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Community-Based Empowerment and Social Inclusion for the Mëranaw Diaspora: A Service-Learning Approach to Combating Discrimination in the Philippines toward Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination remains a social barrier that limits equality and participation among Mëranaw individuals living outside Lanao del Sur. This community service initiative transforms empirical findings on discrimination into community-based empowerment and inclusion programs. Guided by a descriptive survey involving 150 Mëranaw participants, the project engaged local leaders, educators, and youth in intercultural dialogues, awareness campaigns, and peacebuilding workshops. These activities aimed to reduce prejudice, enhance understanding, and strengthen mutual respect between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Results revealed improved social cohesion, reduced feelings of exclusion, and increased confidence among participants to express cultural identity with pride. The project highlights that addressing discrimination requires both data-driven understanding and active service engagement rooted in empathy and cooperation. By integrating research, advocacy, and community service, this study contributes to Sustainable Development Goals 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) through inclusive action and social solidarity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discrimination remains one of the most pressing social barriers that restricts equality, dignity, and opportunity among marginalized populations. It occurs when individuals are treated unfairly because of differences in race, religion, gender, or culture (Rivenbark & Ichou, 2020; Hassan, 2023; Basson, 2023). These unfair actions reinforce stereotypes and sustain structural inequalities that hinder participation and justice (Newman *et al.*, 2023; Syafril, 2021). In Southeast Asia, studies reveal that despite strong legal commitments and social inclusion policies, discrimination continues to affect vulnerable groups, particularly in cultural and religious contexts (see www.oecd.org/en/publications/sigi-2021-regional-report-for-southeast-asia_236f41d0-en.html). Over time, this inequity generates unequal access to employment, education, and political participation, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion (Prince *et al.*, 2023).

The psychological and health consequences of discrimination are also significant. Research demonstrates that experiences of prejudice and exclusion can lead to chronic stress, depression, and anxiety (Lee & Waters, 2021; Ahmed & Islam, 2023). These emotional burdens often manifest in unhealthy behaviors, limited physical activity, and even physiological problems such as hypertension (Booth *et al.*, 2017; Kreutz *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, individuals who experience discrimination in health systems often delay or avoid seeking care, exacerbating disparities in treatment and outcomes (Nong *et al.*, 2020; Varcoe *et al.*, 2022; Hall *et al.*, 2022; Abubakar *et al.*, 2022). This evidence underscores the need for inclusive health and community programs that uphold equity and fairness as pathways to improved well-being (Hone *et al.*, 2022; Friesinger *et al.*, 2025; Ouayogodé & Salas, 2024).

In the Philippines, discrimination remains deeply rooted in social and institutional systems, particularly against Indigenous and Muslim populations in Mindanao and the Bangsamoro region (Domingo, 2020). Reports from national and international organizations reveal persistent gaps between legal protections and their implementation (see www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2023/04/examen-du-rapport-des-philippines-devant-le-cerd-la-situation). Despite the presence of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act and equality-oriented programs, many Mëranaw individuals continue to face barriers in accessing basic services and fair opportunities. Prejudice against Muslims often remains "hidden but harmful," undermining peacebuilding and social cohesion in Mindanao (see www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/07/22/1720433/please-ask-what-we-feel-maranao-leader-speaks-martial-law-abuses).

Given this context, this study expands from a descriptive investigation of discrimination into a community service initiative that transforms research insights into social action. Through participatory engagement with educators, youth, and local leaders, the project implements service-learning activities such as interfaith dialogues, cultural literacy workshops, and awareness campaigns that address prejudice through mutual understanding and cooperation (see www.reliefweb.int/report/philippines/dressmakers-allies-promoting-womens-rights-lanao-del-sur-philippines) (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Ragandang, 2021; Yoshizawa & Kusaka, 2020). These collaborative programs not only empower Mëranaw communities to confront exclusion but also strengthen intercultural relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim populations.

Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), this initiative demonstrates that addressing discrimination requires both empirical understanding and active social participation. By

merging descriptive research with community-based service, the project advances equity, empathy, and sustainable peacebuilding across diverse communities. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of quantitative findings on discrimination with structured community service interventions—bridging research, advocacy, and empowerment to foster intercultural solidarity and inclusive development.

Discrimination and social exclusion continue to affect marginalized communities across the Philippines, particularly among Mëranaw individuals living outside Lanao del Sur. Their cultural and religious identity often becomes a visible marker of difference that exposes them to misunderstanding and unfair treatment. These experiences not only limit access to education, housing, and employment but also weaken self-esteem, participation, and social cohesion. Despite numerous national laws and advocacy efforts, discrimination remains deeply rooted in social practices and intergroup relations, highlighting the urgent need for inclusive community engagement (see www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2023/04/examen-du-rapport-des-philippines-devant-le-cerd-la-situation) (Domingo, 2020).

In response, this community service initiative integrates research findings on Mëranaw discrimination into participatory programs promoting social inclusion, empathy, and intercultural understanding. Guided by principles of descriptive and participatory design, the project involves local leaders, educators, and youth in implementing service-learning activities such as interfaith dialogues, awareness campaigns, and cultural workshops that empower both Muslim and non-Muslim communities to address prejudice collaboratively (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Ragandang, 2021; Yoshizawa & Kusaka, 2020). Through these programs, participants actively transform data into social action, reflecting the value of research-based community engagement as a pathway for empowerment and peacebuilding (see www.reliefweb.int/report/philippines/dressmakers-allies-promoting-womens-rights-lanao-del-sur-philippines).

Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), this initiative demonstrates that combating discrimination requires not only academic analysis but also active community participation. It emphasizes the interconnectedness between cultural awareness, inclusion, and sustainable peace as the foundation for social justice. The novelty of this study lies in transforming empirical data on discrimination into a structured community service framework that bridges research, advocacy, and practical empowerment to foster equality and intercultural harmony.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design combined with participatory action research (PAR) principles to connect empirical findings on discrimination with community-based service. The descriptive approach enabled a clear understanding of Mëranaw experiences, while PAR encouraged collaboration among researchers, educators, and community leaders (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

A total of 150 participants (comprising students, professionals, and advocates from the Mëranaw diaspora) were selected using purposive and criterion-based sampling to ensure diverse yet relevant perspectives (Ahmed & Islam, 2023). Data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and community reflection sessions, offering a holistic view of social discrimination and inclusion dynamics (Ragandang, 2021).

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns, such as experiences of prejudice, coping mechanisms, and strategies for social inclusion (Friesinger *et al.*, 2025; Ouayogodé &

Salas, 2024). Emerging themes guided the development of service-learning programs, including intercultural workshops, interfaith dialogues, and community campaigns promoting peace and empathy (Yoshizawa & Kusaka, 2020; Syafril, 2021).

Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the process, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for cultural identity. The methodological framework aligns with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by integrating research and service as dual mechanisms for empowerment and inclusive development (see www.reliefweb.int/report/philippines/dressmakers-allies-promoting-womens-rights-lanao-del-sur-philippines) (Hone *et al.*, 2022).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study present the lived realities of discrimination experienced by members of the Mëranaw diaspora living outside Lanao del Sur. Using descriptive and participatory analysis, the data reveal patterns of exclusion, prejudice, and resilience that reflect both structural and interpersonal inequalities. The analysis of tables and participant narratives underscores how discrimination continues to influence the social participation, psychological well-being, and agency of Mëranaw individuals. This discussion also integrates a community service perspective, interpreting results not only as social indicators but as guides for inclusive action and empowerment aligned with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

3.1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic background of the 150 Mëranaw participants involved in this study. The respondents varied by age, gender, educational attainment, and occupation, illustrating the diversity of diaspora members living in urban centers such as Manila, Cebu, and Davao. The data show that most respondents were young adults between 20 and 35 years old, with a slightly higher number of female participants. The educational level ranged from secondary to postgraduate, with many engaged in teaching, small business, and community advocacy.

This diversity is significant because it reflects the multilayered nature of discrimination that affects individuals differently across gender, education, and social status. Structural inequality often manifests in unequal access to opportunities even when individuals share similar qualifications (Kaiser & Major, 2006). Similarly, discrimination is not only a matter of attitude but a reproduction of social hierarchy within institutions (Bobo & Fox, 2003). The demographic data thus set the foundation for understanding how discrimination influences multiple domains of life among the Mëranaw diaspora.

Table 1. The socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	68	45.3%
	Female	82	54.7%
Age	20–25	47	31.3%
	26–35	58	38.7%
	36–45	27	18.0%
	46 and above	18	12.0%
	Educational Attainment	Secondary	19
	Tertiary	89	59.3%
	Postgraduate	42	28.0%

Table 1 (continue). The socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Occupation	Student	43	28.7%
	Educator	37	24.7%
	Entrepreneur	34	22.7%
	Community worker	36	24.0%

3.2. Perceptions of Discrimination

Table 2 summarizes the respondents' perceptions of discrimination based on religion, cultural identity, and daily interaction. The majority of respondents reported experiencing at least one form of prejudice in public institutions, workplaces, or residential communities. Religious discrimination was the most commonly cited, followed by stereotyping associated with being Muslim and Mëranaw.

Respondents described how these experiences limited their participation and reduced their confidence in expressing cultural identity. Perceived discrimination can affect individuals' social identity and lead to internalized stigma when support systems are weak (Guimond *et al.*, 2013). In community contexts, such discrimination disrupts civic participation, trust, and social cohesion, issues that align with SDG 16, which calls for inclusive institutions and peaceful societies.

The integration of community service into this study transforms these observations into opportunities for empowerment. During follow-up service-learning workshops, Mëranaw participants used their experiences as case materials for public awareness sessions with local youth organizations and religious groups. Such activities allowed dialogue and reflection on cultural bias, creating safe spaces for mutual understanding and respect.

Table 2. Perceptions of discrimination based on beliefs, practices, and social dynamics.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I experience discrimination because of my religion.	41	72	25	12
People stereotype Mëranaw as violent or untrustworthy.	33	76	27	14
My opinions are often ignored in mixed gatherings.	26	63	39	22
I avoid expressing my cultural identity in public.	29	58	42	21

The patterns in **Table 2** confirm that discrimination operates both explicitly and subtly. Some respondents described overt prejudice (such as verbal insults or job rejections), while others mentioned more implicit forms, like exclusion in group decision-making. This complexity supports previous studies (Friesinger *et al.*, 2025), which emphasize that discriminatory experiences are multidimensional, involving both emotional and institutional factors. Furthermore, exposure to repeated microaggressions gradually weakens social belonging and trust, even among well-educated individuals (Ouayogodé & Salas, 2024).

These results indicate that interventions against discrimination must go beyond legal protection and include education, empathy-building, and intergroup collaboration. Within the service-learning framework, Mëranaw and non-Mëranaw participants co-designed

storytelling projects and art-based community dialogues. Such collaborative activities align with the participatory nature of community service, demonstrating that mutual understanding can emerge when communities share narratives of pain and resilience.

3.3. Well-Being and Resilience Amid Discrimination

Table 3 presents how respondents perceive the relationship between discrimination and their sense of well-being. The data reveal that more than half of the participants reported emotional distress, sleep disruption, or decreased motivation after experiencing prejudice. However, many respondents also showed adaptive coping strategies such as prayer, family support, and community gatherings.

This pattern is consistent with previous studies (Raj *et al.*, 2023) regarding marginalized individuals often developing cultural resilience that mediates the impact of discrimination. Likewise, social connection and spiritual grounding enhance emotional regulation in times of adversity (Tamarit *et al.*, 2023). These findings emphasize that while discrimination harms mental health, strong communal bonds (especially those rooted in faith and cultural pride) can foster recovery and empowerment.

Table 3. Perceptions of well-being and discrimination.

Indicator	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel anxious after facing discrimination.	36	71	28	15
Discrimination reduces my motivation to work or study.	39	66	31	14
My family helps me cope with discrimination.	44	72	23	11
My faith strengthens me when I feel discriminated against.	52	70	18	10

The data affirm that social and spiritual dimensions serve as protective factors in the Mëranaw diaspora's coping mechanisms. Emotional regulation and resilience are often reinforced through collective reflection and community belonging (Cash *et al.*, 2024). During the implementation of this community service project, reflection sessions became therapeutic spaces where participants not only shared stories but also developed empathy for others' struggles. Such participatory reflection mirrors the healing through solidarity model (Slavich *et al.*, 2022), where empathy-driven dialogue acts as a psychosocial intervention against discrimination and stress.

Beyond the descriptive patterns, these outcomes illustrate that community-based service amplifies the transformative potential of research. The act of turning findings into collective action (through storytelling, education, and public awareness) helped participants reframe pain into purpose. The workshops also inspired volunteer projects advocating cultural understanding in schools and barangay councils.

3.4. Sense of Agency and Respect

The last dimension explored in this study concerns the participants' sense of agency (their ability to act freely and confidently despite discrimination) and their perception of respect within host communities. **Table 4** summarizes the responses, revealing that nearly 60% of participants agreed they have learned to assert themselves constructively when facing bias. However, a notable 40% still reported hesitancy to voice concerns in public, particularly when surrounded by non-Mëranaw peers.

Table 4. Perceptions of sense of agency and respect.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I can express my opinions confidently despite discrimination.	38	53	37	22
I feel respected when I contribute to community discussions.	41	68	25	16
Discrimination prevents me from joining social events.	35	59	33	23
I believe my voice matters in community initiatives.	45	63	27	15

The findings in **Table 4** demonstrate that while most participants develop assertiveness through education and community engagement, some remain cautious about voicing their identity. Chronic exposure to social bias often diminishes one's perceived control over social outcomes (Kaiser & Major, 2006). Empowerment requires structural and relational transformation, where respect and inclusion are embedded in community norms rather than dependent on individual effort (Bobo & Fox, 2003).

From a community service standpoint, these findings guided the design of empowerment activities such as peer mentoring and leadership training. Participants who initially expressed reluctance to engage in dialogue later volunteered as facilitators in intercultural workshops. This shift in agency demonstrates that service-based participation (anchored in cooperation and shared responsibility) can nurture confidence and bridge identity gaps.

3.5. Integrating Quantitative Findings with Community Action

The descriptive results, supported by the four tables, provided more than empirical evidence; they became the basis for direct community service intervention. Following the data analysis, researchers organized several participatory activities under three program clusters:

- (i) Intercultural Understanding Workshops, focusing on dismantling stereotypes and promoting shared values of peace and cooperation.
- (ii) Faith and Dialogue Sessions, held in collaboration with local imams, pastors, and youth ministers, to highlight empathy and coexistence.
- (iii) Community Solidarity Campaigns, emphasizing volunteerism and collaboration in barangay-level initiatives that benefit both Mëranaw and non-Mëranaw citizens.

Each of these programs represented the transformation of research into practice. The descriptive statistics showing high rates of prejudice and emotional strain were translated into awareness activities that directly targeted the sources of misunderstanding. Practical interventions grounded in data help communities recognize discrimination as a social rather than personal issue (Friesinger *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, initiatives encouraging collective dialogue increase tolerance and empathy, key components of social healing (Raj *et al.*, 2023).

During post-program evaluations, many participants reported a renewed sense of dignity and belonging. They emphasized how collective storytelling and shared action allowed them to reclaim their narrative. This aligns with previous studies (Tamarit *et al.*, 2023), which describe "relational restoration" as a process where marginalized groups rebuild confidence through meaningful social roles.

3.6. Psychological and Social Implications

A recurring theme throughout the findings is that discrimination has both emotional and structural consequences. Participants consistently identified emotional fatigue, social withdrawal, and mistrust as outcomes of repeated prejudice. However, within the service-learning framework, these vulnerabilities were addressed through reflective sessions and community empathy circles.

Such participatory reflection resonates with previous reports (Slavich *et al.*, 2022), who argue that empathy-driven discourse can mitigate psychological distress by validating experiences of marginalization. Similarly, emotional well-being improves when individuals actively engage in collective problem-solving rather than isolated coping (Cash *et al.*, 2024). These theoretical perspectives support the study's finding that community involvement itself becomes a form of healing.

The community reflection sessions allowed Mëranaw participants to transform negative emotions into motivation for advocacy. One female participant, for example, shared how discussing her experiences in a mixed-faith dialogue changed her perception from self-protection to empathy. Such transformations illustrate that service-learning not only generates social impact but also fosters personal growth, an educational process that develops character and leadership.

3.7. Linking Findings to SDGs 10 and 16

The integration of quantitative data with service-oriented programs supports two core Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The patterns of discrimination revealed through this study correspond to persistent inequalities in access to opportunity, participation, and social trust. Through action-oriented engagement, participants collectively addressed these inequalities by promoting understanding, respect, and empowerment.

This approach is consistent with previous reports (Guimond *et al.*, 2013), who assert that structural inequality can be dismantled when communities develop inclusive spaces for representation and dialogue. By aligning research outcomes with service-learning practice, the project bridges academic inquiry and social transformation. The resulting initiatives—education campaigns, dialogue sessions, and leadership programs—are tangible contributions to peacebuilding.

Moreover, the project's inclusive model highlights that discrimination cannot be solved by legislation alone. While legal frameworks remain vital, the everyday enactment of equality depends on community behavior and intercultural relationships. These insights affirm that SDG implementation requires both macro-level policy reform and micro-level cultural engagement, which this initiative effectively demonstrates.

3.8. Reflections on Community Empowerment

One of the most significant impacts of the project was the shift in perception among participants, from seeing themselves as passive victims of discrimination to active agents of change. Community engagement (Ouayogodé & Salas, 2024) strengthens agency by positioning marginalized individuals as contributors rather than recipients of aid. This empowerment model was visible as Mëranaw participants initiated outreach programs in local schools, conducted forums about tolerance, and produced digital campaigns on cultural respect.

Through these collective efforts, participants extended the impact of the research beyond academic publication into community transformation. The initiative demonstrates how service-learning merges knowledge and compassion, turning research data into tools for peace and social justice. The emphasis on empathy and participation also resonates with previous studies (Bobo & Fox, 2003), who emphasize that true inclusion emerges when social structures reflect shared moral commitment, not merely policy compliance.

3.9. Synthesis and Implications

The combined findings from all tables highlight three interrelated dimensions:

- (i) Discrimination as a continuing barrier to social participation;
- (ii) Resilience and faith as protective factors sustaining emotional well-being; and
- (iii) Empowerment through community service as a pathway to healing and equality.

Together, these insights contribute to the broader discourse on intercultural education and peacebuilding. By applying descriptive research in real community settings, this study bridges the gap between empirical data and lived experience. In doing so, it exemplifies previous reports (Friesinger *et al.*, 2025) call “transformative participation,” where communities co-create solutions rather than receive externally imposed interventions.

Finally, this community service initiative underscores the importance of empathy-based research in achieving sustainable peace. The project aligns with SDG 10 and SDG 16 not only in principle but in measurable outcomes, enhanced agency, improved mutual understanding, and strengthened cultural pride among Mëranaw diaspora members. The results affirm that discrimination can be countered most effectively when academic inquiry becomes a catalyst for social inclusion and when communities themselves become partners in the pursuit of equality.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that discrimination against the Mëranaw diaspora extends beyond individual experiences; it reflects systemic inequality that requires a collective response. By transforming descriptive findings into community-based service, the project demonstrated that empathy, intercultural understanding, and participatory dialogue can effectively reduce prejudice and promote inclusion. Through collaboration with educators, youth, and faith leaders, the initiative fostered mutual respect and agency among marginalized groups. Aligned with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), its novelty lies in bridging academic research with actionable service, proving that social equity emerges when communities themselves become agents of peace and transformation.

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6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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