The Experiences of Maguindanaon Women School Heads in the Armed Conflict Areas

ELENA B. KABUGATAN[1] , **HELEN M. ESPARTERO[1]**
[1]Sultan Kudarat State University, Philippines

Corresponding author: elena.kabugatan@deped.gov.ph

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ABSTRACT

In armed conflict-affected communities in Mindanao, there is a shining Maguindanaon heroine in the schools, heads such as herself renewing to illuminate their path through shone leadership amid adversity. This study aims to explore the experiences of Maguindanaon women school heads in armed conflict-affected areas, focusing on their challenges, contributions to education and peace. The research used a phenomenological lens to present the experiences of eight Maguindanaon women school heads. The data was collected and analyzed through in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to elicit central themes from their lived experiences, contexts, and perceptions of their future. The study reveals that school leaders manage the repercussions of gender discrimination, roles, and armed conflicts; community buy-in has been critical to the sustainability of education, although support is uneven, with various actors upholding restrictive gender norms. Key findings highlighted the need for gender-responsive policies, leadership training, and psychosocial support for women school heads who

played significant roles in education, peace building, community resilience, and leadership. Thus, it is concluded that women school heads play a vital role in redesigning leadership dynamics, promoting agency, and steering change within a competitive environment.

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, in many conflict-affected region around the world, women in positions of leadership face obstacles that restrict their ability to lead effectively. The barriers that hinder women leaders in many situations often arise from gender-based discrimination, traditional and cultural expectations, and lack of institutional support. Research from Sub-Saharan Africa shows that female school leaders in the context of war, such as South Sudan and Somalia, work in constant threat, with limited resources and little autonomy (Witter et al., 2017). In Latin America, Colombian women in post-conflict contexts deal with structural inequalities and low participation in school governance (Suárez-Baquero et al., 2022). Similar narratives concerning the marginalization of women in educational leadership, due to religious and societal restrictions, also exist in the Middle Eastern region, including Palestine (Issa & Melhem, 2023). These display that in the context of armed conflict, women's leadership is limited by the compound influence of security threats, systemic sexism, and sociopolitical instability. These countries are experiencing the same phenomenon: armed conflicts are affecting women leaders around the world. This provides the current study in Mindanao with perspective, common issues, and comparative insights that further enhance the understanding of women school leaders in similar situations.

In Southeast Asia, the plight of women school leaders situated in areas impacted by armed conflict, exposes the unique challenges they face, which are largely influenced by the cultural, political, and social dynamics of a region that does not support their leadership potential. Although awareness of women's contributions to education and peacebuilding is increasing, their experiences continue to be shaped by systemic barriers and gender-based biases, particularly in male-dominated societies. There are frameworks such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, that seek to attend to the empowerment of women, however these have limited implementation, and the contributions of women's leadership are often not acknowledged (Azizuddin & Shamsuzzoha, 2023; Veneracion, 2023). Reports and contemporary accounts indicate resilience and newfound agency ow women leaders in contexts of conflict, but their positions of power are often compromised by deep-seated norms around femininity and

leadership. Research shows how pivotal these leaders are in building the community and anchoring psychosocial stability through education (Hilmi et al., 2024), which emphasizes the urgency of implementing gender-sensitive policies, localized support mechanisms, and leadership development programs to fully utilize their transformative potential (Apriani & Zulfiani, 2020).

While the global scholarly work on women in conflict zones and educational leadership is well established, there are few inquiries that center explicitly on the lived experience of Muslim women school heads from the Maguindanaon ethnic group within the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao. Most of the existing research either abstracts women's leadership in post-conflict recovery or concentrates on non-education sectors. Also, little is documented of how these women negotiate their status vis a vis roles as school heads, peacebuilder and community leader in sectors marked by high patriarchy and militarized spaces.

This study fills that gap. It provides a focused lens toward Maguindanaon women school heads and considers how they lead schools while negotiating security threats, institutional pressures and cultural expectations. Compared to previous related studies, it foregrounds the perspectives of Muslim women leaders who work in volatile conditions. Having worked with schools in Mindanao, the researcher is passionate about bringing these stories to light, which may not be featured in mainstream discussions. The study documents their resilience and leadership strategies and aims to inform policy, support systems, and gender-sensitive educational frameworks in conflict-prone areas.

FRAMEWORK

Four intersecting theoretical lenses help guide this study: Feminist Theory, Intersectionality Theory, Constructivism, and Trait Theory. These theories do not serve as theories to be tested in hypotheses, but as interpretive lenses to help interpret the lived leadership experiences of Maguindanaon women school heads in conflict-affected areas. Each of these theories provides analytic tools for understanding how gender, culture, identity and personal interact in molding their leadership during periods of adversity.

Feminist Theory (Tong, 2009) was developed in response to feminist movements aimed at critiquing and challenging patriarchal systems that subjugate and oppress women. It seeks to dismantle gender hierarchies and push for equity, as well as elevate the voices of women and other marginalized groups. The key components of feminist theory include the acknowledgment of gender as a social construct, the acknowledgment of women's lived experiences, the analysis of power relations, and the belief that systemic inequalities should be

dismantled in the public and private spheres.

By addressing systemic barriers of patriarchal norms and gender biases that intersect through all spheres of their life, Feminist Theory grounds this study in locating the issues Maguindanaon Women face as leaders in their communities. These women tend to face institutional discrimination across the educational hierarchy while also expected to conform to traditional gender roles. This framework contextualizes how they exercise agency and respond to opposition and redefine leadership in ways that legitimize their own power and cultural identity, especially in deeply patriarchal and militarized contexts.

Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991) arose in critique of single-axis frameworks that consider social oppression in one category such as gender or race. The starting point of intersectionality is that people hold multiple social identities at once and the intersection of those identities creates unique experiences of privilege and oppression. It stresses how systems of oppression such as sexism, racism, classism and religious discrimination, are interconnected and cannot be studied in isolation.

Through these lens, the research takes note of the fact that Maguindanaon women do not face marginalization only as women but as Muslim women, as part of an ethnic minority, and as school leaders in conflict areas. Intersectionality shows how this intertwining of identities compounds their vulnerabilities but, at the same time, forms their leadership practices. It opens up deeper investigations of the structural, cultural, and political barriers facing these women, and how they leverage their complex identities to lead with cultural and situational sensitivity. Constructivism (Fosnot, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978), based on epistemological constructivism, which claims that knowledge is actively constructed rather than passively received, grounded in interaction with the environment, culture, and experience. Its principles emphasize the role of context, social interaction, and personal meaning-making in the construction of understanding. A key value of constructivism is focusing on the individual or learner's perspective on knowledge construction as a dynamic and non-static process.

This current study drew from Constructivism, which emphasizes how Maguindanaon women school heads develop as organizational leaders through their lived experience rather than formal training or organizational hierarchy. Their lens of leadership is defined through daily negotiations with conflict, tradition, community expectation, and institutional reality. This theory offers a framework for understanding how these women create their own definitions of what it means to lead, learn from, and respond to the sociocultural and conflict-polarized environments they live in. Trait Theory (Northouse, 2016)

is among the first of approaches to leadership and assumes that some people have natural- type characteristics that make them more a viable candidate to be an efficient leader. These qualities typically consist of intelligence, confidence, determination, integrity and sociability. While early trait theorists saw this as a static phenomenon, more recent views maintain that such traits are malleable to a degree and emerge through experience.

Building upon Trait Theory as a complementary lens, this study aims to highlight the personal attributes, including resilience, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and moral conviction that permeate the leadership stories of Maguindanaon women. These qualities are not treated as fixed, but as capacities honed through exposure to hardship, community expectations and the demands of leading in high-stakes contexts. This lens emphasizes the internal resources that enable these women to persist and thrive even when structural support is scarce.

Together, these four theories provide a broad, multi-layered interpretive framework for this qualitative study. Feminist and Intersectionality Theories provide big pictures and sociocultural emphasis while Constructivism focuses on the ever-changing leadership knowledge through experience, and Trait Theory identifies personal characteristics that can enhance leadership effectiveness. This integration enables a rich understanding of the experience of Maguindanaon women school heads, how they practice and nurture leadership in conflict-affected communities, and highlights discourses that are not often considered in the prevailing educational and leadership narratives.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to (1) describe the personal experiences of Maguindanaon women school heads in conflict-affected areas using their narratives. (2) Understand the contextual factors shaping their leadership and impact the day to day functions and decisions. (3) Feature the dreams and future plans of these Maguindanaon women leaders.

METHODOLOGY

In investigating the lived experiences of Maguindanaon women school heads in Mindanao, a qualitative phenomenological research design was utilized in this study.

Selected municipalities were studied, and they include Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, North Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat. These sites

were selected based on their histories of armed conflict as well as for Muslim women serving as head teachers in schools.

The participants included eight Maguindanaon women school heads with at least one-year experience as heads of schools in conflict-affected areas. They were selected through complete enumeration sampling, with inclusion criteria focusing on leadership experience, ethnic identity, and willingness to share personal narratives.

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The instrument underwent expert validation and pilot testing to ensure clarity and relevance. Consistent questioning across interviews enhanced reliability, and validity was supported through triangulation using field notes and document analysis.

The research followed ethical protocols aligned with institutional guidelines. Participants were informed about the study's objectives and procedures. Informed consent was obtained in writing. Ethical clearance was secured from the Ethics Review Board of the researcher's affiliated institution.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, supplemented with observational notes and relevant documents. Due to participant preferences, only two interviews were audio-recorded, while the remaining data were gathered using detailed field notes.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes that reflect participants' lived experiences, contextual conditions, and future outlooks. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and researcher reflexivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are based on a comprehensive thematic analysis of the personal experiences, contextual realities, and future visions of Maguindanaon women school heads in conflict-affected areas. Guided by a phenomenological approach, the study sought to answer three core objectives: (1) to explore their lived experiences as school leaders in volatile settings, (2) to examine the contextual factors shaping their leadership roles and decisions, and (3) to uncover their aspirations for the future and vision of peace-oriented leadership. Drawing from in-depth interviews and thick field notes, recurring themes, and categories emerged that reveal the nuanced emotional, cultural, and institutional landscapes these women navigate. The results are presented according to each research objective, with supporting exemplar quotes and theoretical insights to provide depth and clarity to their unique narratives.

The Personal Experiences of Maguindanaon Women School Heads. The narratives surfaced five dominant themes with accompanying categories that reveal the psychological, cultural, and emotional demands of being a woman leader in conflict zones:

Emotional Turbulence and Personal Struggle. Many participants reported experiencing fear, exhaustion, and emotional strain, but these were often masked in order to project strength. One participant said, *"Sometimes, I wanted to cry because of the situation, but because of the love of the people surrounding me, it makes me stronger"* (Field Note 1). This reflects what Witter et al. (2017) observed among women leaders in South Sudan—emotional labor is often concealed behind resilience. These accounts validate Feminist Theory (Tong, 2009), where women are expected to demonstrate strength in male-dominated systems despite lacking adequate support.

Personal Resilience and Adaptive Coping. Participants cited the need to develop innovative strategies such as distance learning and asynchronous teaching. These are adaptive coping mechanisms shaped by urgent crises, aligning with Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) where knowledge and solutions evolve from lived experience and environmental demands.

Internalizing Gender and Cultural Norms. Women leaders repeatedly encountered discrimination tied to their gender roles. The statement *"Some belittle the abilities of a woman leader instead of supporting them"* (Field Note 6) highlights the double burden of proving one's competence while navigating patriarchy. This directly engages Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991), which explains the compounded experiences of discrimination due to overlapping identities—being female, Muslim, Maguindanaon, and a leader.

Sense of Duty and Personal Identity as a Leader. Participants associated leadership with a deep moral and social obligation. The quote *"If I will not stand for them, who else will?"* (Field Note 5) echoes notions of trait-based leadership such as altruism and responsibility (Northouse, 2016), suggesting that their leadership is not positional but transformational and values-driven.

Personal Impact on Educational Practice. Conflict has disrupted education delivery, forcing school heads to grapple with mass displacements and psychological distress among students. These disruptions demand trauma-informed education leadership models for uplifting education leaders, but these women fill this gap regardless of their lack of formal mental health training and structural support (Suárez-Baquero et al., 2022).

The stories coming from Maguindanaon women in leadership positions in schools speak volume of what leadership is about amidst conflict that is present in everyday life. These women often cover their fear and sadness to show bravery

to their educators and students. Still, even as its members grapple with these and other challenges, they show up, not just in service of themselves but of the children who count on them for their education and their safety. They have shown impressive resourcefulness in finding ways to teach while schools are closed, occasionally using distance learning or gathering students in makeshift shelters. On top of those hardships of war, they face inequitable treatment simply for being a woman. Others doubt their ability or expect them to act in a certain manner. But instead of backpedaling, these women rise to the challenge. They experience the professions as more than occupations: they are a deep sense of responsibility. They lead with compassion, steadfast faith, and quiet strength that binds their educational communities together, even through the most trying times.

The Contextual Factors Shaping Leadership. The daily leadership work of Maguindanaon women school heads is shaped by systemic conditions, local realities, and social relationships; represented in the five themes that emerged:

External Security Environment and Safety Protocols. School heads work closely with the military, barangay officials and community elders to shield their schools and students from conflict that erupts nearby. This reality underscores the call for peace education and school-based safety planning that takes into account the specific situation in the Bangsamoro region—justifying the claims of Suárez-Baquero et al. (2022) that emphasizes localized educational leadership strategies rooted in community collaboration in post-conflict settings.

External Community Coordination and Stakeholder Collaboration. Family Day, *Brigada Eskwela* – activities and communal gathering organized by schools involving teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders to foster strong home-school connection and promote volunteerism and community spirit (bayanihan) – and the like are not just a school tradition — they are reviving severed community ties from the violence. As one participant noted, "Family days help rebuild unity after conflict" (Field Note 4). These examples illustrate that schools can serve as spaces for healing at the community level—where school heads translate their lived experiences into physical environments and systems that promote social capital and resilience. Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), encourages the development of knowledge and practices born from meaningful, culturally relevant activities conducted within communities.

Institutional and Infrastructural Constraints. Participants complained of damaged classrooms and broken fencing and a lack of basic teaching materials. These challenges indicate systemic neglect in schools affected by conflict. Instead of seeing education as a socially neutral process, this positions their situations along the lines of Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), where in this theory,

the environment in which they are learning (both physically and socially) is critical in shaping school experiences.

Disruptions in Educational Processes Due to Conflict. The ongoing violence drives some students to miss school, transfer to new schools or drop out altogether. These disruptions exacerbate the education gap for learners in rural and conflict-affected areas, consistent with UNESCO (2020) findings that indicate minority and remote learners are affected most by crisis-driven school intrusions.

External Crisis Management and Preparedness Protocols. With the lack of formal crisis training, these school heads instead rehearse for armed conflict, plan evacuations, and change learning modalities when needed. Their fast decision making and agile leadership styles are real-world examples of adaptive responses in an uncertain environment, emphasizing the importance of trauma-informed leadership, and the need for the institutional and social support to allow women leaders to navigate perennial conflict.

Leading an educational institution in conflict-affected areas is beyond offering education: it is about survival, safety and healing of the community. For Maguindanaon women leaders in schools, their job requires constant interaction with local leaders and military personnel to protect their students yet instill normalcy through school activities that bring the community together after fear. They operate under poor classroom conditions, a lack of learning resources, and a lack of institutional support; and yet they endure, ensuring learning continues. The heartbreak of watching students retreat, or disappear to violence, is devastating and leaves a mark. Despite these enormous challenges, they strive to remain strong. They deploy emergency drills, innovative teaching methods, and use myriad nonerosive paths to help students and teachers keep the learning pipeline going. Their leadership is based not just on power, but with empathy, strength and an unyielding love for their communities.

The Future Aspirations and Leadership Vision

The final themes reflect the forward-looking ambitions and moral frameworks that guide these school heads:

Visionary Leadership and Legacy Building. The participants in this research are passionate about empowering girls and developing leaders of the future, and view their leadership not as an obligation but rather as a mission to create change for future generations. As one school head explained, "I see myself as an empowered woman in the future" (Field Note 2). These women consider the challenges they face in conflict zones not as obstacles but as formative experiences that strengthen their determination to seek meaningful leadership. Many of their visions reached beyond the schoolhouse doors, seeking larger

roles in mentorship, policy advocacy, and community transformation. This is in line with the findings of Arroyo (2021) and Martinez et al. (2020) who found that women educational leaders in similarly adverse contexts shaped their narrative of legacy around empowerment and social justice. Their commitment also embodies what Ferrer (2023) describes peace-driven transformational mentorship, a transformational leadership style guided by cultural resilience and moral responsibility.

Aspirations for Women's Leadership in Peacebuilding and Social Change. They referred to their leadership experiences as "blueprints for sustainable peace" (Field Note 1), demonstrating how education can act as a pillar for peace, echoing the aftermath-focused educational models in Colombia (Jopson, 2023).

Future Strategies for Conflict Management and Ethical Decision-Making. Their advice exemplified a "peace first" ethos: "You need to go for peace… do not make the simple situation complicated" (IDI 2). Their moral clarity serves as a vital reminder of the need for values-driven decisions, and a culturally grounded approach to peace leadership, echoing Ferrer's (2023) assertion on the convergence of local values and the moral invitation to peace in the lens of conflict-affected communities in Mindanao.

Future Community Engagement, Education, and Mentorship. Participants reported that sharing their personal stories with students was a powerful way to inspire resilience and confidence. One school head shared, "I always share with my students so they can learn to be brave and confident" (Field Note 4). This act of storytelling is more than a motivational strategy—it is a form of cultural transmission and empowerment that fosters leadership among the youth. In conflict-affected communities, where trauma and uncertainty often shape young people's lives, the visibility of strong, values-driven women leaders becomes a robust model. These school heads use their narratives not only to educate but also to instill hope and agency. This approach reflects the ASEAN framework on transformational mentorship, which underscores the role of educational leaders in guiding the next generation through relational, values-based, and future-oriented engagement (Ferrer, 2023).

Spirituality and Ethical Guidance in Future Leadership. Many leaders drew strength from their faith. "Peace always starts from within" (Field Note 5). Spirituality in leadership emerged as a source of resilience, guiding moral decisions, and offering inner strength—especially significant in Islamic contexts like Bangsamoro, where faith and leadership are deeply connected. This reflects insights by Trocio (2017), who emphasized how indigenous and religious beliefs shape women's engagement in peacebuilding in Mindanao.

The future visions of Maguindanaon women school heads reflect a deep

commitment to peace, mentorship, and community transformation. Despite the hardships they endure, these leaders look ahead with hope—imagining themselves as empowered women who can inspire the next generation. They aspire not just to manage schools but to shape a more peaceful society, using their experiences as roadmaps for others. Their leadership philosophy is grounded in compassion, ethical decision-making, and spiritual strength, often drawing from their faith as a source of guidance. They view their roles as opportunities to mentor students, especially girls, and to use education as a powerful tool for healing, growth, and lasting change in their conflict-affected communities.

The phenomenological design was successful in unearthing rich and intimate narratives. However, reliance on self-reported data may limit triangulation. Future studies should integrate perspectives from students, community leaders, and Department of Education supervisors better to understand the broader impact of these school heads.

Moreover, the integration of Feminist, Intersectionality, Constructivist, and Trait theories proved effective. Yet, a possible enhancement would be the incorporation of indigenous leadership frameworks such as Kapwa, Pangandungan, or Islamic leadership ethics to reflect the cultural landscape of the Maguindanaon better.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study provided, therefore, an insight on how Maguindanaoon women school heads exercised their leadership in conflict-afflicted areas in Mindanao. Fear, resilience, and cultural expectations define and extend the findings of Feminist Theory, Intersectionality Theory, Constructivism, Trait Theory. The results confirm that these women are not just running a school—they make adaptive, moral, and transformative leadership work in conditions of adversity. A particularly striking finding in this study, not directly addressed in the prior literature, is the function these women have served as informal peace agents in their respective communities—performing tasks far outside the bounds of educational administration. Their strategic partnership with local community elders and security forces to maintain safety in the community while ensuring the continuity of basic education is an emergent form of grassroots peacebuilding leadership.

The experiences of the participants in the study were examined using Feminist, Intersectionality, Constructivist, and Trait theories. The findings align with the theoretical lenses used, while also suggesting new insights that are not widely reported in the literature. Significantly, this study reveals the emergence

of Maguindanaon women school heads as informal peace agents, beyond the literature of their official roles as administrative leaders. In using spiritual guidance, local alliances, and ethical leadership as they navigate conflict situations, they highlight the need for more culturally grounded models of leadership. They provide counterexamples to the idea that Western frameworks can be applied universally, indicating the need for indigenous or hybrid constructs that provide an accurate reflection to the lived experiences of Muslim women leading in conflict-affected regions of the Philippines.

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