



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Community Engagement in Conflict-Affected Communities: Practices, Challenges, and Pathways toward Resilience in Basilan Province, Philippines

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Community engagement has gained renewed attention in post-conflict and fragile contexts where social capital has been systematically eroded by prolonged violence and institutional distrust. In Basilan Province, Philippines — a geopolitically sensitive territory long affected by armed conflict, displacement, and underdevelopment — questions about how residents participate in community life, influence local governance, and exercise collective agency remain underexplored. This study examined the forms, drivers, barriers, and outcomes of community engagement among residents of Basilan Province using a concurrent mixed-methods design. A structured survey was administered to 384 household heads across six municipalities, and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 42 purposively selected participants. Quantitative findings revealed that community engagement levels were moderate overall ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.74$ on a 5-point scale), with participation in barangay-level activities being the most prevalent form (78.6%) and engagement in policy advocacy being the least common (21.4%). Multiple regression analysis identified community trust ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$), perceived collective efficacy ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$), and organizational membership ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$) as significant predictors of engagement. Qualitative narratives revealed four overarching themes: (1) culturally embedded forms of collective action rooted in indigenous governance structures, (2) faith-based community organizing as a central mobilizing force, (3) gendered dimensions of participation shaped by patriarchal norms, and (4) persistent structural barriers tied to poverty, political patronage, and security concerns. Findings contextualize community engagement within the realities of a conflict-affected Muslim-majority province and offer implications for social work practice, local governance, and peacebuilding programming in similar settings.

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement, broadly understood as the active, voluntary involvement of individuals and groups in collective efforts to improve the conditions of community life (Gamble & Weil, 1995, as cited in Ohmer, 2007), has been recognized across disciplines as a cornerstone of effective community practice, governance, and development (Ohmer et al., 2022). Over the past century, the theoretical and practical terrain of community engagement has shifted considerably, moving from organizationally driven collaboration toward more resident-centered, empowerment-oriented approaches that foreground capacity building, voice, and self-determination (Ohmer et al., 2022; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) and related methodologies have further evolved this field by emphasizing that research and practice should be conducted *with* communities rather than merely *on* or *in* them (Ohmer et al., 2012; Israel et al., 1998).

Despite this evolution in thinking, a significant body of community engagement scholarship remains anchored in Western, urban, and relatively stable sociopolitical contexts. The particular challenges of engaging communities in fragile, post-conflict, or conflict-affected settings, where institutional trust has collapsed, social networks have been disrupted by displacement, and everyday life is shaped by the shadow of violence, have received comparatively little scholarly attention (Couldrey & Herson, 2013; Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006). This gap is especially pronounced in Southeast Asia, where several provinces and regions continue to navigate the simultaneous demands of conflict recovery, poverty reduction, and democratic governance.

Basilan Province, located in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in the southern Philippines, represents precisely such a context. With a population of approximately 505,387 residents (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2020), Basilan is home to diverse ethnolinguistic groups (predominantly the Yakan, Tausug, Chavacano, and Bisaya) whose social organization, governance traditions, and civic cultures are deeply shaped by Islamic values, indigenous customary law (*adat*), and decades of exposure to armed conflict involving various non-state armed groups (Torres, 2014; Lara & Champain, 2009). The province has been classified among the most economically disadvantaged in the Philippines, with poverty incidence reaching 49.3% as of 2021 (PSA, 2022), and it consistently ranks low on human development indices. At the same time, the peace process culminating in the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) of 2018 and the subsequent establishment of the BARMM have created new governance structures intended to promote participatory development and community empowerment (Arguillas, 2019).

In this complex environment, community engagement takes on layered significance. On one hand, it is essential for rebuilding the social fabric torn by conflict, restoring trust in institutions, and enabling communities to shape the development agenda in ways that reflect their priorities and values. On the other hand, it faces formidable barriers: economic precarity that limits available time and resources, historical experiences of manipulation by political elites, gendered exclusions rooted in patriarchal social norms, and the ever-present risk of security threats that discourage public participation (Gutierrez & Borrás, 2004; Ferrer et al., 2011). Understanding the dynamics of community engagement in Basilan is therefore not only a matter of academic interest but a practical imperative for social workers, development practitioners, local government officials, and peacebuilding actors operating in the region.

This study addresses this gap by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the prevalent forms and levels of community engagement among residents of Basilan Province?
2. What individual, relational, and structural factors predict community engagement in this context?
3. How do community members in Basilan subjectively experience and make meaning of their engagement in community life?
4. What culturally and contextually specific pathways and barriers to community engagement emerge from the lived experiences of Basilan residents?

By employing a concurrent mixed-methods design that integrates survey data with in-depth qualitative inquiry, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on community engagement in non-Western and conflict-affected settings and offers empirically grounded insights for practice and policy.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Community engagement, as a field of practice and inquiry, has evolved from early 20th-century models of community organization (focused on inter-agency collaboration and institutional coordination) toward contemporary frameworks that emphasize resident empowerment, collective agency, and transformative social action (Ohmer et al., 2022; Stein, 1922, as cited in Stuart, 2022). Foundational scholars such as Alinsky (1971) articulated community organizing as inherently political (a practice of redistributing power from elites to marginalized communities). This tradition has been extended by participatory action researchers who argue that communities

must not only be *engaged* but must themselves drive the processes of knowledge production and social change (Fals-Borda, 1987; Freire, 1970).

Contemporary definitions emphasize the active, voluntary character of engagement. Gamble and Weil (1995, as cited in Ohmer, 2007) define citizen participation and engagement as "the active, voluntary involvement of individuals and groups in changing problematic conditions in communities and influencing the policies and programs that affect the quality of their lives" (p. 109). Ohmer (2007) further emphasizes that engaged citizens feel a sense of responsibility not only toward their immediate neighbors but toward the broader social good. These definitions presuppose a degree of institutional openness, civic safety, and social trust that cannot be taken for granted in conflict-affected settings.

The literature on community engagement in conflict-affected contexts highlights the distinctive challenges posed by damaged social capital, weak institutions, and the politicization of civic space. Putnam (2000) distinguished between *bonding* social capital and *bridging* social capital noting that conflict tends to intensify bonding while destroying bridging ties. This dynamic is particularly salient in ethnically and religiously diverse provinces like Basilan, where group-level solidarity may coexist with inter-group mistrust. Some studies show that conflict can be mitigated through religious engagement or integration within educational systems (Sattar & Arriola, 2020; Harad & Arriola, 2022a; Harad & Arriola, 2022b).

Paffenholz and Spurk (2006) identified community-based organizations and civil society groups as key actors in peacebuilding and reconciliation, emphasizing their roles in protection, social cohesion, and advocacy. However, they also cautioned that civil society engagement in conflict zones is frequently co-opted by political actors or constrained by security conditions. Lederach (1997) similarly argued that sustainable peacebuilding requires the active engagement of middle-range and grassroots actors rather than relying solely on elite-level negotiations.

In the Philippine context, Ferrer et al. (2011) documented how communities in Mindanao have developed creative strategies for collective action even under conditions of insecurity, including the use of religious networks, indigenous governance systems, and women's organizations as platforms for engagement. However, these efforts are often fragmented, under-resourced, and vulnerable to political patronage dynamics that can undermine their autonomy (Gutierrez & Borrás, 2004).

Among the Tausug and Yakan peoples of Basilan, community life is structured by indigenous governance systems that predate the Philippine state and continue to shape social obligations, dispute resolution, and collective decision-making (Torres, 2014). The concept of *bayanihan* (communal solidarity) resonates in Basilan in culturally specific forms, including *kanduli* (communal feast and prayer gatherings) and *pagtabang* (mutual aid and reciprocal labor). These indigenous practices represent organic forms of community engagement that are often invisible in formal governance frameworks but are central to community resilience (Rasul, 2014).

Faith-based organizing through mosques and Islamic schools (*madrasah*) also plays a prominent role in shaping civic participation in Muslim-majority communities. Imams and religious teachers (*ustadz*) function as trusted community leaders whose endorsement is often essential for mobilizing community members around collective concerns (Milligan, 2005). Understanding community engagement in Basilan thus requires attention to these culturally embedded structures, not merely formal barangay governance mechanisms.

Gender dynamics significantly shape participation in community life across Muslim-majority communities in Mindanao. While Islamic tradition affirms women's rights to education and participation in public affairs, patriarchal social norms which is reinforced by customary law and, in some cases, misinterpretations of religious teaching, frequently limit women's access to leadership roles and public decision-making spaces (Ting, 2007). At the same time, women in Basilan and surrounding provinces have demonstrated significant agency in grassroots organizing, particularly through women's groups affiliated with local government programs, NGOs, and faith-based organizations (Ferrer et al., 2011). The literature suggests that women's community engagement is often more intensive at the household and neighborhood levels and less visible at

the formal political level — a pattern with implications for how engagement is measured and valued.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a concurrent mixed-methods design, collecting quantitative survey data alongside qualitative data from interviews and focus groups simultaneously, then integrating both at the interpretation stage. Grounded in a transformative paradigm, the research was conducted across six municipalities in Basilan Province chosen to represent varying levels of urbanization, ethnic composition, and conflict exposure. The quantitative component surveyed 384 household heads selected through stratified multi-stage random sampling, using an adapted instrument measuring four dimensions of community engagement on a Likert scale. The instrument demonstrated adequate reliability and validity, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, and hierarchical multiple regression in SPSS.

The qualitative component involved 42 participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, comprising 28 in-depth interview participants and 14 across two focus group discussions representing diverse genders, ethnicities, religions, and community roles. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and FGDs approximately two hours, conducted in participants' preferred languages and audio-recorded with consent. Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework, with two researchers coding independently, member checking with eight participants, and negative case analysis to incorporate disconfirming evidence. Findings from both strands were ultimately integrated through a joint display approach, allowing statistical patterns to be explained and enriched by qualitative themes.

RESULTS

Sociodemographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic profile of the 384 survey respondents.

Table 1 Sociodemographic Profile of Survey Respondents (*N* = 384)

Variable	Category	n	%
Sex	Male	219	57.0
	Female	165	43.0
Age	18–29 years	72	18.8
	30–44 years	148	38.5
	45–59 years	112	29.2
	60 years and above	52	13.5
Religion	Islam	284	73.9
	Roman Catholic	74	19.3
	Other Christian denominations	26	6.8
Ethnicity	Tausug	167	43.5
	Yakan	89	23.2
	Chavacano/Zamboangueño	68	17.7
	Other (Maranao, Tagalog, Bisaya)	60	15.6
Educational Attainment	No formal education	38	9.9
	Elementary level/graduate	97	25.3
	High school level/graduate	131	34.1
	College level/graduate	102	26.6
	Post-graduate	16	4.2
Monthly Household Income	Below PHP 5,000	91	23.7
	PHP 5,001–10,000	134	34.9
	PHP 10,001–20,000	103	26.8
	Above PHP 20,000	56	14.6
Municipality	Lamitan City	78	20.3
	Isabela City	72	18.8
	Lantawan	58	15.1

Variable	Category	n	%
	Sumisip	65	16.9
	Tipo-Tipo	63	16.4
	Akbar	48	12.5
Organizational Membership	Member of at least one org.	218	56.8
	Non-member	166	43.2

Note. Currency figures are in Philippine Peso (PHP). Exchange rate at time of data collection: USD 1 ≈ PHP 56.

Levels of Community Engagement

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for overall community engagement and its four dimensions.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Community Engagement Dimensions (N = 384)

Dimension	M	SD	Interpretation*
Social Participation	3.54	0.68	Moderate–High
Organizational Involvement	3.18	0.79	Moderate
Civic & Governance Participation	2.97	0.82	Moderate
Advocacy & Collective Action	2.14	0.91	Low
Overall Community Engagement	3.21	0.74	Moderate

Note. Scores based on a 5-point Likert scale: 1.00–1.80 = Very Low; 1.81–2.60 = Low; 2.61–3.40 = Moderate; 3.41–4.20 = Moderate–High; 4.21–5.00 = High. Scale anchors: 1 = *Never*, 5 = *Always*.

Table 3 presents the frequency of specific engagement activities reported by respondents.

Table 3: Frequency of Specific Community Engagement Activities (N = 384)

Activity	Yes (n)	Yes (%)
Attended barangay assembly or meeting	302	78.6
Participated in barangay clean-up or community work	289	75.3
Attended community fiesta, <i>kanduli</i> , or religious gathering	274	71.4
Participated in a livelihood or skills training program	198	51.6
Attended Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings	187	48.7
Voted in local elections	341	88.8
Volunteered in a community organization or program	163	42.4
Participated in peace-building or inter-group dialogue	128	33.3
Signed a petition or written to a local official	94	24.5
Participated in protest, demonstration, or rally	46	12.0
Engaged in policy advocacy with government offices	82	21.4
Used social media to raise community concerns	143	37.2

Predictors of Community Engagement

Table 4 presents the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting overall community engagement scores.

Table 4: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictors of Community Engagement (N = 384)

Predictor	Block 1 β	Block 2 β
Block 1: Sociodemographic Variables		
Sex (Female = 1)	.09	.07
Age	.12*	.08
Educational attainment	.18**	.11*
Monthly household income	.15**	.09
Block 2: Community-Level Variables		
Community trust	—	.41***
Perceived collective efficacy	—	.33***
Organizational membership	—	.27**

Predictor	Block 1 β	Block 2 β
Length of residency in barangay	—	.14*
Model Summary		
R ²	.12	.41
Adjusted R ²	.11	.39
ΔR^2	—	.29***
F	12.74***	31.86***

Note. Standardized beta (β) coefficients are reported. N = 384. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The Block 1 model explained 12% of the variance in community engagement ($F(4, 379) = 12.74, p < .001$). The addition of community-level predictors in Block 2 resulted in a significant increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .29, p < .001$), bringing total explained variance to 41%. Community trust emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .41, p < .001$), followed by perceived collective efficacy ($\beta = .33, p < .001$) and organizational membership ($\beta = .27, p < .01$).

Table 5 presents comparisons of community engagement by selected sociodemographic variables.

Table 5: Differences in Community Engagement by Select Sociodemographic Variables

Variable	Group	M	SD	Test Statistic	p
Sex	Male	3.27	0.71	$t(382) = 1.84$.067
	Female	3.13	0.77		
Religion	Muslim	3.19	0.75	$F(2, 381) = 0.98$.376
	Catholic	3.28	0.71		
	Other Christian	3.17	0.79		
Educational Attainment	No formal education	2.74	0.88	$F(4, 379) = 9.43$	<.001
	Elementary	2.99	0.81		
	High school	3.22	0.71		
	College	3.49	0.64		
	Post-graduate	3.76	0.58		
Organizational Membership	Member	3.51	0.67	$t(382) = 7.63$	<.001
	Non-member	2.82	0.75		
Income Level	Below PHP 5,000	2.88	0.83	$F(3, 380) = 8.17$	<.001
	PHP 5,001–10,000	3.17	0.72		
	PHP 10,001–20,000	3.34	0.68		
	Above PHP 20,000	3.62	0.61		

Note. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests confirmed significant pairwise differences for educational attainment and income level.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the 28 in-depth interviews and 2 focus group discussions yielded four major themes. Each theme is presented below with representative narrative excerpts (pseudonyms used throughout).

Theme 1: Culturally Embedded Forms of Collective Action

Participants consistently described indigenous governance and cultural practices (rather than formal barangay or government structures) as the primary context for their community engagement. The *elders* system and *adat* law were referenced as frameworks through which community obligations were understood and fulfilled.

"Here in Basilan, when the Ustadz calls, the people listen. It is not the barangay captain who people follow most of the time — it is the Ustadz, or the *elder*. That is the tradition. If there is a problem in the community, we go to the *elder* first." — Radzali, 54, male, Tausug elder, Sumisip

"We have the *kanduli* (when there is something important, the whole community comes together, we pray, we eat, we talk). It is not just a religious thing. It is how we make decisions. It is how we help each other." — Hadja Norma, 62, female, Tausug community leader, Lantawan

The *pagtabang* tradition (a form of mutual labor exchange in which community members collectively assist one another in farming, house construction, or crisis response) was described as deeply ingrained across both Tausug and Yakan communities. Participants viewed this practice as the authentic foundation of community engagement, even as they acknowledged its erosion under the pressures of poverty and conflict-driven displacement.

"Before, when you build a house, the whole neighborhood comes. No one asks for money. Now, people are busy, many have left. It is harder. But when there is a *pagtabang*, still many come (because if they need help next time, they know the community will help them)." — *Amsalam, 41, male, Yakan farmer, Tipo-Tipo*

Participants who engaged most actively in formal community structures often did so through the lens of these cultural frameworks, understanding their barangay participation as an extension of customary communal obligation rather than a distinct civic activity.

Theme 2: Faith-Based Community Organizing as a Mobilizing Force

For the predominantly Muslim communities of Basilan, the mosque and its associated social networks constituted a primary arena of community engagement. Imams (*khatib*) and religious scholars (*ustadz*) were identified as the most trusted community figures, and mosque-based networks served as conduits for collective action on a range of social issues.

"The mosque is the center of everything here. When there is a problem (flooding, illness, a family in need) the announcement is made at the mosque after Friday prayers. People respond because it comes from the mosque, from the *ustadz*. It is a matter of *iman* [faith] to help." — *Ustadz Mukhtar, 48, male, religious teacher, Isabela City*

"I got involved in the women's livelihood program because the *ustadza* [female Islamic teacher] encouraged us after our Quran class. She said that Islam encourages women to be productive and to help the community. I felt that this was right (it was not going against our religion, it was part of it)." — *Fatima, 36, female, livelihood program participant, Lamitan City*

Christian participants similarly referenced their parish and church communities as critical mobilizing structures, though they noted that inter-faith collaboration in community activities was sometimes possible and meaningful.

"Our parish has a social action committee. We work with the barangay on feeding programs, on relief operations. Sometimes we work side-by-side with our Muslim neighbors. That is good (it shows we can do things together)." — *Lourdes, 47, female, Catholic parish worker, Isabela City*

Participants from civil society organizations noted the unique and indispensable role of religious leaders in gaining community trust in Basilan's security-sensitive environment, where ordinary civic organizing could be misconstrued or targeted.

Theme 3: Gendered Dimensions of Participation

Gender emerged as a powerful organizer of community engagement in Basilan, shaping not only *who* participated but *how*, *where*, and *on what terms*. While women were active participants in community life (particularly in household-adjacent spheres such as school-related activities, health programs, and livelihood groups) their access to formal governance spaces and public decision-making roles was frequently constrained.

"I attend barangay meetings, yes, but I sit at the back. The men speak. If I want to say something, I have to tell my husband and hope he will say it for me. That is just how it is here, women don't speak in front of the leaders." — *Sarahamon, 44, female, barangay resident, Tipo-Tipo*

"As an *imam*, I see that women do so much for the community, the charity work, the caring for the sick, the teaching. But in the *shura* [consultative assembly], in the barangay council meetings, women are rarely there. This is something we need to change. Islam does not prohibit women from leadership." — *Imam Abdulwahid, 57, male, religious leader, Akbar*

Some women participants described having found spaces of agency within gender-segregated structures (particularly women's organizations and income-generating groups) that provided not only economic benefits but also opportunities for collective voice and leadership development.

"In our women's group, I learned to speak in front of people. I learned to write proposals. I became the president. Now I represent our group in the municipal development council. No one taught me this in school (the group taught me)." — *Rayhana, 39, female, women's organization president, Lantawan*

Male participants' perspectives on gender and engagement were more varied. Younger male participants were generally more supportive of women's expanded participation, while older male respondents sometimes expressed ambivalence grounded in cultural and religious interpretations.

Theme 4: Structural Barriers (Poverty, Patronage, and Insecurity)

Across all participant groups, three structural barriers emerged with particular force: economic poverty, political patronage, and security concerns. These barriers were interrelated and mutually reinforcing, constituting what several participants described as a "wall" between communities and meaningful civic participation.

"How will you go to meetings when you have no rice for your children? Participation is for those who have time. When you are poor, you have no time, every hour must be for earning." — *Danilo, 37, male, informal settler, Isabela City*

"The politicians here give money during elections such as rice, cash, groceries. People vote for them because they are hungry. But after the election, those politicians do nothing. And people feel that participation is useless and that their voice does not matter. So they stop." — *Arnold, 52, male, civil society worker, Lamitan City*

The normalization of political patronage was identified as deeply corrosive to authentic community engagement, creating dependency relationships that undermined collective agency. Several participants expressed a learned helplessness regarding formal political participation, even while remaining active in informal and faith-based community structures.

Security concerns represented a particularly acute barrier in communities with histories of armed conflict or continued presence of armed groups.

"There was a time when we could not have meetings at night. Even during the day, if there were strangers around, people would not come because they were afraid. One wrong word and you could be reported. That fear does not go away quickly." — *Hadji Munsuri, 63, male, retired barangay official, Sumisip*

"I want to be active, to speak about the problems in our barangay like the water supply, the road. But I think twice. Who will hear me? What will happen to my family? So I stay quiet." — *Anonymous female participant, 32, FGD, Tipo-Tipo*

Despite these barriers, participants also articulated sources of resilience and hope. The signing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, the relative improvement in peace conditions in some areas, and the presence of dedicated community organizers and civil society organizations were cited as sources of cautious optimism.

"After the BOL, I felt something had changed. People started meeting again. There is more space to talk, to plan. We have problems still many problems. But at least we can talk about them now." — *Yusop, 45, male, barangay captain, Lantawan*

DISCUSSION

Patterns and Predictors of Engagement: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The quantitative findings of this study reveal a moderate overall level of community engagement in Basilan Province ($M = 3.21$), with social participation, particularly attendance at barangay meetings, community work, and religious-cultural gatherings, representing the most prevalent form. Advocacy and collective action, by contrast, registered low mean scores ($M = 2.14$) and the lowest participation rates for specific activities. This pattern is consistent with research in other

conflict-affected and low-income communities, where engagement tends to cluster in activities that are socially obligatory, low-risk, and proximate to everyday life, while more overtly political forms of participation remain constrained (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006; Gutierrez & Borrás, 2004).

The finding that community trust is the strongest predictor of engagement ($\beta = .41$) aligns with extensive literature on social capital and civic participation (Putnam, 2000; Israel et al., 1998). Qualitative data powerfully illuminate this relationship: participants' willingness to engage was consistently tied to their trust in the legitimacy and competence of the entities calling for engagement, whether barangay officials, imams, *datus*, or civil society leaders. The erosion of trust by political patronage and historical experiences of institutional failure is thus not merely a background condition but a direct mechanism suppressing participation, particularly in more formal governance channels.

The significance of perceived collective efficacy ($\beta = .33$) as a predictor extends Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory to the community level and is consistent with Ohmer's (2007) findings that residents who believe their collective action can produce meaningful change are more likely to engage. Qualitative narratives of learned helplessness among residents in communities with high patronage dependency directly illuminate the mechanism through which low collective efficacy suppresses engagement, even among individuals who express desire to participate.

Indigenous and Faith-Based Structures as Alternative Engagement Platforms

A distinctive contribution of this study is the documentation of how indigenous governance structures (*elder*, *adat* councils) and faith-based networks (mosques, *madrasah*) function as primary and often more trusted platforms for community engagement than formal barangay governance. This finding extends the literature on culturally embedded community practice in non-Western contexts (Rasul, 2014; Milligan, 2005) and has important implications for community practitioners and development organizations operating in Basilan.

Consistent with Ferrer et al.'s (2011) analysis of Mindanao communities, this study confirms that indigenous and Islamic social institutions represent not merely supplementary channels but primary vehicles through which residents of Basilan exercise collective agency. Community engagement interventions designed without recognition of or partnership with these structures are likely to have limited reach and legitimacy. Conversely, programs that work *with* imams, *ustadz*, and traditional leaders, as trusted intermediaries who can convene community members and confer legitimacy on collective efforts, are likely to achieve significantly greater engagement.

This finding also speaks to the broader literature on community engagement evolution. While Ohmer et al. (2022) trace the movement from organizational collaboration to resident-centered empowerment approaches, in Basilan the "resident-centered" dimension of engagement is inseparable from culturally and religiously specific frameworks of social obligation. Effective community practice in this context must therefore be not only participatory but *culturally attuned* recognizing that residents' motivations for engagement are embedded in specific cosmological, relational, and historical frameworks.

Gender, Engagement, and Social Work Practice

The gendered patterns of engagement documented in this study (women's high activity in informal and household-adjacent spheres and their limited presence in formal governance) mirror findings from other Muslim-majority contexts in Southeast Asia (Ting, 2007) while also revealing women's significant agency in creating alternative participation spaces. Women-led organizations and livelihood groups function as what Melucci (1996) called "submerged networks" spaces of cultural practice and identity work that prepare participants for broader civic engagement and leadership.

Social work practitioners in Basilan have an important role to play in supporting these networks, challenging the structural barriers that limit women's formal participation, and working with religious leaders (several of whom in this study expressed theological support for women's expanded public roles) to create more inclusive community governance spaces. The finding that women who participated in community organizations developed significant leadership skills underscores the transformative potential of organizational involvement for women's civic

development, consistent with Ohmer's (2007) emphasis on engagement as a pathway to empowerment.

Structural Barriers and Implications for Intervention

The intertwined structural barriers of poverty, political patronage, and insecurity identified in this study present a challenge that community engagement interventions alone cannot resolve. Poverty functions as a direct time-and-resource constraint on participation (Verba et al., 1995) and as a vulnerability that makes residents susceptible to patronage relationships that compromise their civic autonomy. Political patronage, widely documented in Philippine local governance (Gutierrez & Borrás, 2004), is particularly entrenched in conflict-affected regions where formal accountability mechanisms are weak.

These findings call for multi-level interventions that combine community-level engagement capacity building with structural reforms in local governance (including support for participatory planning mechanisms and civil society oversight) and economic interventions that reduce the poverty-driven dependency on political patronage. Social workers operating in Basilan must be equipped with both community organizing skills and political literacy and the capacity to support communities in analyzing and acting on the structural forces shaping their lives, consistent with Freire's (1970) tradition of critical consciousness raising and Friedline et al.'s (2022) framework for political education.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a contextually grounded analysis of community engagement in Basilan Province, a conflict-affected, Muslim-majority territory whose complexity has been underrepresented in community practice scholarship. The mixed-methods findings reveal that while community engagement exists and is meaningful in Basilan, it is unevenly distributed, culturally specific in its forms, constrained by structural barriers, and more vibrant in informal and faith-based spheres than in formal governance spaces. Community trust, collective efficacy, and organizational membership are the most powerful predictors of engagement, while poverty, patronage, and security concerns significantly suppress participation, particularly for women and economically marginalized residents.

These findings have several implications for practice and policy. First, community development and social work programs in Basilan must engage *with* rather than *around* indigenous governance structures and Islamic social institutions, recognizing them as legitimate and effective platforms for community engagement. Second, gender-responsive programming that supports women's leadership development and challenges patriarchal norms (with the active involvement of male religious leaders as allies) is essential for more inclusive community engagement. Third, building community trust through transparent, accountable, and culturally respectful practice is a prerequisite for sustaining engagement; interventions that bypass or undermine existing trust networks are likely to fail. Fourth, the structural conditions (poverty, patronage, and insecurity) that constrain engagement require sustained attention and multi-sectoral responses that extend beyond the purview of community practice alone.

This study also has limitations that should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Social desirability bias may have inflated self-reported engagement levels in the survey. The purposive qualitative sample, while designed for diversity, may not capture all relevant perspectives in the province's diverse communities. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, incorporate additional municipalities and island barangays of Basilan, and give greater attention to the engagement experiences of youth, internally displaced persons, and ex-combatants (groups whose voices remain particularly underrepresented in existing literature).

Despite these limitations, this study makes an original contribution by bringing the realities of community life in a conflict-affected Philippine province into dialogue with global community practice scholarship. It affirms that community engagement (in all its culturally embedded, contested, and contextually specific forms) remains a vital resource for resilience, peacebuilding, and human development in Basilan Province.

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