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The Lived Experiences of Bangsamoro Social Workers: Their Journey in Achieving Inner Peace and Mental Well-Being

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Abstract

The study focused on Bangsamoro social workers' journey to achieve inner peace and well-being in conflict-stricken and violent communities. It described their experiences, challenges encountered, self-care approaches, and lessons learned. The study employed a descriptive research design as it was seen as suitable to generate narratives from 12 Bangsamoro social workers through purposive and snowball sampling. The study utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach and followed the rigorous data collection and analysis following Colaizzi's seven steps of analyzing the narratives of the research participants. The study's key findings are threats and aggressive complaints, delayed salaries and insufficiency of allowances, non-performance of family roles, and other challenges encountered. They are still capable of achieving their inner peace and well-being through self-initiated and peers, family, and faith-motivated self-care initiatives, which allow them to pause from their heavy workloads, manage their stressors into manageable parts, find better solutions to their problems, and regain their motivation to continue their work. This journey of Bangsamoro social workers implied that they could not achieve inner peace and well-being alone. Several individuals should deal with it collaboratively by influencing negative or positive experiences. It also implied that for social work practice to be efficient and progressive—the institutional mechanisms of MSSD-BARMM and other social welfare offices, the programs implemented, and the social work education should be context-based and culturally responsive. In the years, the deaf community in Vinh Long province has had to confront issues of harassment and sexual abuse due to their disabilities. Unfortunately, the majority of the deaf population lacks full awareness of harassment and sexual abuse, often misunderstanding behaviors such as teasing and unwanted touching as not constituting sexual harassment. This article focuses on analyzing the awareness of the deaf community in Vinh Long province, examining aspects such as understanding of sexual harassment behaviors and awareness of responses to harassment.

Keywords: Bangsamoro, conflict, inner peace, social worker, well-being

Introduction

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines Social Work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (IFSW, 2014). It is fundamentally based on the values of social justice, human rights, collective responsibilities, and respect for individual differences. Social work engages people and structures to address life difficulties and improve well-being, drawing from theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge. This definition reflects the profession's goal of assisting communities and vulnerable individuals in overcoming daily challenges, promoting and enhancing the lives of people, families, groups, and societies. Social workers must understand human growth, behavior, social, economic, cultural structures, and interconnections.

As researchers deeply immersed in the daily lives of social workers in the Philippines, we witness the crucial roles they generally play. Through countless interactions and shared experiences, we have seen social workers counsel individuals, groups, and entire communities with strong and consistent sense of dedication. We also observed how they performed their duties and responsibilities embedded in their profession consistent to the perception of Yeshiva University such as maintaining case histories and preparing reports, serving as liaisons between institutions and individuals or families, advocating for clients, resolving crises, developing service plans, investigating issues, and supervising other social workers (Yeshiva University, 2022). However, the significant workload often leads to higher stress levels, exhaustion, and poor mental and physical health. Studies have highlighted the stress and burnout prevalent among social workers due to factors like work pressure, workload, role ambiguity, and relationships with supervisors (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2022). In Mindanao, social workers face additional challenges due to armed conflicts and other crises, such as those caused by COVID-19. The Bangsamoro region, historically plagued by conflicts, now operates under the Bangsamoro Organic Law, creating a new landscape for social work practice (Hutchcroft, 2018). The Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD) has taken on a more comprehensive role in social welfare, particularly during crises (MSSD, 2018).

Bangsamoro social workers are specializing in poverty reduction, disaster work, conflict management, and peacebuilding, reflecting the unique challenges they face (MSSD, 2018). With a limited number of social workers and a high number of displaced individuals due to armed conflict and other crises, social workers in Mindanao shoulder heavy caseloads, leading to exhaustion, stress, burnout, and health issues (MOH-BARMM, 2021). Moreover, their work in conflict-affected areas poses risks to their safety, as they must directly provide resources to survivors, often visiting them in unsafe environments (Mamucao, 2022). Despite these challenges, social workers in Mindanao play a vital role in peacebuilding efforts, offering programs and services to promote family development and community resilience (Mamucao, 2022; Truell, 2019).

Bangsamoro social workers face significant mental, emotional, and physical challenges in their work, exacerbated by the demanding nature of their environment and cultural considerations. This research aims to explore their experiences, challenges faced, self-care approaches and activities, essential for promoting their inner peace and well-being. Understanding and addressing these challenges are crucial for supporting social workers in their vital roles and ensuring the resilience of their communities: hence the necessity for creating a program that will support social workers in establishing resilient communities in the Bangsamoro Region.

This research aimed to understand how Bangsamoro social workers achieve inner peace and protect their well-being in conflict-affected communities. It delves into their living experiences, challenges faced, self-care approaches, and other activities. Additionally, it identifies lessons learned in Maguindanao del Sur that are beneficial for protecting their inner peace and well-being.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design particularly Phenomenology, adapting Colaizzi's seven-step process to analyze the narratives of Bangsamoro social workers regarding their journey to achieving inner peace and well-being. Twelve social workers from conflict-stricken communities in Maguindanao del Sur—such as Shariff Aguak, Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Talitay, and General SK Pendatun—participated in the study. In-depth individual interview questionnaires were used to gather information, with participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Key ethical considerations included ensuring voluntary participation, employing a do-no-harm approach, and maintaining privacy and confidentiality. To protect participant identities, pseudonyms were used instead of real names.

Results

The results were divided into four parts such as (1) *The Lived Experiences of Bangsamoro Social Workers in the Conflict – Affected Areas of Maguindanao Del Sur*, (2) *Challenges Encountered by the Social Workers in the Protection of their Inner Peace and Well-being*, (3) *Self – care Approaches of the Bangsamoro Social Workers in Maguindanao del Sur*, and (4) *Lessons Learned of Bangsamoro Social Workers in the Protection of their Inner Peace and Well-being in Conflict Affected Communities*.

The Lived Experiences of Bangsamoro Social Workers in the Conflict – Affected Areas of Maguindanao del Sur

Our study of the journey of social workers toward inner peace and well-being in conflict-affected communities poses unique challenges for Bangsamoro social workers, marked by violent contextual realities. Similar to experiences in Brazil and Jerusalem, Bangsamoro social workers face heightened vulnerability to secondary stress and burnout due to ongoing armed conflicts and oppressive community behaviors (Santos et al., 2020; Carter, 2014). Unlike their global counterparts, Bangsamoro social workers endure the most severe conditions in the Philippines. These challenges necessitate comprehensive solutions beyond policy changes, requiring protective measures and enhanced training to manage such realities effectively (Lloyd et al., 2022; Frederico et al., 2016).

Bangsamoro social workers are violently threatened

The prevalent threat faced by Bangsamoro social workers, including gun strapping and receiving anonymous threats, reflects the culture of war in Maguindanao del Sur. Bai Rose had experienced hiding during of the payout activities because of gunshots. These experiences hinder their ability to cultivate inner peace and well-being at work, leading to increased feelings of insecurity and demotivation in their community engagement efforts. Similar challenges were observed in social workers in Brazil, where exposure to violence in their workspaces resulted in physical and mental fatigue. Addressing this violent environment collaboratively is crucial, as prolonged exposure to violence can lead to long-term mental health issues (Santos et al., 2020; Good Therapy, 2020).

Bangsamoro social workers are accused of corruption

This theme highlighted the oppression Bangsamoro social workers face due to false accusations of corrupt practices by some authorities and community members in their area. Accusations of soliciting payments, as experienced by Bai Bembet and Bai Kumbay, not only angered them but also caused embarrassment and hurt, as they were committed to just practices in their work. Similarly, Bai Soraida faced false accusations of political bias, leading to significant stress. These experiences not only reflect the culture of war but also hinder social workers' ability to achieve inner peace and well-being. Such accusations undermine their dedication to improving the quality of life for individuals and communities and raise doubts about their commitment to justice in their profession. These challenges highlight the complex nature of social work in conflict areas, where achieving peace and justice remains a constant struggle.

Bangsamoro social workers are humiliated

Bangsamoro social workers in conflict areas often face humiliation in the course of their work. Accusations of corruption and reprimands in municipal meetings, as shared by Bai Bembet, lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Indirect humiliation, such as being recorded without consent, further violates their rights. These experiences are primarily shared by female social workers, reflecting broader gender dynamics influenced by Islamic teachings. While men also face violence, it may not be perceived as humiliating. However, the lack of grievance procedures within the Ministry of Social Services and Development exacerbates the struggle for inner peace and well-being among all Bangsamoro social workers (Mua, 2017; Daloo, 2015).

Women Bangsamoro social workers are sexually and emotionally abused

Women Bangsamoro social workers often face sexual abuse and threats in their barangays, with instances of verbal intimidation and explicit threats of sexual violence. These experiences, such as those recounted by Bai Shahara, highlight the violation of human rights and the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in Bangsamoro communities. These incidents reflect a broader culture of violence and injustice, particularly in patriarchal settings like Maguindanao del Sur. Such challenges undermine efforts to foster harmony and equitable relationships, as described by McDaniel (2021), and require social and behavioral changes within Bangsamoro communities to address gender-based issues effectively (Frederico et al., 2016).

Physical Health at Risk

“Physical Health at Risk” emerged from my personal observation of the Bangsamoro social workers’ experiences in working in conflict-affected areas which highlights the detrimental impact of heavy workloads on their well-being. The strenuous efforts required to manage multiple programs amidst ongoing armed conflict and natural disasters often led to “compassion fatigue” and severe illnesses. Instances such as being diagnosed with GERD or pneumonia, as recounted by Binalyn and Datu Puti, underscore the toll of stress and overwork on their health. Skipping meals to prioritize community needs further exacerbated their health struggles, with Bai Soraida and Bai Kumbay also experiencing ulcer, migraine, and recurrent sickness. Bai Bembet’s miscarriages due to heavy workloads highlight the extreme consequences of such conditions. These narratives reveal the sacrifices made by Bangsamoro social workers in prioritizing community welfare, underscoring the need for greater support and recognition to mitigate the risk to their physical health. While their compassionate dedication to their work is admirable, it also renders them vulnerable to compassion fatigue, as highlighted by UKCSW (2022), especially when adequate rest and appreciation are lacking.

Mental Health in Jeopardy – Bangsamoro Social Workers are Vicariously Traumatized

The theme encapsulates the experiences of Bangsamoro social workers in conflict-affected areas, highlighting the profound impact of exposure to violence on their psychological well-being. Instances of fear, flashbacks, and vicarious trauma resulting from direct involvement or witnessing violent incidents, particularly gun violence, were prevalent among the social workers. Bailyn recounted instances of sleeplessness and fear triggered by gunshots during overnight stays in communities, while Datu Puti and Jose described the lasting effects of witnessing shootings firsthand. Flashbacks and overthinking plagued Jose and Nora after witnessing violent incidents, with Binalyn revealing her team’s response during gunfire exchanges. Bai Bembet shared her struggle with anxiety stemming from repeated exposure to violence. These narratives underscore the urgent need to address the mental health challenges faced by Bangsamoro social workers, as prolonged exposure to violence can lead to panic attacks, anxiety, and depression. Failure to prioritize the mental well-being of social workers and provide adequate support can exacerbate these issues, impacting their ability to effectively carry out their duties and jeopardizing their overall welfare. While systemic changes may be required to address the broader landscape of violence, instituting worker-centered approaches within public welfare institutions can mitigate the negative impact on social workers’ mental health, ensuring their well-being is safeguarded as they continue their vital work in conflict-affected communities.

Work – Life Crisis

Work-life crisis emerged from the narratives of Bangsamoro social workers in conflict-affected areas, reflecting on their professional efficacy and personal fulfillment. This crisis, often triggered by compassion fatigue, encompasses feelings of inadequacy in addressing community needs and doubts about the impact of their work. Witnessing violence, like shootings, and feeling unable to intervene exacerbates these doubts, as seen in Jose’s experience. Similarly, Bai Shahara questions the sufficiency of her services and feels guilty about her inability to meet community needs. The demotivating behavior of communities, coupled with handling traumatic cases like rape and incest, further challenges social workers’ inner peace, as highlighted by Binalyn’s experience. The lack of support from officials adds to their sense of ineffectiveness and prompts thoughts of resigning. These challenges not only affect their professional efficacy but also trigger doubts about self-worth and contribute to mental health concerns. Toh’s concept of inner peace emphasizes the importance of a sound mind and holistic well-being, which is hindered by self-doubt and mental health issues. Addressing aggressive practices, fostering a supportive work environment, and recognizing social workers’ efforts are crucial steps in mitigating the work–life crisis experienced by Bangsamoro social workers.

24/7 Work

This explores the challenges faced by Bangsamoro social workers in conflict-affected areas, focusing on institutional demands and realities during armed conflict and displacements. They operate from 7 AM until late or 24/7, ensuring the welfare of internally displaced persons and responding to escalating armed conflicts. Even amidst gunfire, they must attend to emergencies. This exhaustive, life-threatening work undermines their physical and mental well-being, hindering inner peace. Similar challenges were observed in Jerusalem, where social workers operated during missile attacks, emphasizing the need for strengthened institutional support and policies to protect workers' lives and promote their well-being (Carter, 2014; Toh & Cawagis, 2004).

Unfinished and Repeated Tasks and Deliverables

The theme delves into how external factors and community realities affect institutional deliverables for Bangsamoro social workers in conflict-affected areas. Armed conflict hampers regular program completion, prioritizing community safety over social work tasks. Challenges in case management arise due to client displacement. Gun violence halts community activities, adding to work backlogs. Overworked social workers experience burnout, affecting job satisfaction and productivity. These issues contribute to poverty persistence in the Bangsamoro region despite government efforts (Lloyd et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2020; Tula, 2022). Addressing worker well-being is crucial for improving development outcomes and tackling interconnected regional challenges.

Coerced in Fraud and Dishonest Activities

Findings reveal instances of coercion and fraud experienced by Bangsamoro social workers in conflict-affected communities. Coercion, often by local officials or community leaders, pressured workers into fraudulent activities, leading to inner turmoil and ethical dilemmas. Disagreement resulted in reprimands or threats, as one participant experienced. This coercion undermines workers' self-efficacy and principles, as some fear retaliation for speaking out. Despite challenges, workers strive to ensure services reach those in need, even at personal risk. The tension between upholding principles and ensuring safety highlights the complex ethical dilemmas faced by Bangsamoro social workers.

Natural Disasters are Additional Culprits

The experiences of Bangsamoro social workers encompass both human-induced and natural disasters, influencing community social and economic conditions. Datu Puti highlighted the challenge of managing both types of disasters, prioritizing severely affected areas amidst complaints about resource scarcity. Similarly, Bainalyn noted the recurring nature of armed conflict and flooding in their municipality, requiring consistent action. Additionally, environmental disasters like earthquakes, as experienced by Bailyn, further disrupt their work. Often overlooked, environmental peace is integral, as poor practices exacerbate vulnerabilities to disasters, impacting both communities and frontline workers.

Unhealthy Community Relationships

The driving force for many Bangsamoro social workers amidst challenging conditions is the community's need for their assistance. However, their experiences often entail strained relationships within the community. Besides facing criticism from local officials and service providers, community members express dissatisfaction if promises made by social workers remain unfulfilled. This disappointment stems from administrative issues, such as ineffective data utilization, leading to a loss of trust. For instance, profiling efforts aimed at aiding families affected by conflict yielded futile results due to mismanagement and budget constraints, eliciting frustration and embarrassment from workers and community members alike. Additionally, fluctuating instructions from administrative superiors further complicate their interactions with the community, sometimes exposing them to threats.

Volunteerism as Community's Help to Social Workers

Despite many negative and violent experiences, Bai Soraida shared positive encounters while assisting displaced communities, fostering inner peace and fulfillment. McDaniel (2021) emphasized that building relationships through volunteerism and collaboration is crucial for achieving harmony with others and oneself, promoting inner peace and well-being. Bangsamoro social workers' experiences reflect the roles of individuals, communities, and institutions in fostering their inner peace. The flower peace petal framework highlights the need to dismantle violence, promote justice and integrity, foster solidarity, advocate for environmental peace, and protect social workers from abuse in conflict-affected areas (McDaniel, 2021).

Challenges Encountered by the Social Workers in the Protection of their Inner Peace and Well-being

The challenges faced by Bangsamoro social workers in Maguindanao del Sur parallel those encountered in Lanao del Sur and Marawi City, as documented by Save the Children (2020). These challenges hinder social workers from attaining inner peace and well-being, extending beyond concepts like vicarious traumatization (Lloyd et al., 2022; Good Therapy, 2020). They directly experience the negative effects of conflict, including physical attacks in their workplaces. The pervasive culture of war is a primary obstacle, emphasized by Dr. Toh and Cawagis (2004), as it leads to unjust practices, lack of protection for social workers, and an unsupportive environment for emotional processing. These challenges impede their journey toward inner peace and may lead to resignation or acceptance of the impossibility of finding peace amidst conflict (Springer, 2022). Addressing the root causes of the culture of war is crucial for fostering a conducive environment for social workers to achieve inner peace.

Living with Threats and Complaints

The theme of threats and complaints from various sources, including local officials, colleagues, and clients, poses significant challenges to the inner peace and well-being of Bangsamoro social workers. These threats range from intimidating text messages to direct displays of firearms, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and insecurity in their work environments. Such experiences not only undermine their sense of safety but also affect their professional efficacy and self-esteem, as highlighted by Jose and Datu Puti. Despite their training in development work, social workers remain vulnerable to trauma and stress, necessitating robust support mechanisms. The existence of grievance mechanisms at the local government level is crucial for addressing community complaints effectively and fostering a culture of safety and support for social workers.

Non-performance of Roles as a Family Member

The theme of familial responsibilities and guilt emerged as a significant challenge to the inner peace and well-being of Bangsamoro social workers. Balancing their roles as both family members and professionals in disaster-affected areas proves daunting, as highlighted by Jose and Vilma. The weight of work-related stress often spills over into family dynamics, leading to feelings of guilt and inadequacy, especially when scolding or neglecting children due to exhaustion. This internal conflict disrupts their peace of mind and strains familial relationships, as Bainalyn and Bailyn attest. Such challenges are exacerbated by the constant reminder of unfulfilled familial duties, perpetuating emotional discomfort, as noted by Ruiz-Fernandez et al. (2021). Moreover, the risk of inadvertently perpetuating a cycle of violence within their families looms large, potentially impacting future generations, as discussed by Bell (2012). Despite not being direct clients, children bear the brunt of this violence, threatening their mental well-being (Slone & Mann, 2016). To mitigate these risks, Bangsamoro social workers must develop coping mechanisms to manage work-related stress effectively, safeguarding their families from conflict and fostering healthier long-term relationships.

Heavy Workloads

Heavy workload emerged as a significant factor contributing to the profound stress experienced by Bangsamoro social workers, echoing findings by Lloyd et al. (2021). Bai Kadija emphasized that inner peace for her is achieved when there are no backlogs or pending tasks, reflecting the toll that an overwhelming workload takes on their well-being. The sheer volume of caseloads affects their sleep, eating habits, and overall health, as described by Datu Puti. Heads of municipal offices like Bainalyn and Datu Puti face additional challenges, balancing regular government programs with handling cases unique to conflict-affected areas, such as CICL cases and other ground concerns. This heavy workload not only leads to physical and mental exhaustion but also increases the risk of compassion fatigue, as noted by the UKCSW (2022). Moreover, it poses challenges in maintaining harmony within their families, colleagues, and communities. Addressing this issue is further complicated by the difficulty in hiring additional staff to alleviate the burden.

Delays of Salaries and Insufficient Travel Allowances

The fourth challenge faced by Bangsamoro social workers in achieving inner peace and well-being revolves around financial difficulties with the Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD). Delayed salaries, lasting three to six months, and insufficient travel allowances significantly impact their ability to protect their inner peace. Participants, like Bai Kadija and Nora, stressed how delayed salaries hinder their concentration and cause stress, especially when facing household expenses or emergencies. The burden of borrowing money exacerbates their stress, as Bai Rose and Bai Kumbay highlighted, with rising interest rates adding to their financial strain. This financial instability not only affects their ability to engage in self-care but also leads to larger debts, deepening their stress and disrupting their inner peace. The repercussions of these financial challenges extend beyond personal well-being, as highlighted by the University of Medan Area (2022), impacting employee morale, questioning office credibility, and reducing loyalty to their roles. Persistent delays in salary disbursement by the MSSD-BARMM risk fostering dissatisfaction among social workers, undermining productivity, and hindering program effectiveness in conflict-affected communities of Maguindanao del Sur

Bangsamoro social workers feel undervalued and unappreciated

This highlights the sense of being undervalued and unappreciated among Bangsamoro social workers by institutional heads of social welfare institutions. Bai Bembet and Bai Kumbay shared instances where their efforts were dismissed, with regional heads responding negatively to their expressions of difficulty working in politicized conflict-affected communities. This lack of appreciation and support exacerbates their stress and disturbs their inner peace, as the hostile working environment fails to acknowledge their accomplishments or address their grievances effectively. Bai Bembet's experience of receiving minimal support after a miscarriage reflects the broader issue of institutional neglect. The call for effective mechanisms to support workers in conflict areas aligns with Dr. Toh and Cawagis's (2004) emphasis on human rights, particularly in protecting workers from the dangers inherent in their roles. The gap between the institutional mandate primary social welfare institutions and its implementation underscores the need for a more balanced and responsive approach to social welfare, ensuring the well-being of Bangsamoro social workers in conflict-affected communities.

Unclear and changing supervisor's instructions

The theme concerning challenges in achieving inner peace and well-being was attributed to unclear and changing instructions from supervisors. Bai Kadija recounted a scenario where they conducted a household profiling task as instructed by the region, only to find out later that the data gathered would not be used for beneficiary selection. This inconsistency left her feeling frustrated and embarrassed, especially when questioned by the community members. Her experience reflects the importance, as discussed by Bauwens and Naturale (2017), of social workers understanding their roles clearly in planning, response, and recovery stages to avoid confusion and wasted efforts. Such ambiguity, as highlighted by Lloyd et al. (2022), contributes to profound stress and burnout among

social workers, potentially leading to compassion fatigue, as noted by UKCSW (2022). This underscores the necessity for collaboration between workers and social welfare institutions to navigate the journey toward inner peace and well-being effectively. Clarifying roles, as advocated by Bauwens and Naturale (2017), is crucial in mitigating the impact of unclear instructions, preventing community misconceptions and fostering a supportive environment for social workers.

Institution is understaffed and unroofed

One of the challenges shared by Bangsamoro Social Workers stems from the non-conducive working environment, characterized by a lack of workforce and structured offices for completing tasks and decompressing from field visits. Municipal heads expressed concern over the unrest due to manpower shortages, with Binalyn and Datu Puti underscoring the difficulties of managing additional tasks without extra staff. Datu Puti emphasized the profound stress of sole accountability for municipal matters. Other participants noted the loss of conducive office spaces, hindering their ability to work comfortably and find peace. Bai Bembet stressed the importance of conducive offices for maintaining order and providing a space to process stressful experiences, echoing Dr. Toh's concept of Environmental Peace. Without conducive environments, social workers struggle to achieve inner peace, as they often fail to process their experiences due to ongoing challenges both at work and at home.

Rude and aggressive supervisees

This examines the behavior of supervisees towards their supervisors, which poses a challenge to their inner peace and well-being. Datu Puti shared an unsettling experience where a confrontational supervisee caused significant distress, leading him to feel uncomfortable, afraid, and angered at work. Despite being older, the supervisee's behavior was immature and confrontational, contrary to the expectation of maturity among older professionals as suggested by Daloos (2015). This incident contradicts the notion that age and gender determine one's emotional intelligence (EI) and adversity quotient (AQ). Regardless of age or gender, those in positions of responsibility must develop EI and AQ to handle workplace challenges effectively. The findings align with Lloyd et al.'s (2022) assertion that unhealthy relationships contribute to burnout, as rude supervisees can stress out supervisors. Additionally, it underscores the importance of maintaining harmony with colleagues, as broken relationships hinder the journey toward inner peace and well-being, as emphasized by McDaniel (2021).

Politically – motivated conflicts

The political landscape in conflict-stricken municipalities of Maguindanao presents significant challenges to the inner peace and well-being of Bangsamoro social workers. Political dynamics in the region, including intimidation, fraud, and gun violence, add to the burdens faced by social workers. The involvement of officials in wrongful program implementations and the threat of random messages exacerbate stress levels. Social workers with low autonomy feel manipulated and demotivated, impacting their satisfaction and output. Political tensions and dramas further complicate decision-making, as social workers must navigate conflicting interests. The need to serve multiple mayors and the fear of being perceived as biased create additional pressure. These challenges are exacerbated by the protracted displacements rooted in political divides within communities. The socio-political landscape hampers efforts to cultivate inner peace and mental well-being, perpetuating anxiety among social workers. Addressing political tensions and promoting lasting peace in Mindanao are crucial steps toward creating a conducive environment for Bangsamoro social workers to thrive professionally and achieve sound mental health. (Avila, 2019; Nagamura, 2022; Bukit, 2019; Good Therapy, 2020; Toh & Cawagis, 2004).

Demands of Displacement Work

Displacement work poses significant challenges to the inner peace and well-being of Bangsamoro social workers, as it involves laborious tasks and exposes them to the threat of armed conflict. These big displacements, prevalent in conflict-affected areas like Maguindanao, Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi, often lead to neglecting personal needs and witnessing terrifying events. Case

management becomes more difficult due to clients' constant relocation, contributing to their vulnerability and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Social workers, like those in Jerusalem, are tasked with providing safe spaces and psychosocial support, making their work life-threatening. Unlike other regions, conflict in Mindanao is cyclical and protracted, leaving social workers in a perpetual state of violence and vulnerability to vicarious traumatization. This ongoing exposure may have long-term effects on their mental health. (Toh, 2004; Save the Children, 2020; Bell, 2012; Carter, 2014; Bauwens & Naturale, 2017; Avila, 2019; Baugerud et al., 2017).

Miscommunications and misconceptions at community works

Miscommunications and misconceptions about the roles of Bangsamoro social workers contribute to conflicts within different systems, hindering their efforts to achieve inner peace and well-being. Some community members mistakenly believe that social workers control budgets for welfare programs, making it challenging to gain support. Additionally, language differences exacerbate these misunderstandings, causing social workers like Vilma to fear misinterpretations due to unfamiliar dialects. Broken relationships resulting from these misunderstandings add to the stress faced in the field. McDaniel (2021) emphasizes the importance of harmonious relationships for achieving peace, especially in conflict-affected communities. Despite the diverse cultural landscape of the Bangsamoro region, highlighted by Mua (2017), these narratives underscore the need for social workers to bridge gaps in cultural and language differences to protect their well-being effectively (McDaniel, 2021; Mua, 2017).

Self – care Approaches of the Bangsamoro Social Workers in Maguindanao del Sur

Bangsamoro social workers face significant challenges such as displacements, heavy workloads, and the demands of multiple roles, leading to fear, trauma, and sacrifice of basic needs. According to Decenteceo's Pagdadala Model, they are called "taga-dala," tasked not only with job fulfillment but also with achieving a sense of belongingness and self-worth. This includes practicing "self-care" to manage burdens effectively. However, self-care in the region is often self-initiated due to the politicized nature of social work and conservative socio-cultural principles. Mental health initiatives tend to focus on Islamic education, linking depression and anxiety to faith. Expanding self-care responsibilities beyond taga-dala roles and involving institutions like MSSD and the Bangsamoro government could prioritize mental health programs for more productive social work practice.

Mental health and self-care, not an institutional priority

The assessment of how social welfare institutions support self-care for Bangsamoro social workers reveals significant gaps. Despite their long service, many social workers lack access to training and programs for coping skills and stress management, essential for self-care. Participation in a Care for Carers survey serves as a baseline but is not institutionalized within MSSD. There's a call for an institutionalized mental health program to address the needs of field workers, particularly those exposed to displacement and trauma. The absence of formal debriefing exacerbates the situation, leaving social workers to process emotional burdens individually. Decenteceo's Pagdadala model underscores the importance of communication in handling traumatic experiences to prevent breakdowns. Similar challenges are observed in healthcare institutions, where self-care activities are often self-initiated. Integrating self-care into institutional processes is crucial for job satisfaction and effectiveness. Insufficient mental health support can lead to demotivation, ineffectiveness, and resignation among distressed workers. Futuki et al. (2020) emphasize the need for mental health policies at governmental, institutional, and individual levels, urging prioritization of service providers' welfare. This study underscores the urgency for MSSD-BARMM to institutionalize mental health and self-care policies in the Bangsamoro region to ensure the well-being of its social workers.

Venting – out stresses to others

The second theme explores self-care approaches, particularly venting stresses to colleagues, peers, and family members, providing cathartic relief for Bangsamoro social workers. Shared

pagdadala, as emphasized by Decenteceo (1999), allows them to release traumatic experiences and gain insights from peers. Binalyn finds solace in bonding with friends, while Datu Puti confides in both friends and his spouse. However, some social workers choose to shield family members from their stresses, fearing it may burden them. Venting to trusted individuals is regarded as social self-care, fostering deeper connections and strengthening social relationships, aligning with the concept of building intercultural solidarity. These practices contribute to their journey toward inner peace and well-being.

Self – pampering activities

The third self-care approach embraced by Bangsamoro social workers encompasses a blend of physical, social, and emotional self-care through indulgent activities aimed at bringing happiness and relief. These activities, divided into five sub-themes, serve as outlets for stress relief amidst their demanding work environments. Indulging in movies and Netflix series offers Bai Shahara a comedic escape from work stress, fostering both relaxation and problem-solving. Bai Bembet finds solace in mobile games like Mobile Legends, bonding with family while unwinding. Pampering oneself with beauty products and salon treatments, as Bai Soraida does, enhances self-esteem and confidence, promoting inner peace. Online and window shopping, favored by Bai Kumbay and Vilma, provide temporary distractions and moments of joy amid stress. Stress-eating, practiced by Bai Kadija and others, serves as a coping mechanism, albeit with potential health consequences. Moreover, venturing outdoors, whether alone or with company, offers therapeutic benefits, as highlighted by Jose and Binalyn, reinforcing a connection to nature and facilitating self-reflection. These self-pampering activities, though varied, serve as vital coping mechanisms for Bangsamoro social workers in navigating the challenges of their work environments. They underscore the importance of tailored self-care practices in promoting resilience and inner peace, aligning with contemporary trends in stress management and well-being enhancement.

The comfort of their families

The fourth self-care approach adopted by Bangsamoro social workers in conflict-affected areas to foster inner peace and well-being revolves around their homes and family members. Despite the challenges associated with familial roles, they play significant roles in achieving inner peace and well-being. Effective self-care activities often involve family members, as expressed by Bai Kumbay, who finds solace in outings with her children, highlighting the importance of familial happiness in easing personal burdens. Binalyn echoes this sentiment, citing the joy and stress relief derived from interacting with her children. Single participants or those living with parents also benefit from familial support, as indicated by Baily, who finds peace in family bonding. For Bai Bembet, her family's support was pivotal in coping with a miscarriage, underscoring the role of familial comfort in times of grief and recovery. These narratives underscore the significance of familial relationships in fostering both interpersonal harmony and self-acceptance. As emphasized by McDaniel (2021), a healthy relationship with family members contributes to inner peace by providing support and understanding. These accounts highlight the pivotal role of family in the journey towards managing stress, reclaiming motivation, and nurturing well-being. Ultimately, Bangsamoro social workers find solace in returning to the embrace of loved ones, emphasizing the importance of familial involvement in safeguarding their inner peace and well-being.

Prayers and other spiritual care

The fifth theme derived from the narratives of Bangsamoro social workers in conflict-affected areas in MDS focuses on spiritual self-care through prayers and strengthened faith in God. This approach, as highlighted by Planned Parenthood (2022), nurtures the spirit and provides a broader perspective on life's challenges. For many social workers, prayer emerges as the most accessible form of self-care, offering solace and calmness amidst difficulties. Bai Shahara emphasizes the centrality of prayer in her self-care routine, rooted deeply in her family's tradition. Similarly, Bai Soraida finds solace in reading the Qur'an when confronted with the uncertainty of conflict-ridden assignments, viewing it as

a source of guidance and enlightenment. In essence, spiritual self-care serves as a means for social workers to navigate and find meaning in challenging circumstances. This connection to spirituality underscores the importance of faith in fostering inner peace and resilience, aligning with Dr. Toh's (2004) perspective on the empowering effect of strong faith in coping with adversity.

Good Samaritans – treats and treatments

The last self-care approach experienced by Bangsamoro social workers in conflict areas involves the assistance provided by various individuals such as supervisors, local officials, community members, and beneficiaries. Despite limited funding from MSSD, they organized outings that offered relief from work stresses. Additionally, supervisors like Jose extended gestures such as treating them to food, creating opportunities for debriefing sessions where they could share experiences and fears. This collaborative support from colleagues and authorities underscores the importance of external assistance in fostering inner peace and well-being amidst challenging work environments.

Discussions

The study resulted into a visual framework rooted from the narratives of the 12 Bangsamoro social workers in the provinces of Maguindanao in their journey of achieving their inner peace and well-being. This framework shows their lived threatening experiences in the conflict-stricken communities which are contributory to having profound stresses not only in their professional life but to their personal life also. Moreover, the framework also shows the different coping strategies they employ to achieve their inner peace and well-being.

This section answers the grand tour question of this study on the journey of the Bangsamoro social workers in the conflict-affected areas of Maguindanao del Sur in achieving a state of inner peace and well-being. The answer to this grand tour question was mainly influenced by their lived experiences, challenges encountered, self-care approaches, and lessons learned supported by the concepts in the flower petal of peace framework by Dr. Swee Hin Toh and Virginia Cawagis (2004.)

The Bangsamoro social workers in Maguindanao del Sur achieve their inner peace and well-being amid their exposure to the violent realities of the Bangsamoro communities through (1) allotting time to pause and reflect on the current stressful condition, (2) having the ability to manage the stresses confronting them, (3) finding better and effective solutions to their problems, and in (4) re-gaining their motivation to work. Their self-initiated self-care activities, which vary from one individual to the other, were essential in the journey towards inner peace and well-being as they are the ones conducted by a Bangsamoro social worker to re-compose themselves to confront stressful conditions or to be enlightened by other things that contribute to their inner peace struggles. In order to fully understand the journey of Bangsamoro social workers to the cultivation and achievement of their inner peace and well-being, a structure that provides a holistic picture of their lived experiences, challenges encountered, self-care approaches, and their state of inner peace was created.

To highlight how the flower petal of peace framework was used in the study, the concepts of the petals were reflected to describe the threats or challenges encountered in achieving inner peace and well-being. The sixth petal was not added to the above table because cultivating inner peace will only be possible whenever a social worker has the chance to escape the threats and challenges encountered in the Bangsamoro communities of Maguindanao del Sur. One of the distinct features of this study was in viewing the flower peace petal framework not as concepts that a Bangsamoro social worker must adhere to in their day-to-day lives in the conflict-affected communities, but instead, it provided an investigation on how these petals were concretized in the lives of Bangsamoro social workers today. By specifying the concrete narratives relating to these petals and their connection to the achievement of inner peace and well-being, Bangsamoro social workers and social welfare institutions like MSSD-BARMM can create institutional policies easier more responsive to the narratives of their workers.

However, the idea of getting out to these challenges encountered—threats, intimidation, abuses, work oppression, seemed to be impossible unless they were transferred to other communities within or outside the Bangsamoro region with a context that is non-violent or at least have lesser cases of inter-

group armed and violent conflicts. This struggle was represented by bringing these threats inside a big circle which highlights how these challenges become very cyclical for Bangsamoro social workers, they keep on repeating in these conflict areas, and it emphasizes that social workers are locked up to their assignments amid influences of violent realities.

Only a few of them were given these chances to transfer area assignments, and these chances were given to workers who were in "justified" and "validated" life-and-death conditions. This is what the red zigzag lines represent in the figure. The forces and conditions that Bangsamoro social workers have no control over might challenge or stop them from seeking inner peace and well-being. Therefore, Bangsamoro social workers experiencing burnout, demotivation, and verbal and emotional oppression had to endure their situations and search for practical self-care approaches. The spiral shape, reflected in the structure, did not only mean that the process towards inner peace and well-being is cyclical or unending, but it also separated the challenges encountered by their self-care approaches. Moreover, the shape also served as a shield formed by self-care to safeguard Bangsamoro social

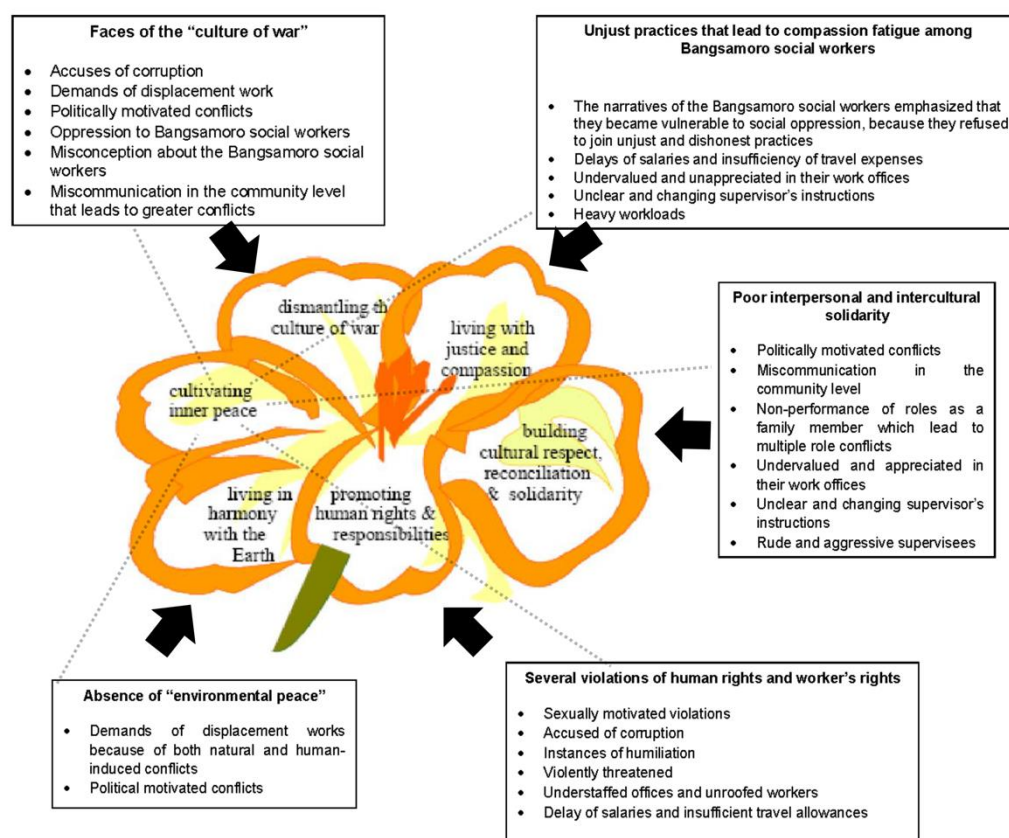


Figure 2. Summary of Threats and Flower Petals of Peace Concepts

workers as they continue to achieve inner peace and well-being. The self-initiated self-care activities of the Bangsamoro social workers vary in approach and continue to differ depending on the severity of the challenges encountered. The idea of self-care approaches in the structure is also done in collective and several forms. They usually do more than one self-care activity to succeed in restoring their social functionality, recomposing themselves to confronting the challenges of their day-to-day work and achieving inner peace in the end. Planned Parenthood (2022) specified that these self-care approaches may be physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. The blue arrows showed how critical self-care approaches are in their journey towards self-care. They all point and lead them to a self-reflective moment which paused them from working on several things in their offices and communities to the management of stresses, which refers to applying the social work technique of *partialization*, which breaks the problems into several parts, to finding solutions to the problems confronting them, and lastly, to solve these problems and re-gain their motivation to work in conflict-affected communities

(Cournoyer, 2016). These interconnected instances, shown through green lines that connect them, led a Bangsamoro social worker to arrive at inner peace and well-being.

Achieving Inner Peace and Well-being Through Self-Reflective Moments

Pause at work can also be a form of self-reflection. Self-reflective moments allow Bangsamoro social workers to hibernate from the several activities and problems they encounter in the field. Through hibernation, Bangsamoro social workers were put in a situation to relax and recover. The study of Bauwens and Naturale (2017) on the several roles and unclear roles that social workers portray in the field may add to these narratives of Bangsamoro social workers, which did only lead to non-productivity and inefficiency at work but also to experiencing mental breakdowns and work-life crisis. Inner peace will not be attained whenever a social worker's table is full (Toh & Cawagis, 2004). It can only be attained whenever a Bangsamoro social worker puts it on top of its priority. Praying, reading Qur'an or bible, having long drives, and going on beach and nature trips were effective self-care activities that provided a self-reflective moment for Bangsamoro social workers, especially since these self-care activities are a combination of a self-care approach that enhances their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual abilities (Planned Parenthood, 2022). Self-reflective moments can also bring social workers back to a state of recalling the principles of social work that they have to adhere to. Dash (2022) emphasized how these principles become effective in building healthy community relationships because social workers can respond to situations more maturely. This study suggested that Bangsamoro social workers should learn the beauty of doing backpedal to realize a more manageable path toward inner peace and well-being.

Achieving Inner Peace and Well-being Through Effective Management of Stresses

Bangsamoro social workers in the conflict affected were not only dealing with a single stressor; based on their actual experiences, they were handling one stressor on top of the other stressors. The heads of MSWDOs were handling the stresses brought by their rude and aggressive supervisees simultaneously with the displaced communities in their numerous evacuation centers, the complaints of the beneficiaries, the demands of the corrupt and greedy local leaders, and for some, they also faced family and personal problems. The study of Lloyd et al. (2022) emphasized how multi-functional social workers in multi-faceted problematic and stressful situations become very vulnerable to burnout, demotivation, and emotional discomfort. With this, the study insinuated that when stress is viewed from a bird's eye, a Bangsamoro social worker breaks down and finds it impossible to resolve these stresses. In their journey towards inner peace and well-being, the Bangsamoro social workers achieved them by applying the principle of *partialization*, in which they break down their problems into manageable parts and deal with them individually (Cournoyer, 2016). They encouraged using this technique because they are only human beings who cannot solve them simultaneously. Moreover, this also acknowledges that Bangsamoro social workers have different levels of EI and AQ (Daloos, 2015). There are Bangsamoro social workers who can manage stresses and control how they react to stressful conditions, while there are many who have lower EI and AQ and have issues with their *emotional expression* that requires them to deal with stressful conditions in units so that they may solve it one at a time (Daloos, 2015).

This can also be related to the long journey of the peace process in the Bangsamoro region (Bukit, 2019). Moreover, to attain lasting peace for Mindanao, they followed a rigorous peace process that broke down the components of conflict into varying peace agreements one at a time (Marcelo, 2018). With this, the idea highlights that the peace journey is long and laborious in the context of the Bangsamoro communities. It shall be dealt with by effective management of stresses, which ensures that it will not stop social workers because of the heaviness and number of stressors they have to deal with. Instead, they work with these problems piece by piece and solve them effectively.

Achieving Inner Peace and Well-being Through Finding Solutions to a Problem

The end goal of social workers, in general, is to find better solutions to community problems and to advance the quality of life (IFSW, 2014). Resolving a community problem fulfills Bangsamoro social workers. They achieved a certain feeling of happiness and productivity essential to cultivating inner

peace, as emphasized by Toh and Cawagis (2004). However, this can also be applied to their inner peace and well-being journey. To attain such, they needed better solutions to the problems they were confronting. Resolution of a problem—may that be with a supervisor, a community leader, a beneficiary, or even a family member, gives Bangsamoro social workers inner peace and well-being and moves them away from stress and burnout (Lloyd et al., 2022). Most of the stories of Bai Kadija, Vilma, Nora, and Bailyn, who did not attend the office for several weeks after being scolded, returned to work when their concerns were resolved. McDaniel (2021) would count this as a manifestation of how *harmony with others* contributes to work motivation. These solutions may come from their colleagues, peers, and heads whenever they vent out their stresses, from their parents during their family bonding, from their self-reflective moment, or whenever they break down their stresses into manageable parts (Cournoyer, 2016). Nonetheless, the narratives indicated how the journey revolved around finding better solutions to their concerns.

Achieving Inner Peace and Well-Being Through Regained Work Motivation

Most of the Bangsamoro social workers struggling in their journey to inner peace and well-being were demotivated, burned out, or lost in unhappy with their work in general (Lloyd et al., 2022). To achieve inner peace and well-being, they must bring back their motivation to continue working in conflict-affected communities. This is included in the lesson learned shared by Vilma about building a positive environment at work as needed in cultivating inner peace and well-being, which means that the journey has also involved a lot of the worker-factor on how they will strive towards inner peace and well-being. Considering the cyclical and protracted characteristics of the threats to their inner peace like armed conflict, *rido*, and displacements (Avila, 2019), work motivation may be lost upon experiencing another threat, but it can still be regained in the journey with the help of the different self-care approaches which can be explained and be dependent on how they emotional react and bounce back from these stresses (Daloos, 2015).

The concepts of self-reflection or a moment of pause at work, stress management and *partialization*, finding better solutions, and regaining work motivation may be dependent and independent of one another, may be or may not be viewed as stages or processes because they may still vary from the capabilities of a Bangsamoro social worker. In connection with this, the structure also reflected one (1) and only positive contextual reality of how volunteerism existed in the conflict-affected areas, which manifested intercultural and community solidarity of the people (Toh & Cawagis, 2004). This experience may automatically reinforce workers' motivation, as reflected by an arrow encompassing threats and self-care in the structure. They feel the support of the community they serve, which gives them relief and happiness essential to their journey toward inner peace and well-being. If unhealthy relationships with supervisors, supervisees, and communities were causes of stress and burnout among social workers, according to Lloyd et al. (2022), then its opposite counterpart, like the communities' efforts in helping them are beneficial in their journey towards inner peace and well-being.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers a visual framework derived from the narratives of 12 Bangsamoro social workers in Maguindanao del Sur, illustrating their journey toward achieving inner peace and well-being amidst the challenges of conflict-affected communities. The framework reveals the profound stresses faced by these social workers, both professionally and personally, as well as the various coping strategies they employ. The study addresses the overarching question by delving into their lived experiences, challenges, self-care approaches, and lessons learned, drawing on the Flower Petals of Peace framework by Dr. Swee Hin Toh and Virginia Cawagis (2004). Bangsamoro social workers achieve inner peace through self-reflection, stress management, problem-solving, and regaining work motivation. Their self-care activities vary and are often collective, providing moments of relief and resilience-building. Importantly, the study highlights the cyclical nature of threats to their well-being, emphasizing the need for ongoing support and resilience-building initiatives. By contextualizing the challenges faced by Bangsamoro social workers and identifying effective coping strategies, this study

contributes to understanding and supporting the mental health and well-being of social workers in conflict-affected regions. It underscores the importance of institutional policies that prioritize the welfare of social workers and promote a conducive working environment. Ultimately, the journey toward inner peace and well-being for Bangsamoro social workers is complex and ongoing, requiring collaborative efforts from various stakeholders to ensure their continued resilience and effectiveness in serving their communities.

Suggestions/Implications

This section outlines the implications of the study for various stakeholders involved in the Bangsamoro social work context. For Bangsamoro social workers, the study highlights the importance of emotional and adversity quotients in navigating challenges and achieving inner peace. It underscores the prevalence of compassion fatigue and the need for effective self-care strategies to mitigate its effects. Additionally, the study suggests that self-care activities need not be costly and emphasizes the gender-neutral impact of traumatic experiences on social workers. Regarding the Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD) in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) in the Philippines, the findings indicate a lack of institutional support for mental health and self-care initiatives, emphasizing the need for policy reforms to prioritize the well-being of social workers. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of creating a conducive working environment and implementing protective measures for social workers. For Social Work education, there is a call for context-based curriculum focusing on disaster response, stress management, and localized theories. The study also advocates for the integration of local contexts into licensure examinations to better prepare graduates for real-world challenges. In terms of self-care and mental health practices, the research highlights the ongoing struggles in addressing these issues in the Bangsamoro region, emphasizing the need for increased awareness and program development. Finally, regarding the peace and order landscape in conflict-affected areas, the study underscores the detrimental impact of political divides and clan wars on social workers' well-being, necessitating collaborative efforts among various stakeholders to address security concerns and promote inner peace. Overall, the study emphasizes the collaborative nature of achieving inner peace and well-being in conflict-affected communities and highlights the importance of ongoing support and resilience-building initiatives for Bangsamoro social workers.

In the challenging landscape of conflict-affected areas such in Maguindanao del Sur, our social workers play a crucial role in supporting communities while often facing significant personal and professional stress. Thus, this study suggests for the integration of philosophical and spiritual practices into their work to greatly enhance their resilience and well-being. The Ubuntu philosophy, as explored by Chowdhury et al. (2023), emphasizes community and interconnectedness, which are vital for fostering a supportive network among social workers in the Bangsamoro region. The 'JR Self-Repairing Model' detailed in this work provides a practical framework for self-restoration, aligning personal well-being with community care. This model encourages Bangsamoro social workers to engage in self-care practices that are harmonized with their commitment to community welfare, thereby sustaining their motivation and resilience in demanding environments. Moreover, the concept of 'Selfosophy' – the study of one's own philosophical grounding – helps these professionals to align their personal values with their professional duties, enhancing their inner peace and job satisfaction. Additionally, the principles of reciprocity discussed in Chowdhury et al. (2022) underscore the importance of building trust and sustainable relationships through mutual engagement. For Bangsamoro social workers, applying these principles means giving back to the community in ways that honor and respect mutual benefits to promote ethical and empathetic practices. This approach not only empowers the community but also reinforces the social workers' sense of purpose and mental well-being. Embracing these insights help Bangsamoro social workers to explore the psychological toll of their work more effectively to foster a healing environment for themselves and the communities they serve.

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