

## Realities of Internally Displaced Persons in Armed Conflict: Narratives from Maguindanaon Women

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the narratives of women in Maguindanao as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). This qualitative multiple-case study aims to describe and explore the experiences of Maguindanao women IDPs during the armed conflict. Moreover, this study explained experiences in detail to develop a comprehensive understanding of the IDPs' narratives. Their strategies and coping mechanisms were also discussed. Through in-depth interviews and analysis, significant themes were noted. The results show that women IDPs are the most affected during armed conflicts. They assume the roles of men and stand to protect their children. These results imply that IDPs need the support of government institutions and other organizations to improve the quality of their lives. More attention and effort must be dedicated to this marginalized sector of the community.

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## INTRODUCTION

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are hugely affected by armed conflict, and their lives are frequently disregarded. Armed conflicts devastate people, families, communities, and nations. This societal problem not only annihilates the present but also disable future. Their experience in areas of violence could generally have reaching effects on their overall social functioning (Qayoom, 2014). IDPs receive very little or no attention from the government of their habitual residence. These people leave their comfort for uncertainty elsewhere that triggers insecurity within them, not to mention the minimal attention received from the government (Ejiofor, Oni, & Sejoro, 2017). Armed conflict is triggered by problems and the identity, ethnicity, faith, or competition for resources, so for women, it is a time of direction as they take over roles historically performed by men. Besides, the difficulty of women's worth resides in their productive and procreative labor power and their possessions and access to valuable assets, like land and livestock (Turshen, 2000). Conflict shapes women's constraints, determines their selections, and drives their socioeconomic outcomes (Heit, 2012). Although the status of women in the twenty-first century is greatly improved globally, social structures and prejudices still hinder women's rights. These rights should be fully and immediately implemented all over the world. Many women are victims of violence that usually stay socially invisible (Krstic & Stankovic, 2018). Women are suffering unfairly from armed conflict. In recent years, violence against women in armed conflicts has received a lot of attention. Indeed, in this case, the process of recognizing women's unique experiences and proving the law's failure to address them has progressed faster than in armed conflict-specific groups. Armed conflict has a distinct impact on women today compared to men. (Gardam & Charlesworth, 2000). The conflict outlays thousands of lives, internal displacements, and property destruction, and the war results are so detrimental (Chawade, 2016).

On the other hand, while there have been researches on IDPs, there have been very few studies in the Philippines that concentrate on the experiences of Moro women as they flee for their lives and try to survive during armed conflict. Women IDPs' situations have received less recognition than their actual circumstances; recent research has focused on refugees, but IDPs also need attention.

The purpose of this qualitative-multiple case study is to produce concise, brief documents describing the experiences, coping mechanisms, and learning insights of women of Maguindanao who were displaced during armed conflict. Family case studies in Mindanao are explored to understand narratives of Maguindanao women as internally displaced persons. In this study, the experience was also explained in detail to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the situation of internally displaced persons. This case study presents the experiences of women in Maguindanao who became internally displaced persons, not by choice. Further, this study shall intend to look for, listen to, and seize the stories of women of Maguindanao during the armed conflict through their narratives and how they were able to survive the

challenges and difficulties of their situation. The study details further how women in the evacuation or campsite cope and learn after armed conflict and how they manage to continue their lives amid the chaos.

### **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

In this part of the research, we were able to identify the different theories that would explain the participants' experiences and how they were able to do something about their situation. This study is viewed from the lens of system theory. The theory emphasized that natural systems are open to and interact with their environments and acquire qualitatively new properties through emergence, resulting in continual evolution (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992). Also, systems theory states that behavior is influenced by a range of things that labor as a system. This study involved analyzing how society adapts to its environment through adjustments in its structure, with important implications for understanding social order. Systems theory reveals the complexity of social evolution and, on this basis, stresses the limited possibility of steering society. On the other hand, because society is vastly complex, social scientists can appreciate the extensive range of adaptive possibilities for social systems (Gibson, 2019).

Further, the study of Zamzam (2016) reveals that the majority of IDPs depend on humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs, with women being the primary recipients of aid; this has resulted in shifts in gender norms. Women could engage in economic activities and manage their households and families because of changes in gender norms. Still, they were irritated by the difficulty of performing both male and female roles. Also, displacement continues to shift family and household structures and gender roles. Except in situations where families can remain together, relocation causes extreme stresses on the entire family, to the point where divorce is widespread in IDP environments. On both factors, the number of female-headed households would significantly rise in times of displacement. This situation puts a heavy burden on women as they become the sole breadwinners for their families. Still, in most migration cases, limited economic resources and patriarchal policies make it difficult for displaced women to discharge their responsibilities fully (Mooney, 1998).

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, it applied qualitative research using multiple case studies. Further, in representational inquiry, qualitative researchers seek real-world settings inductively to develop narrative explanations and construct case studies. Inductive analysis generates trends and themes across situations, the fruit of qualitative analysis (Patton, 2005).

The research participants in this study were five women who experienced armed conflict. All of them were Maguindanaon. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling base on the criteria of my study. The participants who took part in this study fled their homes due to unrest and were relocated to the Municipality of Guindulungan, Maguindanao. They remained there even after the war ended in their area. They lived and settled in Municipality pf

Guindulungan, Maguindanao because it provided them with stability and provided them with a means of earning a living.

From the interview guide, the data gathered were transcribed, analyzed, coded, and interpreted. The description analysis was guided by the occurrence of the developing themes, and these themes were coded and interpreted accordingly. Words and phrases that appeared to be similar meanings were grouped into the same category. These categories were gradually replaced and re-evaluated to find out how they were linked. In essence, the analysis involves removing significant statements from transcribed interviews so that the main phrases and statements that speak straight to the phenomenon in question can be extracted.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aimed to learn about internally displaced people's firsthand experiences and go beyond through in-depth interviews. As survivors of armed conflict, this centered on the heart of the topic, which enhanced their understanding of their emotions, points of view, interpretation, observations, and feelings.

This paper drew insights and awareness for all women displaced due to armed conflict and are still coping with the situation. There are three research questions in this study. Each has probing questions that served as the guide for the in-depth interviews. The first research question was about the experiences of Maguindanao women IDPs in armed conflict. The second was how the Maguindanao women IDPs cope with the challenges and difficulties brought by the armed conflict. The third was concerned with insights the participants can share with the community about their experiences.

### *IDPs Experiences in Armed Conflict*

The participants stated that learning how to make their shelter was a must for them, as they do not rely on their husbands. They have learned it from experience. They took the initiative to survive and find ways to make a living. As Nor said, she did not expect to learn how to do body massage in their community as her neighbors seek her help for their children since the clinic was out of reach for them to do a consultation. All five of them learned how to chop wood and make charcoal out of them. They used the abundant crops in their area to make a living. The majority of the displaced persons receive no educational opportunities or skills training that will help them to earn. In most displaced settings, data collection is inadequate or non-existent; thus, data on education might not be available. Most IDPs have limited opportunities for income generation (Benjamin, 1998).

The participants stated that they had a hard time living. They had to eat anything edible for their survival. Moreover, they knew that strangers were going to enter their area as the armed conflict started. Nor said that she had to warn her children not to go out for their safety. They had to evacuate their houses at dawn to avoid the armed conflict. As Ara stated, she had difficulty during the armed conflict as she does not know what to do. She was scared that she couldn't bring anything. It was difficult to be subjected to such an

occurrence when you were fleeing for your life, and all you could think of was your children's welfare. As war disrupts social, economic, and gender hierarchies, women conjointly tackle financial and political responsibility as heads of households and communities and as leaders in peace and reconciliation (Rivera, 2011).

The informants revealed that they looked for ways to make a living. It was a challenging experience, because they had nothing to eat. As Bai said, every time they evacuate, it was tough getting water and food. In the information coming from UNICEF report, as of March 2018, around 30,000 people were suffering per month, 1.5 million were living with a permanent handicap, 6.5 million were suffering from food shortages, 70% of the population was living in extreme poverty, and 1.75 million of the children were not able to attend school, with one out of every three schools unfit for use due to the war (Vincent, 2017).

Mot narrated that her husband drove a motorbike while she sold food near the school, since their children were still little, and she couldn't leave them behind. Nor thought that charcoal-making was hard because they do not make it easily. Relying on this was quite difficult. Also, farming was the only thing they could do. They left their livelihood behind, and that is why life was hard. Women are more likely to finish up as displaced persons, while being the only caretaker for their children. Women and girls need to cope as heads of household, often in environments where, even in peacetime, a girl on her own has few rights. And having fled, they may find themselves prone to attacks and rape while they find refuge. In a hostile environment, without access to essential services, women are expected to supply the necessities for themselves and their families (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2003).

### *Coping Mechanisms of the IDPs*

All the informants did find a way for them to survive. They worked hard to seek job along with their husband. Their children served as their strength. They wanted their children to have a good education because that was the only wealth they could keep, and the majority of them were not given a chance to study. Everything they have learned during the war became helpful at present. They were very thankful that they had learned those things.

The participants stated that they chopped wood to sell at the market so that they could eat. They looked for possible jobs since most of them stated that they do not rely much on their husbands. They must do something to feed their children. Ara said that she had to work on a farm to buy things since they cannot bring anything while on the run, and charcoal-making was the only thing she knew.

All the informants had stated that the strategies they did for them to earn and survive were effective. Mot said that she was able to support the education of her children by charcoal-making and to peddle food to their neighbors. The children were able to eat because of their hard work.

The participants said that their environment helped them a lot to survive their situation. The neighbors could help them by giving them advice on what to do in their situation since they also experienced it. Nor said that the

neighbors helped her. If they knew possible work, they included her. Also, Apay said that while on the run, her neighbors helped her carry her children. They were helping one another.

The participants stated that despite their situation, they remained faithful to God. They believed that everything would pass and there will always be a reason for their experiences. Mot said that she always remembers the oneness of God and that everybody dies no matter what. She accepted that she couldn't go back. Also, Bai said she must ask for guidance from above regardless of the suffering. She knew that if you have faith, you will overcome whatever you are going through. You just have to keep the faith.

### *Implications*

The plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) around the world is nothing new, but how are we going to change the fact that we can support and inspire them so that they can continue to live and work for the sake of their families despite their circumstances. Because of rebel groups, Muslims versus Christians, family feuds, natural calamities, and other factors, people in the Philippines, especially in Maguidanao, have been forced to migrate from one place to another for decades.

For social workers dealing in situations like these, they must understand the wishes of the IDPs, as mentioned. This has been going on for decades, and IDPs have grown up in that kind of atmosphere, which is disturbing because they have become used to it. There are no other organizations or departments to support their needs, despite the fact that there were agencies that addressed their needs in the past. Often, because of the exposure, they really need to discuss the mental wellbeing of the IDPs. According to the participants, time heals them. It happened a long time ago without the assistance of professionals, but it affects them again as they experience the same situation. Furthermore, they should receive vocational training and financial support to help them develop their skills and start a new life, whether they live inside or outside the camp.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this research. I made a list of my observations. Learning new skills was daunting at first because of the IDPs' backgrounds, such as being the family's support system and immediately trying to do your best in taking care of your children. Also, life in the camp was challenging as the participants did not have any basic necessities like water, food, and clothing.

Second, their coping mechanisms not only empowered and inspired their family but also the people around them. They continued to prioritize Allah and entrusted their case to him. The participants come up with several ways to feed themselves and earn money. Even though they had nothing to sell, they supported each other. Most of the participants were unable to attend school due to poverty, and most of them got married at an early age, as it was common in their culture.

We must never forget that being an IDP is not an option and that no one likes it in any circumstances. This is a reality that citizens have become used to.

However, it should not have been the case. The government should take steps to put an end to the war and encourage people to live in peace and safety. Also, the fundamental obligation and responsibility of national authorities are to provide protection and humanitarian support to internally displaced persons within their authority.

Moreover, the authorities responsible for the displacement must guarantee that the displaced persons are supplied with adequate accommodation to the fullest degree possible.

The findings of the study would aid in empathizing with the plight of internally displaced persons when they are in evacuation centers or while on the run. They noticed that they were learning without even realizing it and that they are taking up new skills. They could do even masculine work if needed. We should cooperate and assist one another so that we do not have to depend on others in the future.

IDPs and their families should not necessarily depend on the government for assistance; instead, they should take steps to meet their basic needs on their own. The government and non-government agencies' assistance was insufficient, which is why they became resourceful in terms of edible crops they could eat and sell.

## **FURTHER STUDY**

The advanced research on the realities of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in armed conflict sheds crucial light on the experiences of Maguindanaon women caught in the midst of turmoil. Through their narratives, a profound understanding emerges of the multifaceted challenges they endure, from the loss of homes and livelihoods to the disruption of social structures and access to basic amenities. This research underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms to address the specific vulnerabilities faced by these resilient women, empowering them to rebuild their lives and communities in the face of adversity.

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