BANGSAMORO AUTONOMOUS REGION IN MUSLIM MINDANAO LEADERSHIP: PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE TRANSITION OF GOVERNANCE

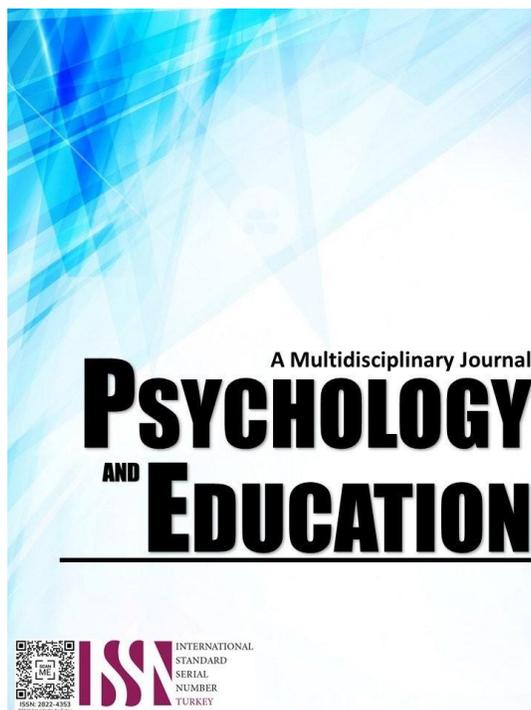# Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao Leadership: Participation of Women in the Transition of Governance

Hasana M. H. Malic,* Nenita I. Prado
For affiliations and correspondence, see the last page.

Abstract

This study examined how women are represented in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), including their challenges and contributions to leadership and decision-making. The Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) and the Magna Carta for Women are two examples of legislative frameworks that exclude women from fully participating in government due to cultural and sociological constraints. The research goals were to investigate these issues and devise strategies to enhance women's leadership in the area. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with eight female leaders in executive and supervisory roles in government organizations using a qualitative phenomenological method. These participants played an active role in developing and delivering educational services, making them important stakeholders with distinct perspectives on regional leadership and decision-making methods. To ensure the study encompassed a wide range of perspectives, participants were selected based on their roles in MBHTE's regional governance, reflecting diverse experiences and leadership contexts. Purposive and convenience sampling were the primary methods for selecting participants. Findings revealed both progress and persistent challenges, including gender tokenism, patriarchal norms, religious interpretations, and economic dependency, which restrict women's autonomy in governance. Key themes that emerged as challenges for women's leadership include work-life balance, the patriarchal system, a lack of support, and security concerns. Despite these barriers, women made significant contributions to policy creation, gender-responsive governance, and peacebuilding. The study concluded that while women's leadership in BARMM is growing, sustained institutional support and cultural shifts are necessary for meaningful participation. It recommends strengthening gender-responsive policies, leadership training, advocacy efforts, and economic empowerment programs. Future research should explore the long-term impact of gender policies and the intersectionality of socio-economic and political factors influencing women's leadership.

Keywords: *Bangsamoro decision-making, gender inclusivity, policy creation, responsive governance, women's leadership*

Introduction

Maintaining representative leadership in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was both a significant issue and a prerequisite for long-term growth in a world where governments are constantly shifting. A significant change in the area's government structure was brought about by the Bangsamoro Organic Law (Republic Act No. 11054). To achieve inclusion and fairness in this setting, it was essential to understand and address the dynamics of women's leadership engagement during this transition.

Despite their potential contributions to long-term peace and prosperity, research indicates that women's roles in governance remain underrepresented. The UN Resident Coordinator in the Philippines, Gonzales (2020), emphasized the significance of Bangsamoro women in shaping normalization efforts during the unveiling of BARMM's agenda on women, peace, and security. While he recognized the achievement, BARMM Chief Minister Murad Ebrahim noted that several important goals related to the active participation and empowerment of women remained unfulfilled.

Systemic barriers that prevent Bangsamoro women from fully engaging in government processes persist. Marginalized women, especially those from underrepresented ethnic groups, were disproportionately affected by socio-economic disadvantages, a lack of political awareness, and intersectional discrimination. Significant obstacles prevented women living below the poverty level from participating in initiatives that could have given them more political influence and from securing leadership positions. The disarray of women's experiences made it challenging to establish a cohesive sector that could work toward shared objectives.

This study examined and recorded women's participation in leadership roles at the BARMM Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education (MBHTE) and the Bangsamoro Women Commission (BWC), as agreed upon during the proposal defense. The study, which focused on the transition era of government, shed light on the barriers, opportunities, and contributions of women leaders in shaping the region's policies and practices.

This study examined women's engagement in the BARMM's transition, drawing on both local and international scholarship on women's leadership in governance. Using a qualitative narrative study design, it emphasized lived experiences, problems, and best practices for promoting women's leadership. To achieve a thorough examination, the study used focus group discussions, interviews, and case studies. These techniques facilitated the identification of themes and subthemes, which were then analyzed in NVivo for greater accuracy and depth.

Research Questions

This study aimed to understand the significant involvement of women in leadership positions within the BARMM during the governance transition. The specific inquiries that guided this investigation, as refined, were as follows:

1. What is the current representation of women in key decision-making positions within the BARMM?
2. What are the cultural and societal dynamics that give meaningful participation of women in governance?
3. What challenges do women face in leadership roles related to effective governance and management?
4. How does women's participation contribute to developing and implementing policies within the BARMM?

Methodology

The research utilized a qualitative narrative design to investigate women's involvement in governance in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The research employed interviews, case studies, and direct observations to elucidate the lived experiences, challenges, and leadership strategies of women in transitional governance contexts. Thematic analysis served as the principal data analysis method, informed by Creswell's framework, which highlights the identification and classification of recurring themes in qualitative data. This method offered a profound, contextual insight into the participants' viewpoints and leadership trajectories.

Data were gathered from eight intentionally selected female leaders within the MBHTE and BWC, ensuring a variety of experiences and governance roles. Ethical protocols were meticulously adhered to, including obtaining informed consent, safeguarding participant confidentiality, and obtaining ethical approval from the Liceo Research Ethics Board. A semi-structured interview guide grounded in leadership and gender inclusion literature facilitated the collection of comprehensive narratives, which were further corroborated through triangulation with observations and questionnaires. Recruitment complied with cultural sensitivity and institutional protocols, highlighting voluntary and informed participation.

The study's credibility was ensured through subject-matter expert evaluation and pilot testing of the research instruments. The application of triangulation, utilizing interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation, augments data reliability. Thematic analysis using NVivo was conducted iteratively to discern significant patterns in the data, and the findings were conveyed to participants and stakeholders with cultural sensitivity. The research ensured methodological rigor and ethical integrity while providing insights with actionable implications for improving women's leadership in BARMM governance.

Results and Discussion

The analysis follows the sequence of the research inquiries as follows: 1) The current representation of women in key decision-making positions within BARMM; 2) The cultural and societal dynamics influencing meaningful participation of women in governance; 3) The challenges faced by women in leadership roles affecting effective governance; 4) The contribution of women's participation to the development and implementation of policies within BARMM.

Current representation of women in key decision-making positions within the BARMM

Key themes that emerged from participants' responses include: Recognition of Women's Role in Decision-Making, Limited Representation, Gradual Progress, and Women's Representation.

Theme 1: Recognition of Women's Role in Decision-Making

Participant 1 highlighted the progress made in recognizing gender representation in decision-making roles within the BARMM. They emphasized the importance of acknowledging women's roles and the mandate of the Bangsamoro Women Commission (BWC), which explicitly includes women's empowerment in its objectives. Participant 1 stated:

"Gender representation has been recognized... it is highly significant to recognize the role of women in decision making."

This suggests that the acknowledgment of women's participation in governance has moved beyond tokenism to a more meaningful and integrated approach. The participant noted that many policies, projects, and services aimed at women are now in place due to the increased visibility of women's voices in decision-making.

While there has been progress, Participant 2 also mentioned the need to address further the participation and needs of women from grassroots communities, indicating that inclusivity in decision-making is still a work in progress:

"In the BARMM, I can see the existence and neutral status of women in several lenses... However, it is significant to address the participation and needs of our women from the community and other organizations."

This reflects the ongoing challenge of ensuring that women across sectors, especially those from marginalized or rural areas, are adequately represented and included in decision-making processes.

Numerous scholarly studies and policy reports support the conclusions that gender representation, diversity, and leadership impact in governance demonstrate both progress and enduring difficulties. While gender quotas have increased the number of women in many

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parliaments around the world, Hughes et al. (2017) note that their effectiveness varies depending on how they are enforced and on society's views of women in leadership roles. Similarly, Faugoo (2024) contends that women's decision-making power remains constrained by structural and cultural barriers, suggesting that numerical representation alone does not guarantee influence.

Lwamba et al. (2022) also highlight the significance of ensuring women's meaningful participation in leadership roles in addition to increasing their numbers. This supports research by Herre (2024), which shows that women are still underrepresented in important policymaking positions, even though the number of female lawmakers has increased globally. Koca (2022) also notes that although progress has been made, one of the hardest gaps to close is gender parity in political empowerment.

Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) bolster the idea that, although women now have more opportunities to hold leadership positions, obstacles such as implicit bias, expectations for work-life balance, and a lack of mentorship still limit their potential. They argue that inclusive governance necessitates systemic change beyond greater representation, including changes to institutional culture and policy.

Together, these studies support the notion that, despite advancements in gender representation, there are still major institutional, cultural, and structural obstacles to overcome. Initiatives in leadership development, cultural change, and policy innovation are among the ongoing efforts needed to address these.

Theme 2: Limited Representation

Participant 2 discussed the current state of gender representation in decision-making within the BARMM. They emphasized that while women's participation is formally included in governance roles, it is often symbolic and does not always translate into meaningful decision-making power. Participant 2 stated:

"Women's participation in governance is mostly symbolic, often to meet compliance rather than making real decisions."

This suggests that although women's roles are officially recognized, their influence in actual decision-making processes remains limited. Participant 2 noted that the representation of women is often minimal, and their involvement tends to be peripheral rather than central to governance structures.

Furthermore, Participant 4 highlighted the importance of continuing efforts to ensure that women's voices, especially from grassroots communities, are not only heard but also have a tangible impact. They expressed the need to push beyond symbolic participation:

"There is a need to ensure that women are not just participating on paper, but are genuinely involved in decision-making processes."

This reflects the ongoing struggle of women leaders to overcome the barriers that limit the full integration of women in governance, particularly at the local level.

Although gender quotas in local governance boost women's political representation, Chawla (2021) discovered that this does not always translate into increased influence. The study, conducted in India, found that although women elected to panchayats (local councils) gained prominence, they frequently encountered opposition from male counterparts and social norms that questioned their authority.

Similarly, Thelma and Ngulube (2024) highlight how women in African local governance structures frequently face obstacles due to a lack of institutional support and patriarchal norms. Their research revealed that informal networks dominated by men often undermine women's decision-making authority, even in leadership positions.

In the Philippines, women in local government frequently experience "double discrimination" as both women and local leaders find it difficult to gain political clout at the national level (Zhang & Zhang, 2021)The study emphasizes that although women now have more opportunities to hold political office, their influence is usually restricted to matters about society and the community rather than significant budgetary or policy choices.

Together, these studies support the conclusion that although women have made strides toward full participation and influence in local governance, ingrained structural and societal barriers still prevent them from doing so. To overcome these obstacles, mentorship programs, policy changes, and broader cultural shifts are needed to normalize women's leadership at all levels of government.

Theme 3: Gradual Progress

Participant 3 emphasized the ongoing, albeit slow, progress in increasing women's representation in decision-making positions in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). They noted that the number of female members in the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) Parliament has increased from 16% in 2019 to 20% in 2022, reflecting a positive trend. However, achieving the 50-50 gender balance, as stipulated in the Magna Carta of Women, remains a significant challenge. Participant 3 highlighted:

"Although women in BARMM may be few, they have a significant influence. The inclusion of women in decision-making roles is still a work in progress."

Also, participant 7 shared:

I've observed an evolving landscape where more women are taking on leadership and decision-making roles, especially in sectors

traditionally dominated by men. This shift is palpable within government agencies and local governance units."

This suggests that while there has been progress in the number of women in leadership roles, achieving gender parity in governance will take time and requires continued efforts. Despite the low numbers, women's influence remains impactful, and their participation in governance is essential for shaping policies that reflect their needs and concerns.

Recent research supports the finding that more needs to be done to achieve gender parity in governance, even with improvements in the representation of women in leadership roles. Women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly in less urbanized areas where gender norms are still prevalent, claim Bryan et al. (2024). Furthermore, Maguire (2018) emphasizes that women face greater obstacles at higher tiers of local government, where power dynamics favor established male networks. These barriers, often shaped by client politics and social structures, limit women's access to leadership opportunities, especially for those without mentorship and support to develop their skills.

The importance of women's and youths' meaningful participation in governance is highlighted in the Anabtawi et al. (2023) study, which corroborates the current findings. In Palestine's cities, villages, and refugee camps, they discovered that structural obstacles like political exclusion and restricted access to resources are common. The study highlights the value of women's participation in gender equality, accountability, and good governance by demonstrating that decision-making becomes more inclusive and effective when women participate.

The fact that CSOs are crucial in bridging the gap between marginalized communities and governance lends even more credence to the findings. According to Anabtawi et al. (2023), research on the Civil Society for Dignity project indicates that CSOs empower women through community planning, service delivery, and municipal governance. Furthermore, Hammoudeh et al. (2020) emphasize persistent gender differences in education, employment, and political participation that are exacerbated by sociopolitical problems. Despite these challenges, women remain strong, continue to have an impact on governance, and defend their rights. Despite advancements, these studies affirm that achieving gender parity in governance still requires removing institutional, social, and political barriers.

Together, these studies confirm that although there has been progress in increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, major structural obstacles still stand in the way of their achieving senior leadership roles. It will take consistent work to remove these obstacles, including changes to governance and workplace culture, leadership development, and policy reforms.

Cultural and societal dynamics that give meaningful participation of women in governance

The themes that emerged from the discussion on the cultural and societal dynamics influencing women's meaningful participation in governance are: Societal Norms, Overcoming Cultural Barriers, and Creating an Empowering Environment. The findings highlight how deeply ingrained cultural norms, religious interpretations, and socio-economic factors continue to shape women's involvement in leadership and decision-making roles.

While there is a growing recognition of women's contributions to governance, barriers such as economic dependence, limited access to education, and patriarchal societal expectations still hinder their full participation. The table also underscores the role of education, activism, and supportive leadership in empowering women to assume governance roles, particularly in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

Theme 1: Societal Norms

Participant 1 discussed how cultural and societal dynamics continue to shape women's participation in governance. They pointed to traditional beliefs about the roles of women in family and society as key constraints:

"Traditional beliefs about women's roles in the family and society, certain interpretations of religious texts and practices may restrict women's autonomy and decision-making power."

This statement suggests that despite advancements in legal frameworks or institutional support, deeply ingrained cultural norms continue to restrict women's autonomy, particularly in decision-making contexts. These traditional norms often hinder women from fully engaging in public life and governance.

Additionally, Participant 1 identified how societal perceptions of women's roles in the family could affect their ability to participate in leadership and governance. They stated:

"Their roles and responsibilities in the family may be considered as hindering factors by others, questioning their abilities due to societal perceptions and institutional barriers."

This highlights the dual burden that women often face—balancing family obligations with professional aspirations—leading to societal doubts about their leadership capacity.

As both primary carers and skilled professionals, women in leadership positions frequently have to balance competing expectations, as discussed by Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2016). Since women are frequently viewed more negatively than men when attempting to strike a balance between their family obligations and professional advancement, their research emphasizes how these societal

perceptions further impede women's progress.

Dhatt et al. (2017) also examine how, despite demanding jobs, working women still handle the majority of caregiving and household duties. This "second shift" restricts women's opportunities to seek leadership roles at the same pace as men, according to the study, which feeds prejudices about their suitability for high-stakes decision-making.

According to Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023), the societal expectation that women should put their families first prevents many of them from achieving leadership positions. According to the report, cultural norms in many societies continue to frame women's primary role as carers, raising questions about their long-term commitment to leadership roles.

Furthermore, Geys and Sørensen (2019) contend that conventional workplace structures were created with the "ideal worker" model in mind, which presupposes that a person has no caregiving duties. Because they are more likely to take on family responsibilities, women are disadvantaged by this model, which results in fewer leadership opportunities and ongoing gender gaps in career advancement.

These studies collectively affirm that the dual burden of family and career responsibilities remains a significant barrier for women in leadership. Addressing this requires systemic changes, such as workplace flexibility, parental leave policies, and cultural shifts that normalize shared caregiving responsibilities between men and women.

Theme 2: Overcoming Cultural Barriers for Women's Empowerment

Participant 3 shared insights into the cultural and societal dynamics that shape women's ability to participate in governance meaningfully. They noted that while women in BARMM are becoming increasingly empowered, deep-rooted cultural norms and societal expectations still pose challenges. Participant 3 explained:

"Women are becoming empowered to take on important roles in peacebuilding and governance in the BARMM, but overcoming cultural barriers requires collaboration across government, civil society, and the community."

The participant further highlighted that factors such as limited access to education, economic dependence, and family responsibilities often restrict women's involvement in governance. They stated:

"Economic dependence on male family members can further limit their autonomy to participate in governance."

This suggests that societal factors, such as limited educational opportunities and economic constraints, continue to affect women's ability to engage in leadership roles, despite their growing empowerment.

Kabeer (2015) points out that, even though women's empowerment has advanced in many nations, obstacles in education and the economy continue to limit their ability to assume leadership roles. According to the study, women from lower-income families often lack access to professional networks and higher education, both of which are necessary for advancing into leadership roles.

In a similar vein, Tembo (2021) notes that early marriage, cultural norms, and a lack of educational opportunities result in educational disadvantages for girls in many developing nations. Since higher education is often required for decision-making roles, this lack of education directly affects women's capacity to assume leadership roles.

According to the World Economic Forum (2023), economic inequality continues to impede women's career advancement, even as gender equality has improved in many areas. According to the report, women's leadership opportunities are disproportionately impacted by the gender pay gap, caregiving responsibilities, and a lack of financial independence.

According to UN Women (2020), financial obstacles prevent women from starting their own businesses or seeking political office, two crucial paths to leadership. The study found that when women lack financial resources, they struggle to gain the influence needed to participate in high-level decision-making.

Correll (2017) also contends that systemic problems, such as workplace discrimination and a lack of mentorship opportunities, make it harder for women to pursue leadership positions. According to the research, policies that support economic assistance, gender-inclusive workplaces, and access to education are essential for removing these obstacles.

Together, these studies show that although women's empowerment has advanced, structural societal factors still restrict their ability to assume leadership roles. Systemic reforms, such as funding for education, economic empowerment initiatives, and gender-sensitive policy changes, are necessary to remove these obstacles.

Theme 3: Creating an Empowering Environment

Participant 5 reflected on the cultural and societal dynamics that shape women's participation in governance. She noted that when leaders create a sense of belonging and encouragement, it motivates women to contribute meaningfully to society. She explained:

"When our leaders and those around us make us feel a sense of belonging, we feel deeply encouraged, valued, and grateful. This creates an environment where we feel comfortable expressing what we want to do for the betterment of our society."

However, she also pointed out a critical issue: gender-related budgets are often allocated solely for compliance purposes, which

undermines meaningful progress. She further stressed that a lack of priority given to gender issues perpetuates inequality, stating:

"When the topic of gender is not given adequate importance or priority, and gender-related budgets are allocated solely for compliance purposes, it undermines meaningful progress and perpetuates inequality."

She also acknowledged the significant roles that women have historically played in Islam, which continue to inspire leadership and community contributions. According to a study by Riyadi et al. (2021), women have historically played important roles in Islamic leadership. Notable examples include Khadijah, the Prophet Muhammad's first wife, who was a prosperous businesswoman and a major advocate of early Islam. Another illustration is Aisha, a well-known academic and political figure who was instrumental in disseminating hadiths and offering guidance on governance. Muslim women are still motivated by these historical examples, which demonstrate that Islamic women's roles have always included leadership and community service.

Similarly, Galloway (2017) dispels the myth that leadership is only for men in Feminism in Islam by examining how women have occupied political and social leadership positions across various Islamic societies.

Additionally, UN Women (2021) emphasizes that, to question social norms and advance gender-inclusive governance, modern Muslim women leaders often draw inspiration from the lives of historical Islamic women. The study highlights how programs in several Muslim-majority nations, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, have encouraged women to assume leadership roles in politics, business, and education, thereby enhancing their influence within communities. Furthermore, according to Ali (2016) in Islam and Female Leadership, cultural interpretations have frequently limited women's opportunities for decision-making, despite religious teachings that encourage it. According to these studies, women have always played important roles in Islam, but more work is required to guarantee that their leadership is acknowledged and encouraged in contemporary governmental systems.

Challenges faced by women in leadership roles in effective governance

Many of the challenges faced by women in top roles within the BARMM are a result of institutional gender norms and well- ingrained cultural expectations. Respondents noted several persistent obstacles that limit women's efficacy in governance, regardless of their positions of authority. Among the obstacles are gender preconceptions that cast doubt on women's skills, the strain of juggling leadership and household duties, and a lack of institutional support.

Women frequently find themselves in situations where men predominate, and their authority is either questioned or disregarded. Patriarchal views that place women as inferior to men in decision-making sometimes overshadow women's attempts at leadership. A lack of institutional support and respect severely constrains women's capacity to advance governance transformation and policy reform. Key themes that emerged are: work-life balance, patriarchal system, lack of support, and security concerns as major obstacles.

Theme 1: Work-Life Balance

A significant challenge identified by Participant 1 is the impact of family responsibilities on women's participation in governance. They highlighted the disproportionate caregiving roles that women assume, which often force them to prioritize family over career or leadership roles. Participant 1 observed:

"Women disproportionately shoulder caregiving and domestic responsibilities. Even pursuing a career, some women quit their job and choose to manage at home and take care of their family."

This clearly indicates that women's caregiving duties can limit their capacity for professional growth or engagement in governance, reinforcing the notion that societal expectations often force women into roles that diminish their public presence.

Moreover, Participant 1 emphasized that men, in contrast, can manage both financial and caregiving responsibilities, which allows them to remain engaged in governance and leadership:

"This limits their participation in governance, especially when men can afford to manage the financial needs that support the family."

This quote underscores the gendered nature of family responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women and restrict their full participation in the public and political spheres.

Hochschild and Machung (2017) emphasise how women are disproportionately burdened with household and caregiving duties due to traditional gender roles. According to their research, women handle the majority of domestic work, even in households with two incomes. This leaves them with less time and flexibility to take on leadership roles in politics and society. According to Christopherson Puh et al. (2016), women worldwide struggle to balance unpaid caregiving with professional development, especially in roles involving politics and decision-making. This disparity further under-represents women in governance.

Furthermore, Júlia et al. (2024) found that women are often pressured by society to prioritize their families over their career goals, which prevents them from fully engaging in public life. This is further supported by the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023), which shows that work-family conflicts are a common problem for women in leadership roles, hindering their career advancement and limiting their access to political decision-making. All of these studies support the idea that women will continue to face barriers to full participation in public life and governance unless structural changes are made, such as improved parental leave

policies, flexible work schedules, and shared household duties.

Theme 2: Patriarchal System

Participant 2 discussed the systemic challenges faced by women in leadership positions, especially at the barangay level. They pointed out that the deeply entrenched patriarchal system limits women's leadership opportunities, making it difficult for them to take on roles in conflict resolution and decision-making. Participant 2 remarked:

"At the barangay level, women's participation in leadership roles is still very limited. Patriarchal views often undermine their potential to lead."

This emphasizes the cultural and structural barriers that women face in leadership roles. Additionally, Participant 2 noted that local government units (LGUs) often fail to implement policies that would enable the full participation of women in leadership:

"There's a lack of gender-responsive policies in many LGUs, and the implementation of Gender and Development (GAD) programs is still inconsistent."

This points to the ongoing need for stronger institutional support and the implementation of gender-responsive policies to create an environment where women can thrive as leaders.

Krook and Mackay (2018) emphasize that gender-responsive policies, such as gender quotas and leadership training programs, are essential to fostering an environment in which women can thrive in leadership roles. According to their research, nations like Norway and Rwanda that have robust institutional support for women in leadership roles have seen increases in the number of women in positions of authority. According to Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2016), women still face obstacles such as political bias, a lack of mentorship, and restricted access to decision-making platforms unless systemic changes are made. According to the study, women's success in leadership roles is greatly influenced by gender-responsive policies, such as equal pay, fair hiring procedures, and anti-discrimination legislation.

Furthermore, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2022) found that women are more likely to enter and remain in executive and political roles when organizations adopt gender-sensitive policies, such as childcare assistance, flexible work schedules, and targeted leadership development. This is further supported by the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Report, which shows that women's leadership has steadily increased in nations where governments have actively supported gender-inclusive policies. These studies demonstrate that removing systemic barriers and creating a leadership environment where women can flourish require consistent institutional support.

Theme 3: Lack of Support

Participant 3 discussed several challenges that women face in leadership roles, particularly the lack of support for women-centered initiatives. They highlighted the struggles women often face when their leadership initiatives are not supported by the majority, stating:

"One notable challenge that women, particularly those in leadership roles, often encounter is the level of support they receive from the majority when initiatives are designed specifically for women."

They also pointed out the deeply ingrained cultural belief that leadership is predominantly a male domain, which undermines women's authority and effectiveness in governance. Participant 3 noted:

"The deeply entrenched belief in many cultures that leadership is predominantly a male domain results in women leaders being undermined and their authority questioned."

This reflects the ongoing societal challenge of gender bias in leadership, where women's authority is not always respected, limiting their ability to influence policy and drive change. According to a study by Tabassum and Nayak (2021), biases against women in leadership roles stem from societal expectations that often link leadership to characteristics traditionally associated with men. According to their research, women in positions of authority are less likely than their male counterparts to face questions or challenges, which hinders their capacity to influence policy effectively. Thelma and Ngulube (2024) postulate that women leaders encounter more scrutiny and opposition in settings where decisions are made, especially in fields and political arenas where men predominate. According to the study, even when women hold leadership roles, their power is often weakened, making it difficult for them to implement significant policy changes.

Furthermore, Heilman (2019) discovered that when women leaders exercise authority, they are often viewed negatively and are subject to harsher criticism than men. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2022), women's political influence remains constrained by gender bias, as evidenced by the frequent marginalization or assignment of less significant roles to female leaders. These studies suggest that without cultural shifts and structural support, gender bias will continue to hinder women's ability to drive significant policy and governance changes.

Theme 4: Security Concerns

Participant 6 shared her experiences of women in leadership positions facing significant challenges due to cultural norms and security

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concerns. She described how women in Rido settlements play crucial peacemaking roles but remain constrained by societal expectations. She explained:

"In Rido settlements, women play crucial roles but still have been limited by cultural norms. They are peacemakers and mediators, but it is challenging in some instances where conflicting parties are both enraged, and only women can pacify the situation."

Participant 6 shared that:

"Women in conflict-affected areas may be discouraged to active participation in governance due to safety issues and traumatic experiences."

She further emphasized the challenge women face in conflict-affected areas, where safety concerns and traumatic experiences discourage their active participation in governance. These challenges, coupled with religious misinterpretations and cultural traditions, often hinder women's effectiveness in leadership roles, particularly in conflict zones.

Contribution of women's participation to the development and implementation of policies within the BARMM

Investigating the contribution of women's participation to the development and implementation of policies within the BARMM, three key themes emerged: Women's Empowerment, Contribution to the Bangsamoro Women's Commission, Policy Creation and Monitoring, and Gender-Responsive Policy Involvement.

Theme 1: Women's Empowerment

Despite the challenges, Participant 1 recognized the transformative potential of women's involvement in governance, particularly through advocacy and policy development. They highlighted the role of women leaders in raising awareness of women's rights and promoting inclusive policies. Participant 1 noted:

"With the dedication and powerful advocacy and engagement of women leaders, many women in an organization actively recognized and helped fellow women to rise and actively participate."

This highlights the importance of female role models and leaders who advocate for gender equality, not only raising awareness about women's issues but also empowering other women to engage in governance and leadership.

Participant 1 also noted the role of the Bangsamoro Women's Commission in policymaking, stating:

"In the Bangsamoro Women Commission, as mandated for the primary policymaking body for women, the commission developed a policy for Women. Issues and concerns from the grassroots had been gathered and assessed."

This statement demonstrates the concrete impact of women's participation in policy formulation, ensuring that women's issues are addressed at the highest levels of governance. It also reflects the importance of grassroots involvement in shaping policies that directly affect women's lives.

Participant 1's reply represents both progress and current obstacles in women's representation and engagement in decision-making within the BARMM. These include the formal recognition of women in leadership, the ongoing cultural and societal hurdles that prevent women from fully participating, the impact of family duties on work-life balance, and the significant influence of women's advocacy in policymaking.

This aligns with Thelma and Ngulube's (2024) study, which asserts that the tangible effects of women's involvement in policy formulation are undeniable. Their research underscores that the inclusion of women ensures the consideration of gender-specific issues at the highest echelons of governance, thereby making policymaking more comprehensive and responsive. Moreover, they underscore the essential role of grassroots women's participation, demonstrating that when women at the community level influence policy formation, the outcomes are more grounded in lived experiences and foster more sustainable, inclusive development.

Theme 2: Contribution in Bangsamoro Women Commission

Participant 2 highlighted the positive impact of women's involvement in policy development, particularly through the Bangsamoro Women Commission (BWC). They discussed how women's voices have been integral in the creation of policies such as the Gender and Development Code, which seeks to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. Participant 2 mentioned:

"Women's participation has significantly contributed to the formulation of policies like the Gender and Development Code, which addresses women's issues directly."

This suggests that when women are actively involved in governance, they can influence policies that reflect their needs and concerns. The creation of the Gender and Development Code is one such example where women's perspectives have led to the establishment of concrete measures to improve gender equality.

However, Participant 2 also noted that while progress has been made, there is still work to be done to ensure that these policies are fully implemented and benefit women across all sectors of society:

"We need to ensure that the policies created are not just symbolic but are fully implemented to benefit women, especially those in marginalized communities."

This reflects the ongoing challenge of translating policy into practice and ensuring that women's rights are protected and upheld.

Participant 2's responses reveal a nuanced understanding of the challenges and progress regarding women's participation in governance. While formal representation has been achieved, real decision-making power remains limited due to cultural, societal, and institutional barriers. However, the establishment of frameworks like the Bangsamoro Women Commission and the Gender and Development Code demonstrates the potential for positive change when women are actively involved in governance.

Thelma and Ngulube (2024) clearly illustrate that women's active participation in governance can lead to positive change. Their research indicates that women's involvement enhances decision-making quality and fosters more inclusive, equitable policies. Women in leadership contribute distinct perspectives and priorities, particularly concerning education, healthcare, and community development, thereby facilitating reforms that benefit entire populations rather than isolated groups.

Theme 3: Policy Creation and Monitoring

Participant 2 emphasized the crucial role women play in the development and implementation of policies within BARMM. They noted that women's grassroots-level understanding of issues is essential for creating relevant, data-driven policies. Participant 2 remarked:

"Women's active participation is crucial for the development and implementation of policies within the BARMM."

They also pointed to the Bangsamoro Gender and Development (GAD) Code as a significant policy that integrates women's voices. The GAD Code ensures equal rights for all and empowers women to participate in various aspects of society. Participant 3 stated:

"The BARMM GAD Code serves as a groundbreaking and comprehensive policy framework that actively integrates the perspectives and contributions of women."

Additionally, Participant 9 highlighted the importance of women's engagement in monitoring the implementation of policies to enhance accountability and ensure that their perspectives are reflected in the outcomes, emphasizing:

"Women's active engagement in monitoring the implementation process of policy enhances accountability."

This underscores the critical role of women not only in shaping policies but also in ensuring that these policies are effectively executed and align with their needs and rights.

Theme 4: Creation of Gender-Responsive Policies Involvement

Participant 10 emphasized the important role women's participation plays in shaping policies within the BARMM, particularly through women's organizations. She noted that these organizations have been instrumental in identifying gaps and challenges, ensuring these issues are addressed in the policy development process. She said:

"Various women's organizations in the community have actively shared their gaps and challenges, contributing valuable insights to ensure these issues are addressed during policy development."

She also pointed to the GAD Code, which is undergoing public hearings and is expected to have a significant impact once implemented. Moreover, she highlighted the role of grassroots women and organizations in drafting and validating policies through the Bangsamoro Women Commission, which directly influences the formulation and execution of policies. She stated:

"Through the Bangsamoro Women Commission, numerous grassroots women and organizations actively participated in the drafting and validation of policies developed and implemented in the BARMM."

Despite advancements in gender representation, cultural norms, family responsibilities, and educational impediments continue to impede women's full involvement in governance. However, thanks to determined campaigning and the continued work of organizations such as the Bangsamoro Women Commission, women's voices are increasingly dictating policies that lead to a more inclusive government system in the BARMM. This discovery is consistent with the research conducted by Indigay et al. (2024), which underscores the increasing impact of women's involvement in the Bangsamoro Women Commission. Their research demonstrates that women's voices are no longer peripheral in the BARMM; instead, they are becoming more central to the policymaking process. This active engagement is fostering a more inclusive and representative government, illustrating the transformative potential of women's leadership when meaningfully integrated into governance structures.

Conclusions

The findings indicate a multifaceted and dynamic situation regarding women's representation in governance in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Despite increasing recognition of women's contributions to decision-making, their actual representation remains constrained. Participants recognised a gradual yet evident transition towards enhanced inclusion, emphasising the importance of cultural and societal backing in maintaining this progress. Despite structural alterations, societal norms

and conventional gender expectations continue to restrict women's active and substantive involvement in governance, underscoring the necessity for representation to transcend mere symbolic presence and encompass genuine influence and empowerment.

Moreover, women leaders in BARMM face significant challenges, including reconciling professional duties with domestic obligations, navigating patriarchal opposition, navigating perilous political landscapes, and operating without adequate institutional backing. Nonetheless, their contributions—especially via organizations such as the Bangsamoro Women's Commission have resulted in the establishment of gender-responsive policies and enhanced frameworks for policy development and oversight. These outcomes underscore that women's participation enhances governance processes and guarantees that policy decisions are more inclusive and representative of varied community needs.

A multifaceted approach is essential to sustain and enhance women's influence in governance. Cultural and political institutions in BARMM may support initiatives to dismantle patriarchal frameworks and foster women's leadership through targeted education, mentorship, and policy advocacy. Initiatives that promote work-life balance, strengthen women's security in politics, and provide leadership training are imperative. Furthermore, enhancing grassroots platforms for women's civic engagement and bolstering the capabilities of organizations such as the Bangsamoro Women's Commission may elevate women's voices and integrate gender inclusivity as a fundamental principle in governance.

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Affiliations and Corresponding Information

Hasana M. H. Malic
Bangsamoro Women Commission – Philippines

Nenita I. Prado
Liceo de Cagayan University – Philippines