

Understanding Empowerment Through Women-Led Organization Members in Cotabato City, Southern Philippines

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ABSTRACT:

This study was conducted to describe and verify women led-organization members engagement in empowerment process in Cotabato City. Focus group discussion and individual interviews were used to gather data and were translated and analyzed using qualitative method. Data revealed that women faced powerlessness, financial dependence, and condescension from their husband. However, their engagement in the women-led organization brought changes in their lives. They acquired different program interventions rendered by the different humanitarian agencies. They were exposed to several trainings inside and outside the city, attended extensive education on women's rights and gender development and received support in micro-finance and skills training. As a result, these women were capacitated and had realized their potentials. They have demonstrated self-confidence, healthy family relationship, peaceful assertion, positive independence and deeper consciousness. They were appreciative to the Government and Non- Government Organizations for the aid they had provided.

Keywords: Empowerment, Women led- organizations, community , organizing, community interventions

Introduction

Globally, women and girls continue to experience discrimination, inequality, and poverty as a matter of fact, in the worldwide job market, women still make on average, 23% less than males, and they put in around three times as many hours performing unpaid caregiving and household duties (United Nations, 2023). Zeilenger (2013) specified four women issues that have not changed since 1911. First, men dominate many of the most esteemed professional fields and get paid more for their work. Second, work stress disproportionately impacts women. Third, women's workplace is frustrating due to gender-based wage gap and occupational segregation. Finally, women are doubling up on work at home

and outside of the home. In spite of this reality, women play a major role in society because of their effective participation using their skills and abilities (Mojumder, 2020).

Moreover, women empowerment is a pathway to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and sustainable development. In similar view, the National Statistical Coordination Board (2013) reported that women are active players of MDGs, especially on the goal of achieving full and productive employment, decent work for women, and the promotion of gender equality . Indeed, women empowerment can serve as a mechanism for effecting deep and widespread social development as it promotes social inclusion, empowering the vulnerable, building

cohesive and resilient societies, and making institutions accessible and accountable to citizens.

In the Philippines, Filipino women still suffer from domestic violence, prostitution, discrimination, exploitation and gender-based violence (Cayabyab, 2024). But according to Fusilero (2012) Filipino women improved performance in the fields of education, health and survival economic participation and political empowerment.

In the Philippines, several organizations are committed to empower women across different sectors of society. As of today, there were more than a hundred registered women organizations in Philippines (Society Magazine, 2024). Accordingly, women-led organizations are vital to ensure the peace and security agenda. Thus, effective organizing is the foundation of the process of change. Women led-organization does not only promote independence and cohesion but also provides training and education. They also developed tools and skills of community organizing to work for the empowerment of the community ("Community Organizing," 2000).

In the Province of Cotabato, women paved way in advancing gender equality. One of the women led- organizations organized was the Kalipunan ng Liping Pilipina (KALIPPI), an all-female association that specializes in food processing and fruit and vegetable preservation. The Local Government Unit and the Sustainable Livelihood Program provided the association with Skills Enhancement Training. They utilized the seed capital fund they were given for their microbusiness. These women were supported in their projects such as micro entrepreneurs, smallholder farmers and low-skilled workers to improve their skills, income, and access to markets (Reeder, 2015).

Although, women are now recognized as partners in nation building, still it is a long way to close gender gap due to unfavorable situations of women in the society. None the less, this study explored the circumstances of women on how they unburdened the ropes of oppression towards empowerment and also to identify the women-led organization's role in changing their lives.

Methodology

The study used qualitative method through focus group discussion and interviews. Focus group discussion offers an actual means to evaluate outlooks, attitude, ideas, and experiences (Luke & Goodrich, 2019). Moreover, it gives opportunity to immediately add or to clarify, and either confirm or renounce certain ideas or information that one member expressed or presented (Cuizon, et al., 2008). The interview was focused on the participant's personal encounters, feelings, and views.

Three women-led organizations such as KALIPPI, UNYPAD-WAC, and Umpunggan ng Babai sa Bagua 2 (UBB2) were invited. Participants were identified as active members at least six year member of the organization. Five women for individual interview and three sets of focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted. Each FGD which consisted of six members were represented by the members from each woman organization. There were eighteen (18) women participants in all who had experienced empowerment in their homes and communities where they belong.

In this study, the participants gave their feedback, experiences and perceptions on the services that were rendered to them by the organizations. FGD protocol was also observed. After sending formal letter to the organization, the researcher was helped by the organization leaders in choosing the participants in FGD and those for individual interview.

The identified participants were given informed consent forms to accomplish. Those who agreed to be part of the research were invited in one meeting place for the interview. FGDs were held in the Barangay Center and others in the house of their organization leaders. It was made sure that the interview setting was free from background noise and interruptions. They ranged from 180 to 190 minutes in length. Before the conduct of the FGD permission to use a tape recorder was sought from the participants. The participants viewed the transcript of their interview and were encouraged to listen to the recording, and at that time they were also encouraged to provide any additional thoughts.

In this research, there were positive circumstances that helped the researcher in data gathering feasible and convenient. The target area was accessible and beforehand had obtained permission from the Offices of the Local Government Unit and the Barangay Unit. The researcher was assisted by colleagues and students in community integration.

During the interview process the researcher used tape recording while jotting down notes. The researcher was able to transcribe all the relevant information and interpreted the recorded narrations, and was assisted by a helper in doing field notes to capture information that was essential or necessary to the study.

In qualitative research, words and observations are data to be analyzed and it is primary means of knowledge production (Adler, 2022). The researcher was able to examine the transcriptions of the participants, as Ogill (2002) specified. The researcher was able to identify not only the similar experiences, but also the differences between them. In this process, the researcher developed initial categories that described different people's experiences of the given phenomenon. After covering multiple aspects of that phenomenon, the researcher developed the categories that explained all kinds of variations in the data. Based on initial categories, the researcher re-examined the transcripts to determine whether the categories were sufficiently descriptive, were reviewed further for internal consistency of the categories of description. This process of modification and data review continued until the modified categories seemed to be consistent with the interview data.

Results and Discussion

Powerlessness, financial Dependence

and Condescension

One of the realities revealed in the FGDs is powerlessness felt by the women. This is indicated by circumstances such as lack of power to make choices. Most informants said they could not even make their own decisions on styles of dresses to wear, food to prepare, with whom to make friends, organizations to join, items to

purchase, religion to practice, and the manner of upbringing of the children especially in imposing discipline.

"Kahit sa pagpili ng style ng damit, parang wala akong kalayaan noon. Ayaw nya ang pagsuot ng shorts, pati sleeveless, dahil raw nagtatawag pansin". (Even in the choice of dress style I did not seem to have freedom before. Wearing shorts and sleeveless was prohibited because it can catch attention [FGD2- 25])

Some women expressed dismay over the situation of financial dependency they previously felt. They were one in saying and expressing their exasperation as to what was happening to their marital life and their financial emptiness during those days. They shared the same experiences and almost the same feelings of anger and frustration. The emotional revelation was a chain of reaction from other participants who affirmed the state or condition of what one felt who did not have any money at all as if marriage was just for convenience of one side, not a partnership. Some relayed their sad story of the difficulty of depending everything that you needed and wanted from the husband. That was why they said their husbands were selfish, cruel, and unkind.

One participant revealed that her husband was a good provider because food was abundant but she felt that something was lacking in her life. She liked to enjoy a degree of freedom where she could decide what was good for the children and for herself. That time, she said if only she graduated in college, her life would be different.

"Nai- insecure ako kasi hindi ako nakapagtapos mag -ara, kung nakapagtapos lang ako sana di ganito ang buhay ko" (I felt insecure because I was not able to finish my studies, if graduated, my life was not like this).

The others assented to such declaration of the participant and they shared the same hope and prayer during those days for a better life than being dependent on their husbands for a lifetime.

The participants revealed that they were belittled by their husbands. They were not entrusted with the finances of the family and they were humiliated in front of their children. There was

one participant who willingly shared a sad incident because she tried to commit suicide. Feeling devastated of her situation, she sliced her wrist with a sharp blade and let herself bleed. To her, killing herself would end her misery. That incident opened the husband's mind and heart. The husband had serious talk with her then. According to her, the husband showed pity on her, became kind, loving, and concerned. But it was not long enough for after a couple of months, her husband again became insistent on things that she should do. She thought of running away but for the children's sake, she kept the marriage.

After revealing all sentiments, hardships, ill - feelings and insecurities, this researcher asked how they had moved away from such inhuman treatment and mental torture that made their lives miserable and unbearable. This researcher saw how their faces beamed with joy indicating a triumph of overcoming physiological and psychological obstacles and social inequity in the very home they dreamed to be best at first but turned horrible and miserable.

As gathered in this study, the life experiences of the participants in their homes showed that they felt powerless against their husbands' domination. This result is similar and the only solution is silence. Cooper (2014) constructed that powerlessness can be inner and outer experience. Inner, is when the person feels depressed, hopeless, frustrated and angry. Outer, when one wants to control others and to go to other extreme of being in complete control of the environment, for some it will lead to internal feelings visible by the outside world, it could be in the form of one who is always the victim, unfortunate and as a slave to circumstances.

This study also showed that the majority of the participants were elementary and high school graduates which indicate the importance of education to a person's life. Such lack of education contributed to their powerlessness. This result supports Matera's (2015) view that lack of education is the reason behind powerlessness. He further said that education is power, can boost confidence and make individual independent.

The participants experienced financial dependence. The same result came out in the study of Crouch (2011), who pointed out that financial dependency, can lead to a crisis and can ruin marriage. In the same view, Salamone (2010) believed that women who were financially dependent on their husbands may result to domestic violence. Even women who left their homes, would go back and stay with their abusive husbands due to lack of money.

The condescension experience of the participants upholds on the statement of Tucker (2015) that condescending attitude weakens a happy marriage. The wife is the loneliest when married to a condescending husband. She is in constant pressure to do or say the right thing to avoid humiliation.

Community Organizing and

Community Interventions

The participants affirmed in unison that in their bitter world, they had found community women-led groups who visited their homes. They were first reluctant to receive them in their homes for fear that their husbands might arrive home at unannounced times.

Extensive education was provided by the organization that they joined. UNYPAD-WAC educated them on the rights of women, their potential capabilities and the extent of contribution they could give to participants in building their skills in counseling, community organizing, conflict management especially in the conduct of dialogue. The participants were taught that fighting against the husband was not a fair resolution of the conflicts. The approach they used was dialogue gal and preventive. They learned that they should try not to be the person the husband dislike or they should not do the things that the husband saw repulsive.

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) extensively educated them on human rights. They were also taught on what to do in cases of domestic violence or violence to wives and their children. They were also taught about the syndicates doing women

trafficking and the steps to do when they suspect traffickers.

The participants were delighted that they were fully aware of their rights and were able to practice them. One participant said that her husband no longer stopped her to attend meetings since he saw the result of her wife's undertakings. Other participants became better and wiser persons. One participant added that she was able to manage her time to take care of her eleven children and president of the organization at the same time.

Moreover, they were also trained to make street food like kikiam, fishball and siomai. Since they were residing near the river which is abundant with water hyacinth, they learned to make handicraft using water hyacinth material such as: bags, mats, and slippers, decorative and other stuffs. They also learned how to make rugs out of used clothes or cloth.

Meanwhile the UUB2 trained the women to make herbal soaps, indigenously prepared lagundi syrups, skin ointments and turmeric powder as food supplement, oregano cough juice and others. The livelihood skills development went beyond mere development of skills. Such training included special relevant lessons on hygiene and production of medicines from locally available medicinal herbs.

Significant concerns emerged from the findings of the study. The interventions provided by women organizations to which the participants affiliated as members ingrained in their consciousness the importance of inalienable human rights law, specifically on the women's rights to equality, justice, and integrity. The findings imply a great demand for education as indicated by their powerlessness which affirms Matera's (2015) view on gender gap to education.

The findings reported in this study premised on the United Nation's Millennium Development Goal agendum on women empowerment (1996) extended our knowledge of deplorable conditions of disadvantaged women and their perspectives of exploring possibilities to unloose gender inequality and to experience women empowerment. These perspectives are set in the

concrete world of actual situations and particular activities of the women under study.

The positive results of this study on the women organizations' major role to educate the participants for change in their lives support other theorists' views like Davis (2014) and Peet and Hartwick (2009) on effective processes of social organizations for social development.

Self-Worth, Health Family Relationship, Community

leadership, Peaceful Assertion, and Positive independence

Through extensive education, the lessons which focus on human rights and women's rights have enlightened the consciousness of women that they have the right to defend themselves, and that they can rise above regular inequality and reach to the highest point the empowerment of women not only in their homes but as well in the community. The long years of struggle for empowerment provided robust experiences towards personal and social development of women, such: self-worth to community leadership, peaceful assertion, positive independence and deeper consciousness.

Having ingrained in their consciousness human rights and women's rights, education has opened their realization of their worth as a human being. This self-worth sank in their consciousness. It has a great value to their existence. So it has to be developed with strong self-confidence.

In the FGD, the women revealed that gradually they developed confidence. They said that the lessons they learned made them realized that they were not inferior to anyone especially to their husbands. They also have realized that their lack of confidence was their own making. They committed errors and they allowed others to look down on them. Now they have learned to assert that they too have skills and potentials they could be equal with others.

As a manifestation of their leadership skills training and involvement in the community, some of them shared what they had become. According to the participants they were glad that people trusted them and believed in their capacities. But

some of the participants also said that even if they were not elected as officers, they believed that they were leaders in their own way by becoming role models to their children, relatives and other members in the community and by showing initiatives and being active in the organization.

The participants said that they did not violently confront their husbands when they learned from the training and seminars that they were violated, marginalized, oppressed, and abused. They simply shared what they learned and educated the husband about what a beautiful home there would be when each other's rights were respected or each other's choices were considered in making decisions. Although they said it was not easy because the husbands' had tendencies to assert for their powers. Peaceful assertiveness was not only shown towards the husband but also to the neighbors and other members of the organizations. They have learned to peacefully assert during meetings and ordinary conversations, unlike before when they would always insist on what they thought was right. They have realized how to express their best alternative to convince others and they did this calmly.

The participants have revealed that they have realized that they have accountabilities to God, their family, the community and especially to their customers. They always considered the mandates of their religion which is above all else. They have also realized that they are part of their community because this is where their residence is located. They have accountability to participate in nation building and which they cannot do alone but with others in the community. Also they have realized that they have accountability to their customers that is why their goods should be hygienically prepared, justly priced and not hazardous.

The participants have learned to investigate on social problems existing in their community. They have done interventions to alleviate the suffering and problems of others such as helping the IDPs, persons with disability, disadvantaged women, and street children. They have learned to advocate human rights, respect for cultural differences. They have shown support to the peace talks and the approval of the Bangsamoro Basic Law. They

are now on the process of replicating the programs that they availed through the support of the organizations.

The positive results of this study on women's empowerment showed subsequent effects in many instances of their actual experiences, such as community participation for community development. The participants stood for what is right. When they witness violence or abuses in their community, they would raise awareness to their neighbors on the consequences of doing such. One participant said that she was called "pakialamera" when she confronted a parent who was physically maltreating her own child. She grabbed the child and told the parent to call a police and be punished by the law. Another participant also said when her neighbor ran to her and asked for help because of physical abuse, she counseled her and used her home for protection.

Furthermore, their concern was not just limited to their family and neighbors, but also to the community. They initiated activities that contributed to the cleanliness of the Barangay. They conducted seminar in waste management, and it was participated by the non-members of the organization. Also, they participated in the Linis sa Barangay Program, and promoted "Bantay Karahasan" where they became the guards and watchers of the Barangay where they are expected to report cases of violence in the neighborhood.

The participants inculcated the essence of unity among the members of the organization. They said that they were able to help other members in supporting their needs. Whenever members were in difficult times, they lent money, or sometimes visited and gave advises to them. Sometimes they gave assistance not only to the members but also to the community who needed help in availing social services in DSWD or LGU.

In addition, they have leaned on each other's arms. Whenever one had a problem, they would try to help in any way possible. In fact they got affected when the other members in their organization had troubles. If this happened they would try to meddle and fix whatever difficult situations they were in.

The above results bear semblance of other theorists views on the major roles of community participation by concerned individuals to achieve community development like Reid (2000) and Wates (2000). The result of this study is similar with Matera's (2015) view on the importance of education. The findings imply the need to study further on the reflection process that the women participants undertook which was not the concern of this study. Likewise, the culture of silence that the participants adopted implies a further study. They were similar to Paulo Freire's (1970) culture of silence which resulted in his so-called process of reflection. The manifestations of empowerment experiences as declared verbally by participants do not depict a general result as general findings of the study. However, the findings of the study have underscored a definite picture whereby participants have departed from their caged-life and have become reactionaries and actors in supporting other people's need and community improvement of the Barangays where they belong. From the findings, this study indicated worthwhile results that the participants have had long struggle of women empowerment experiences towards demonstrated positively personal and social development premised on the paradigms of self-worth and healthy family relationship, social values of community involvement and community leadership, peaceful assertion, positive independence, and deeper consciousness.

Conclusion

After a thorough analysis of the data presented by the participants in this study, it is clearly shown that women's empowerment was an outcome of women's organization interventions which awakened the women's deep consciousness to struggle and put an end to a miserable life of powerlessness, dependency, and condescension.

The participants' affiliation in an organization provided them training sessions on human rights and women's rights that made the participants realized of their right to defend themselves, to rise above gender inequality, and to exercise empowerment in their homes and later in their communities. The study shows that empowerment is a step by step process caused directly by women's actual engagement in group learning of human rights concepts, conflict management, and livelihood skills in food processing and herbal processing to earn an income. The deprivation among women were opened by the intrusion of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Government Organizations (GOs) into their meek and deplorable lives. The women's long yearning of hope saw the beam of light in their weekly encounter with trainers of the women's organization. The pains and anguish also faded gradually as these disadvantaged women found comfort and care from each other in the very place where lecture sessions and livelihood skills training were held. Their entry into the women's organization were at first partly doubtful for fear of husbands anger and subsequent unknown undesirable actions. But at the back of their minds; their powerlessness, dependency, condescension were enough grounds to cross the barriers that hinder their personal development. The empowered women in this study gained self-worth, healthy family relationship, peaceful assertion, positive independence, and deeper consciousness. The study reveals a very obvious truth that when women engaged in organizations their full potentials will be realized. Indeed, women organization can provide mutual trust, care, and share livelihood skills training and support in building the foundations of women empowerment to social development.

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