the Lumad, Christians, and Muslims.

Religious Institutions' Community Peacebuilding Activities

This research assumed that there are religious institutions in Upi that initiate, facilitate, and/or influence community peacebuilding. These peacebuilding activities were categorized into the **nine types of peacebuilding activities** according to the merged concepts of Anasarias (2008), Bouta et al. (2005), and Manalo (2013):

1. Community Organizing
2. Community-Based Resource Management
3. Education
4. Advocacy
5. Intermediary/Mediation
6. Observing
7. Transitional Justice
8. Intrafaith and Interfaith Dialogue
9. Reconciliation and Healing

Causes of Violent Conflict

The framework has an arrow pointing to the causes of violent conflict. This means that community peacebuilding is assumed to address causes of violent conflicts. The classification of these causes that are aimed to be addressed will be based on the ones identified by International Alert (2018). The seventh category, "undetermined," will not be used, as it is unclear how undetermined causes can be addressed.

- Shadow Economy Issues
- Common Crimes
- Identity Issues
- Political
- Governance Issues
- Resource Issues

Community peacebuilding activities were analyzed if they have formed social capital, and if so, whether it is bonding or bridging social capital.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing document analysis, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) to examine the role of religious institutions in peacebuilding (Figure 3).

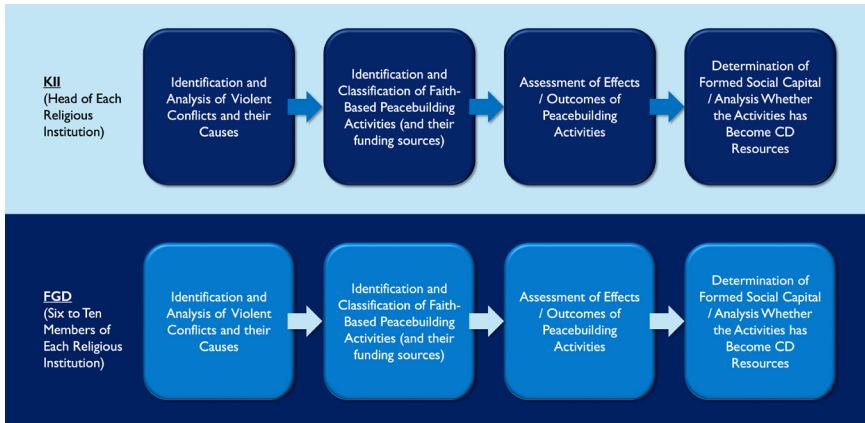


Figure 3. Research Diagram

The researcher first made an initial inventory of religious institutions present in Upi by conducting local consultations and reviewing data from the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Upi and the Philippine Statistical Authority (PSA).

To select the participants for the KIIs and FGDs, the institutions were first screened based on the level of involvement in peacebuilding activities within the community and their population size. Religious institutions with significant peacebuilding roles were prioritized, including Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Tedurays, Muslims, Nuro Alliance Evangelical Church, and Seventh-day Adventists. The Iglesia ni Cristo was included due to its population size. Details on the population size are found in Figure 8.

From the aforementioned institutions, key informants were identified, particularly leaders or administrators knowledgeable about their institution’s peacebuilding initiatives. At least one leader per institution was interviewed, with some institutions providing multiple

respondents based on availability. Two leaders from the Iglesia ni Cristo were interviewed during the 2018 KII, but no representative was available for the 2024 KII (where the research tool for this study was applied) despite several attempts to secure one. There was no representative as well from the Seventh-day Adventist.

Similarly, participants for the FGDs were purposively selected. FGDs covered the central team (leaders) engaged in the peacebuilding activities (with the exception of the respondents to the KII). Due to limitations in time and resources, the researcher conducted an FGD only with the Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and Tedurays while not compromising the quality of the research. Gender dynamics in the Muslim faith were considered, hence, a separate FGD was conducted with males and females. The sixth FGD was done with a mixed group from a barangay—Barangay Rempes—that has almost a balanced number of tri-people. The said barangay was identified through multiple recommendations, including that of the municipal mayor. All groups were encouraged to maintain a balance of sexes (except for the Muslim FGDs) and to include at least one person with a disability (PWD), an LGBTQIA+ member (also except for the Muslims), and a senior citizen. However, no LGBTQIA+ individuals or PWDs participated.

A total of 55 participants contributed, representing diverse backgrounds, including religious leaders, elected officials, government employees, teachers, media personnel, farmers, and housewives. The age range varied, and 58% were male, while 42% were female. This broad representation enriched the study by providing a nuanced understanding of peacebuilding across different faith communities in Upi. Table 1 summarizes the study sample:

Table 1.
Summary of Respondents

Religious Affiliations	Number	Sex Distribution		Age Distribution		
		Male	Female	≤ 30	31-59	≥ 60
Key Informant Interviews (7)						
Episcopalians	1	1			1	
R. Catholics	3	2	1		3	
Muslims	1	1				1
Tedurays	2	2			1	1

Religious Affiliations	Number	Sex Distribution		Age Distribution		
		Male	Female	≤ 30	31-59	≥ 60
Evangelicals	1	1			1	
Focus Group Discussions (47)						
Episcopalians	6	3	3	1	2	3
R. Catholics	7	2	5		3	4
Muslims (Male Only)	6	6		2	4	
Muslims (Female Only)	6		6	2	3	1
Tedurays	11	5	6		8	3
Mixed Group	11	9	2		7	4
TOTAL	55	32	23	5	33	17

Qualitative analysis identified patterns and themes while descriptive statistics summarized their character.

The researcher did regular reflection and review for necessary adaptations, ensuring that the research remains focused, relevant, and rigorous. Detailed documentation captured the richness of the adaptive process, supporting the credibility and ethical integrity of the study.

Data Presentation

This section provides an overview of Upi, examining its history, demographics, and peace and security landscape. A comparative analysis of crime rates with adjacent areas offers insight into Upi’s security situation and potential external threats. The discussion then shifts to Upi’s tri-people composition serving as a foundation for analyzing the role of religious institutions in peacebuilding. Lastly, key community peacebuilding initiatives are presented to highlight local efforts in fostering peace and development and to contribute to the limited literature documenting the peacebuilding efforts of Upians.

Upi, a landlocked municipality, spans 74,295 hectares and consists of 23 barangays, with Barangay Nuro as its administrative center (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2016). Its political history dates back to 1901 when American forces arrived in Cotabato (Municipality of Upi, 2017). Captain Irving Bryant Edwards, a colonial administrator,

established the Upi Agricultural School in 1919 to promote formal education.

Christian settlers from Cebu and Ilocos, as well as Moro settlers arrived following the construction of roads and the introduction of land titling by the Americans, which was unfamiliar to the indigenous Tedurays. This led to land ownership shifts and changes in farming practices, dividing the Tedurays into those who assimilated and those who moved deeper into the forest or ancestral lands (Schlegel, 1999).



Figure 4. *Map of Upi* (Google Maps, n.d.).

Upi officially became a municipality on June 10, 1955 through Republic Act No. 1248, with its first elected mayor, Teduray leader Ignacio Tenorio Labina, assuming office in 1956. Leadership later transitioned to the Sinsuat and Piang families, who played significant roles in local governance (Municipality of Upi, 2017). In 2006, a portion of Upi was carved out to create the Municipality of Datu Blah T. Sinsuat (Muslim Mindanao Autonomy Act No. 198, 2006). Subsequently, in 2019, Upi became part of BARMM following the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law through a plebiscite (Republic Act No. 11054, 2018).

As of 2015, Upi had a population of 59,004, with a 2.64% growth rate and a density of 72 persons per square kilometer. Its economy remains primarily agricultural, dominated by corn, rice, coconut, rubber, and coffee, alongside small-scale livestock and poultry farming, with a 39.11% poverty incidence in 2021, economic development and poverty alleviation remain critical priorities.

Crime Rates of Upi and Adjacent Municipalities

Upi is adjacent to three municipalities: Datu Blah Sinsuat, South Upi, and Datu Odin Sinsuat. Examining its crime statistics alongside these municipalities helps contextualize Upi’s security trends and external influences. Figure 5 shows the crime data analysis from 2016 (the earliest available in the Philippine National Police database) to 2023 based on PNP records.

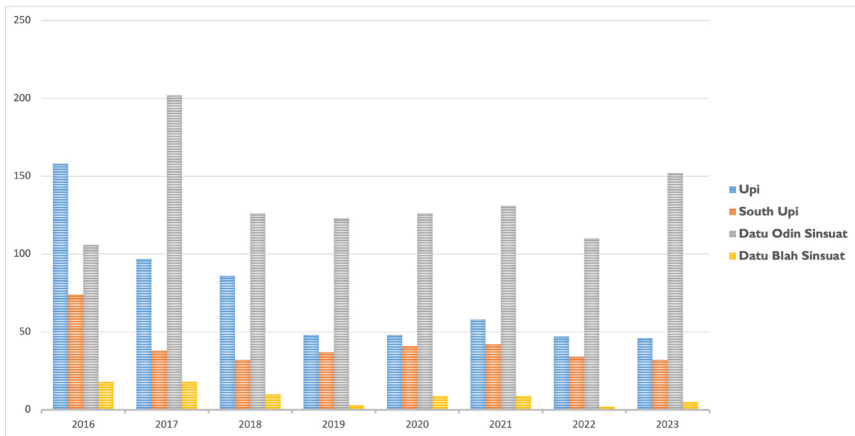


Figure 5. Crime Volume of Upi and Adjacent Municipalities, 2016–2023.

Crime volume, or total reported crimes, has generally declined in Upi since 2016, with a slight increase in 2021 (Figure 5). Upi consistently records lower crime volumes than Datu Odin Sinsuat, which has twice its population, but higher than South Upi and Datu Blah Sinsuat due to its larger population.

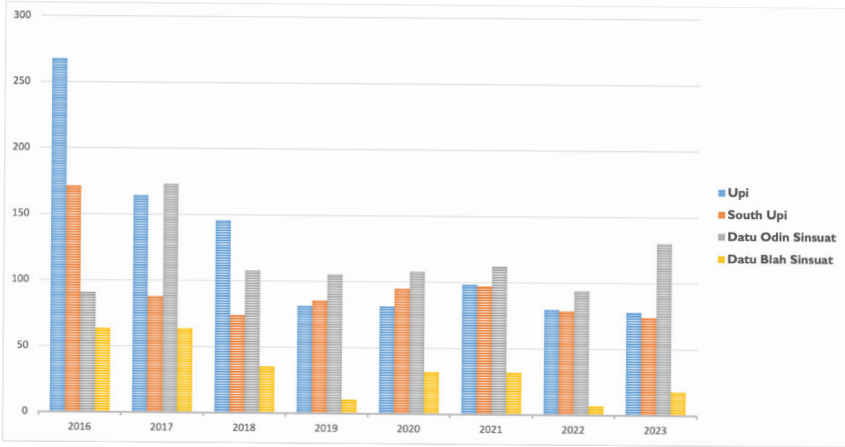


Figure 6. Crime Rate of Upi and Adjacent Municipalities, 2016–2023

Crime rate, measured per 100,000 residents, offers a clearer view of crime prevalence. Upi’s crime rate has fluctuated, peaking in 2016 before declining, whereas Datu Odin Sinsuat maintains a higher rate, indicating more frequent crimes per capita (Figure 6).

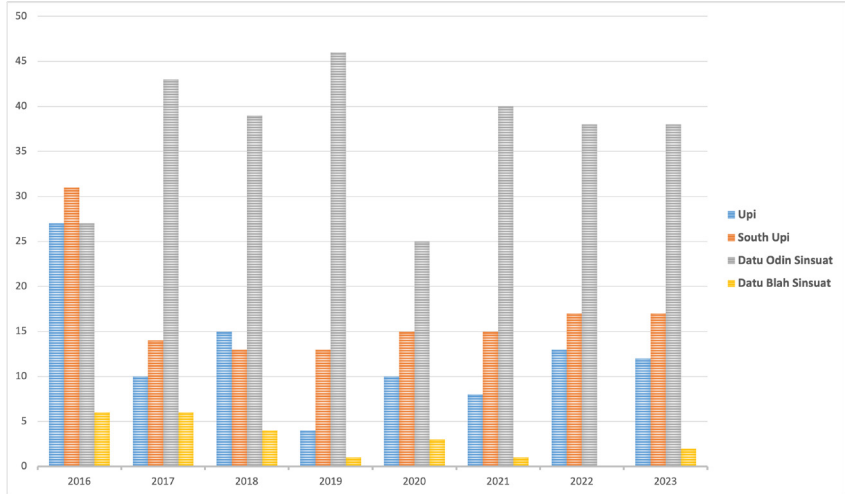


Figure 7. Incidents of Crime Against Persons in Upi and Adjacent Municipalities, 2016–2023

Upi records fewer violent crimes such as homicide, assault, and robbery than its neighbors, particularly Datu Odin Sinsuat (Figure 7).

Since violent crimes significantly shape public perception of safety (McGarrell et al., 1997), Upi’s lower rate reinforces its reputation as a peaceful area. Locals even joke that it serves as a “rest and recreation” area for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) due to its perceived safety.

Tri-People

The tri-people nature of Upi can be understood through two lenses. As shown in Figure 8, the first lens highlights the composition of religious groups (i.e., Tedurays with their traditional faith, Muslims, and Christians). The second perspective focuses on affiliations based on ethnicity or origin, such as Indigenous Peoples/Lumad, Moro, and Settlers (Figure 9). The tri-people lens used in this research is religion.

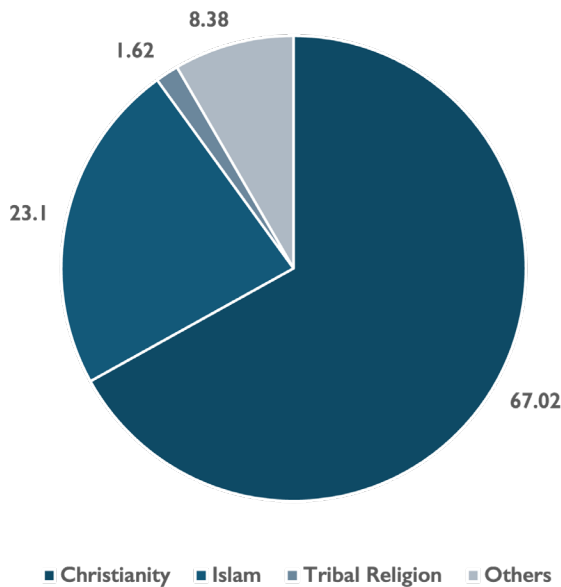


Figure 8. Population Distribution by Religion in Upi, 2010

Note. Christians can further be disaggregated to Episcopal Church (37.9%), Roman Catholic (27.5%), and Evangelical Church (1.62%).

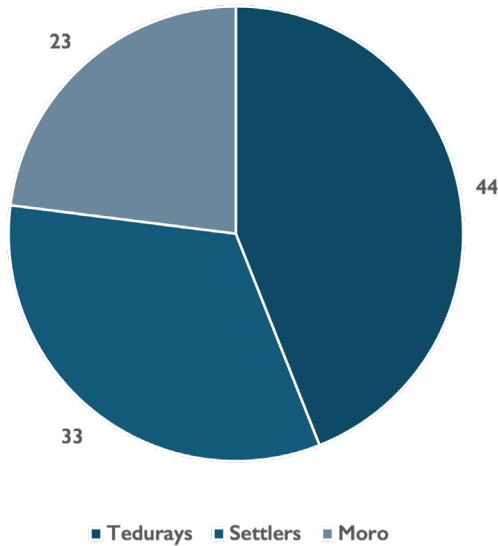


Figure 9. Population Distribution by Ethnicity in Upi, 2015

Note. Sub-groups of settlers are Ilonggos (17%), Tagalogs (7%), Cebuanos (3%), Ilocanos (2%), and Others (4%) (PSA, 2015, as cited in Piang 2018).

On tribal affiliation, the Teduray tribe emerges as the predominant group (44%). This indicates a significant presence and influence of the Teduray culture in the area.

Story of Unrest: Upi's Violent Conflicts

From the 1970s to the early 2000s, Upi experienced various conflicts, including violent clashes between the Ilaga, an extremist paramilitary group, and the Black Shirts, a Moro guerilla faction, along with underdevelopment, kidnappings, and land disputes. The Ilaga, led by Kumander Toothpick, engaged in violent confrontations with Moro guerillas, resulting in civilian casualties, school bombings, and the destruction of public institutions (Schlegel, 1999).

Despite a decline in violence in the 1980s, Upi remained underdeveloped pre-2000s, with poor infrastructure and limited economic growth, leading to frustration among residents (Municipality of Upi, 2017). In the early 2000s, kidnappings, including that of

entrepreneur Arthur Yap, heightened insecurity, though the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) later assisted in recovering victims, demonstrating their commitment to peace talks (Fernandez, 2011). In 2018, bombings by the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) targeted Upi, causing casualties and instilling fear among residents (Fernandez, 2011).

Land disputes, particularly between Muslims, Christians, and Tedurays, further contributed to local tensions, fueled by unresolved ancestral claims and overlapping land titles (Republic Act [RA] No. 8371, 1997). Other challenges, including cattle rustling and isolated *rido* (clan feuds), also persisted, though at lower levels compared to neighboring areas, highlighting the ongoing complexities of peace and security in Upi.

Causes of Violent Conflicts in Upi

The violent conflicts in Upi stem from a complex interplay of social, economic, political, and cultural factors. These causes can be broadly categorized into shadow economy issues, common crimes, identity issues, political issues, governance issues, and resource issues.

KII and FGD data reveal that most of the violent conflicts in Upi are multi-causal, which means they are driven by more than one cause. An example of this is the combination of political and resource made manifest in the illegal mining exploration that reportedly happened in Upi from 2013 to 2015. A male FGD participant shared, “*Kahit walang Free, Prior, and Informed Consent o FPIC, tinuloy pa rin nila ang mining exploration* [Even without our Free, Prior, and Informed Consent or FPIC, they still pursued the mining exploration].” A similar threat emerged in 2023 when portions of Upi and South Upi within the Teduray and Lambangian Ancestral Domain Claim, were proposed as mineral reservation areas. Additionally, many common crimes, such as rape, robbery, and domestic violence, are linked to illegal drug use. The shadow economy, including cigarette smuggling, also intersects with broader political and governance issues. Meanwhile, youth suicide cases have been reported, with factors like bullying and parental absence contributing to depression. These findings highlight the need for a holistic approach to conflict resolution, as violence in Upi is driven by

overlapping and interrelated causes.

Key Community-Based Peacebuilding Initiatives of Upians and Religious Institutions

Upians have undertaken numerous community-based peacebuilding initiatives, largely led by religious institutions. These efforts align with eight of the nine recognized peacebuilding categories, with no reported activities under transitional justice.

A total of 47 peacebuilding initiatives were documented, 40 of which were initiated by religious institutions (those without asterisks). The remaining seven, while not initiated by religious institutions, became platforms for their peacebuilding efforts. For example, Teduray Youth and Students Association (TYSA) and Teduray-Lambangian Youth and Student Association (TLYSA) served as channels for Teduray leaders to pass on indigenous faith and peace teachings to younger generations and to those from other religions. The Upi Agricultural School also became a platform by accommodating different faiths, practicing a tri-people prayer system, and serving as the home of various religious youth groups. In the next section, three programs are highlighted to give a glimpse on the role of religious institutions in shaping and strengthening these initiatives.

1. Community Organizing (13)

- 1.1. Upi Muslim Consultative Assembly (UMCA)
- 1.2. The Upi Ministerial Fellowship (UMF)
- 1.3. Muslim Youth Fellowship (MYF)
- 1.4. Organization of Teduray Lambangian Conference
- 1.5. Family Life Ministry
- 1.6. OMI Indigenous Peoples Ministry in Sitio Blala, Brgy. Renede, Upi, Maguindanao del Norte
- 1.7. Kuyog Rayray Band and i-Watch Media
- 1.8. Teduray Youth and Students Association (TYSA)*
- 1.9. Teduray-Lambangian Youth and Student Association (TLYSA)*
- 1.10. Fëliwawat Ide Libun Teduray [Rise Teduray Women]*
- 1.11. Sënfagayunon
- 1.12. Sakat Youth

- 1.13. Mindanao Women Advocacy for Good Governance
2. **Community-Based Resource Management (4)**
 - 2.1. R. Catholic and Episcopal Churches' Livelihood Assistance
 - 2.2. Care for Creation Program
 - 2.3. Food distribution during calamities
 - 2.4. Talab
3. **Education (10)**
 - 3.1. Pulpit / preachings / khutbah / kanduli
 - 3.2. Notre Dame of Upi
 - 3.3. St. Francis Episcopal School of Upi, Inc.
 - 3.4. Madaris
 - 3.5. Upi Agricultural School*
 - 3.6. Catechism
 - 3.7. JOY Alliance Elementary School
 - 3.8. Muslims' educational outreach in Islamic educational institutions and weekly religious teachings
 - 3.9. Roman Catholics and Episcopalians conducting weekly Bible study
 - 3.10. Teduray education during Kanduli and knowledge sharing about their culture and traditions
4. **Advocacy (4)**
 - 4.1. Kapehan
 - 4.2. Pre-Ramadan symposium
 - 4.3. Quran reading contests
 - 4.4. Muslims and Episcopalians participating in peace and order councils
5. **Intermediary/Mediation (2)**
 - 5.1. Setiawan
 - 5.2. Muslim intermediaries
6. **Observing (4)**
 - 6.1. Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV)
 - 6.2. Muslims ensuring that no extremist groups and teachings will enter Upi
 - 6.3. Philippine Episcopalians advocating clean and peaceful

elections

6.4. Kabalikat sa Malinis na Halalan

7. **Interfaith Dialogues (3)**

- 7.1. Tri-people prayer in the LGU and schools
- 7.2. Inclusive jobs, assistance, and religious celebrations
- 7.3. Inter marriages

8. **Reconciliation and Healing (2)**

- 8.1. Tedurays' efforts in reconciliation and healing through traditional practices like Këfiyo Fëdëw, Toyo Dara, and Sëinëm Dara/Sëinëm Kënugëw
- 8.2. Family visitations, Sacrament of Reconciliation, and counseling

9. **LGU-Institutionalized Peacebuilding Initiatives (5)**

- 9.1. Upi Mayor's Council*
- 9.2. Meguyaya Festival
- 9.3. DXUP Radio Station*
- 9.4. Municipal Peace and Order Council*
- 9.5. Kasalan ng Bayan [Mass Wedding] done in the respective places of worship

Out of these 47, five initiatives of religious institutions are highlighted below. Two of these have been institutionalized by their respective local government units.

First is the *Kapehan*. The *Kapehan* is a community initiative of discussing problems in and out of Upi while having coffee (*kape*). It was formed by members and leaders of different faiths, including Fr. Elinio "Ely" Balboa, OMI, former Parish Priest of the Roman Catholic's San Isidro Parish; Rev. Fr. June A. Imperial, former Administrative Officer of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Philippines and Rector of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Cotabato City; imams; and Tedurays. The *Kapehan* sessions took place every Saturday from around 5 a.m. to 6 a.m. at the San Isidro Parish premises. Each session featured different topics for discussion, aiming to create a platform where everyone, regardless of faith, age, or background, could voice their concerns and contribute to community development.



Figure 10. One of the Performers of the Meguyaya Festival Street Dancing Competition (My Mindanao, 2019).

Second is the Meguyaya Festival. One of the products of the Kapehan is the Meguyaya Festival. *Meguyaya* is derived from the Teduray term for “thanksgiving” or “celebration,” reflecting the spirit of gratitude and communal joy that defines the event. The festival aims to promote peace, unity, and cultural diversity. It serves as a convergence point for the tri-people—showcasing their unique faith and cultural traditions and fostering a sense of communal harmony. Miss Lily-Ong Muslim, one of the key members of the kapehan recounted that “*Every program na nilagay namin, talagang may connection sa culture, may connection sa community* [Every program that we put in place, there was a connection to culture and to the community].” It begins with *Kanduli*, an ecumenical prayer integrating Qur’anic, Biblical, and Teduray teachings, reinforcing mutual respect. A central feature is communal food-sharing, symbolizing unity and goodwill. The festival culminates in a vibrant street dancing competition where participants in traditional attire perform to agong and kulintang rhythms, showcasing Upi’s rich cultural and spiritual heritage and peacebuilding.

Third is the Sënfagayunon. *Sënfagayunon*, a Teduray term for “unity,” is an organization of the Teduray tribal religious leaders founded in 2013 by Deonato P. Mokudef. Currently, the organization is chaired by Timuay Johnny Mokudef. The organization’s main purpose is to provide or come up with a uniform Teduray religious teaching and the preservation and

transmission of Teduray indigenous knowledge. It is in this platform that teachings on peaceful coexistence or respect for people of other faiths are taught. As Timuay Mokudef said, “*Huwag siraan ang ibang denominations kundi tulungan sila, dahil yan ang gusto ni Tulus* [Do not discredit other denominations, instead, let us help them for that is the will of God].”

Figure 11. Seal of the Upi Muslim Consultative Assembly (UMCA)



Fourth is the UMCA. Formed in 2004 by Muslim leaders of Upi, UMCA serves as the unified voice of Upi’s Muslim community, ensuring Islamic teachings remain free from extremist influences, particularly in its 17 Madrasahs. It regulates external religious influences, granting or denying access based on alignment with Islam’s peaceful teachings. Ustadz Haron shared,

May pumasok na nagtuturo ang sabi nila, [ang] gamit nila ay Qur’an ngunit mali ang tinuturo. Pinigilan namin kasi mali ang tinuturo, hindi kapayapaan. Ginagawa namin ang tungkulin namin na ang Upi talaga ay mapanatili ang kapayapaan ‘di gaya ng ibang munisipyo na wala silang control [There were those who came to Upi claiming that they were using the Qur’an in their teachings. We stopped them because their teachings were wrong and not about peace. We are doing our part to keep Upi peaceful, unlike in other municipalities that do not have control].



Figure 12. *Four of the six members of the Upi Mayor's Council, along with their secretary (center), during the FGD in 2018*

Fifth is the Upi Mayor's Council. Established on August 25, 2001, through Upi Municipal Executive Order No. 4, the Upi Mayor's Council mediates disputes among Settlers/Christians, Moro/Muslims, and Tedurays. Each group selects two representatives based on moral standing and religious knowledge. For example, if a settler offends a Teduray, Teduray customs guide the resolution. If initial attempts fail, the case may be escalated to barangay or judicial levels. From 2007 to 2023, the Council handled 640 cases, averaging 38 per year, with a 60% settlement rate. Without this mediation, many disputes could have escalated into violent conflicts.

Analysis and Discussion

This chapter analyzes the research findings through the study's conceptual framework, and presents lessons and implications for community-based peacebuilding. It explores the role of religious institutions in shaping Upi's peace and development vision, the formation of social capital, and how these insights enrich and refine existing

community development methods and strategies. It also examines challenges faced by religious institutions in peacebuilding, the factors behind their peacebuilding's effectiveness, and introduces the UPI (Upi's Peacebuilding Initiative)—a flexible framework developed from Upi's unique experience, which serves as a model for leveraging religious institutions in community peacebuilding. Religious institutions play a significant role in forming a community vision of peace and development.

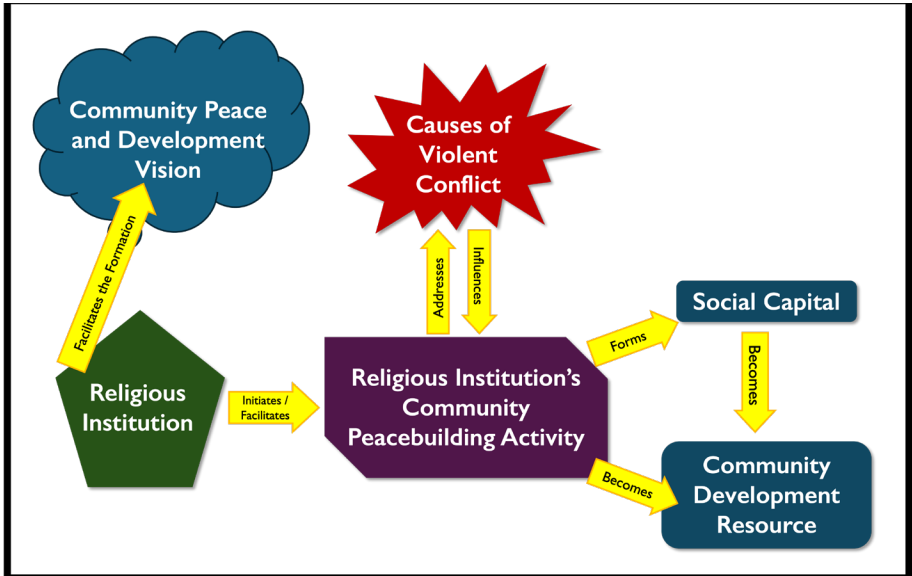


Figure 13. *Enhanced Conceptual Framework on Religious Institutions as a Community Development Resource in Peacebuilding*

The research reveals that religious institutions in Upi play a crucial role in shaping the community's peace and development vision, thus the enhanced conceptual framework in Figure 13. Rather than an outcome of peacebuilding, the collective vision was already present and religion had a profound influence on shaping it. A participant shared, "*Lahat kami ay magkakapatid. Iisa lamang ang aming Diyos pero tinatawag namin siya sa iba't-ibang pangalan. . . . Kami ay iisa* [We are all siblings. We have one God, though we call Him by different names. . . . We are one]."

For years, this vision of unity and peace was embedded in the collective consciousness of the people, shaped by their religious teachings. However,

this vision required a catalyst to fully materialize in the community's social and political landscape. That pivotal moment occurred when the community united to support the candidacy of Mayor Ramon Piang, Sr. Recognizing the need for a leader who embodied their shared values and vision, the people rallied behind Piang, Sr., guarding the election process to ensure its integrity and supporting him throughout his tenure as Mayor.

While Piang, Sr. is often celebrated as a key figure in Upi's history, it is essential to recognize that his leadership was shaped and supported by the religious institutions that nurtured his values and guided his rise to office. These institutions, working closely with the local government, were instrumental in articulating and formalizing the community's long-standing vision into a clear and powerful statement: "Upi: Haven of an Empowered Tri-People" (Municipality of Upi, 2017).

More than a slogan, this vision was ingrained in Upi's collective consciousness through religious teachings long before Piang, Sr.'s term. His administration gave it an official voice, integrating it into the town's development goals and reinforcing its role as a model for inclusive governance.

Formation of Social Capital

The findings reveal that peacebuilding initiatives by religious institutions in Upi have significantly created social capital, helping reduce violent conflict.

The bonding social capital formed is characterized by internal trust and cohesiveness, feelings of belongingness, and acceptance and adherence to shared social norms. Members of different religious institutions approach their respective leaders for guidance and updates on governance and community activities, demonstrating deep trust. There was also a high number of attendees in religious gatherings and a large number of volunteers in ministries and outreach activities. The Episcopalians of Upi, led by Fr. Joerge N. Pinera, all echoed their motto, "Episcopal Church welcomes you." Moreover, the FGD participants of the Teduray group and the mixed group shared that before, they were ashamed of being Tedurays. But slowly, due to peacebuilding initiatives

such as the Meguyaya Festival, they are taking pride in their ethnicity and religion, which includes their practices.

Bridging social capital is evidenced by the expansion of social networks beyond immediate religious communities, as well as toward the LGU. Moreover, trust and respect between different religions were fostered. As Fr. Jericho Veñarta, OMI, said, “The absence of adversarial arguments and unhealthy debates among religious groups is notable.” Interfaith marriages, widely accepted in Upi, contrast with more restrictive areas like Jolo, Sulu. Peacebuilding activities has also helped reduce prejudices, with terms like “land grabbers” diminishing in usage.

Community harmony and safety further reflect the successful formation of bridging capital. Religious groups coexist peacefully—Catholic church bells ring without complaints, Muslims perform Adhan via loudspeakers, and residents walk home safely at night. These factors highlight how religious institutions, through their deep-rooted peacebuilding initiatives, contribute to lasting social cohesion.

Insights for Community Development Methods and Strategies

Observing and analyzing Upi’s peacebuilding initiatives, the researcher identified key community development methods and strategies employed by the religious institutions of Upi. Upi has been notably successful in implementing its peacebuilding initiatives using these community development strategies. This section discusses the key elements of Upi’s peacebuilding initiatives that can enhance the effectiveness of community development methods, whether in peacebuilding activities or in other contexts. It also highlights the added benefits of engaging religious institutions in community development work, beyond their role in building social capital.

1. **Community Organizing:** Religious institutions foster collective action and solidarity by instilling values of faith, responsibility, stewardship, and sustaining engagement in social initiatives. They empower individuals, especially women and youth, to assume leadership roles while upholding religious traditions. A Muslim youth from the MYF said, “*Gumagawa kami ng mga outreach programs at mga Qur’an reading sessions upang hindi mawala sa*

tamang landas ang mga kabataan [We do outreach program and Qur'an reading sessions so the youth will not be strayed from the right path].”

Recognizing that peace cannot solely rely on current leaders, Upi's religious institutions and community organizations place a strong emphasis on nurturing the next generation of leaders. For instance, several former leaders of the MYF now serve as officers of UMCA, such as Ms. Bai Zuhiera Kankan, who is currently the Secretary of UMCA and also a guidance counselor at UAS.

Organizing efforts also play a role in governance. Catholic leaders such as Fr. Elinio Balboa, OMI, and Fr. Eduardo Vasquez, OMI, alongside those from the Episcopal Church, have mobilized communities to resist alleged election fraud.

2. **Participatory Planning:** Religious institutions actively shape development plans through internal planning sessions, such as those conducted by Sënfagayunon. Moreover, UMCA and UMF serve as consultative bodies for faith groups, ensuring diverse religious perspectives are represented in policymaking.
3. **Community Resource Mobilization:** Faith-based institutions secure funding through personal contributions, tithes, donation boxes, and cooperative ventures. The Catholic Church's *Halad Mula sa Puso* [Offering from the Heart] tithing system and rental income from multi-purpose halls sustain initiatives. External support includes the Adopt a Parish Program of the Episcopal Church and NGO partnerships with Plan International, Synergia, and Pathways. International donors, such as an Egyptian benefactor funding a mosque, highlight the global reach of religious networks in Upi.
4. **Community-Based Resource Management:** Teduray religious traditions, as an example, guide sustainable resource management as seen in Kanduli Maras, a ritual seeking divine permission before land cultivation. As Timuay Mokudéf shared, observing star patterns informs agricultural decisions, reinforcing the community's spiritual and ecological connection

to the land.

5. **Community Education:** Religious institutions embed integrity, compassion, and accountability into education, fostering ethical leadership and governance. Teachings promote peace, non-violence, and contentment, cautioning against materialism with expressions like “*dumadaan lang tayo sa mundong ito*” [we are only passersby in this world]. They advocate for generosity and fairness, encouraging mutual support over exploitation.
6. **Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction and Management:** Religious institutions mobilize local resources during crises, utilizing places of worship as relief hubs. They disseminate disaster preparedness information through religious gatherings and provide spiritual and emotional support to strengthen resilience. Their extensive networks ensure long-term recovery assistance for affected families.
7. **Community-Based Monitoring and Evaluation:** Religious institutions integrate monitoring and evaluation into peacebuilding. UMCA actively reviews Madrasah curricula to prevent extremist influences. Organizations like the MYF, TYSA, and TLYSA refine strategies based on evaluations, expanding into various schools to better organize Muslim and Teduray youth. Religious leaders also self-monitor through spiritual reflection, ensuring alignment with peacebuilding goals.

Key Elements of Religious Institutions as Effective Peacebuilding Resources in a Tri-People Context

This study identifies four essential conditions that enable religious institutions to play a transformative role in maintaining peace and fostering unity, namely:

1. A culture of religious tolerance and mutual respect.
2. Committed and consistent religious leadership in peacebuilding efforts.

3. Strong and inclusive interfaith coordination structures composed of both religious leaders, lay leaders, and members/congregations.
4. Religious institutions serving as advocates for the tri-people community vision of peace and development.

UPI (Upi's Peacebuilding Initiative): Upi's Model of Leveraging Religious Institutions

Based on Upi's experience, the researcher made a flexible framework for leveraging religious institutions in community peacebuilding. Upi's case illustrates how religious institutions foster cohesion and stability, offering insights for other communities seeking to integrate faith-based initiatives into peace efforts.

Rather than a rigid blueprint, this model adapts to different religious, cultural, and social contexts. While Upi's experience provides valuable lessons, each community faces distinct challenges that may shape its approach. This framework is not a step-by-step process, but a guiding tool that can be tailored to fit local needs.

By prioritizing flexibility and contextual sensitivity, the model encourages communities to learn from Upi's successes while crafting their own paths to peace and development.

1. Make an inventory of religious institutions.
2. Assess religious teachings and practices: Compare similarities and differences in religious teachings and practices. Understand theological and doctrinal bases that might influence community perspectives.
3. Unravel historical relationships: Investigate historical unity and conflicts among these institutions.
4. Identify a common ground: Identify and build on theological commonalities (e.g., concepts of God, angels, heaven, and hell). For example, Christians, Muslims, and Tedurays all believe that there is one God.

5. Facilitate the healing of historical wounds: Use religious teachings as tools to address structural and historical grievances.
6. Create symbols of unity: Develop and erect visible symbols representing the unity of different faiths (e.g., tri-people statues of Upi at their roundabout and their plaza).
7. Formulate a tri-people vision: Incorporate a tri-people perspective in the community's peace and development vision.
8. Institutionalize religious unity: Establish community festivals and events celebrating interfaith unity (e.g., Meguyaya Festival). Also, start events with tri-people prayers to signify unity and mutual respect.
9. Engage and support religious leaders: Actively involve religious leaders in local governance. Ensure equitable representation in local councils and decision-making bodies. Provide financial and logistical support to enhance their community roles.
10. Establish justice mechanisms: Develop or enhance local justice systems or mechanisms that involve members from all religious backgrounds. Use these systems or mechanisms to address local disputes and conflicts fairly (e.g., Upi Mayors Council).
11. Ensure a partnership perspective: Encompassing all of the steps is needed for the leader of the LGU to have a partnership perspective regarding the relationship with religious groups, not merely treating them as tools for development. Leaders should possess a respectful and knowledgeable approach towards different faiths.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings confirm the influence and impact that religious institutions have on the peacebuilding efforts in Upi, offering valuable lessons, insights, and implications for the theory and practice of community development. Research results showed that religious institutions shape community vision of peace and development, form

social capital, and can enhance the efficacy of community development strategies and methodologies. It also uncovered prerequisite key elements to make effective peacebuilding resources in a tri-people context. Finally, it showed that religious institutions can be leveraged in community peacebuilding.

Among the many recommendations from this research are for religious institutions to plan long-term, manage internal issues, and consider structured transitions to avoid leadership-based disruptions. Religious institutions are also suggested to form their respective peace committee or interfaith ministry to reinforce peacebuilding efforts and guard against potential spoilers who may exploit religion to sow division. For the LGU, they are recommended to sustain partnerships with religious institutions and provide additional support for documenting the indigenous beliefs of the Tedurays.

Community development practitioners are encouraged to learn more about religion; scholars and researchers to increase their study of religion's role in community development, particularly in diverse communities like Upi; and the UP CSWCD to consider establishing a seminar course on the role of religion and indigenous faith in community development. For future research directions, researchers can conduct a parallel study in South Upi and/or other tri-people areas; longitudinal study on the sustainability of peacebuilding initiatives in Upi; exploration of youth involvement in religious-based peacebuilding initiatives; and an assessment of the economic impact of religious institutions' community peacebuilding.

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