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Shifting Norms: A Qualitative Study on Gender Sensitivity and Social Change

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A B S T R A C T

This phenomenological study explores the experiences of fifteen Meranaw participants regarding gender sensitivity and its influence on social and cultural life in Maigo, Lanao del Norte. The study examines how individuals perceive gender sensitivity and how these perceptions shape social, educational, political, and family contexts. Participants were purposively selected from the departments of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Computer Science, and Social Work. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Ethical principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and cultural respect, were strictly observed. Findings reveal that participants recognize men and women as equally capable in leadership, education, and professional roles, while also valuing women's contributions to peace and community development. However, traditional norms, such as male dominance in household decision-making, remain evident. The study concludes that gender sensitivity is gradually fostering inclusive attitudes and influencing social change, although full gender equality continues to evolve.

A R T I C L E I N F O

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender sensitivity refers to the recognition and deliberate response to differences between genders in biological, social, and behavioral contexts, as reported in many studies (Barrett *et al.*, 2021; Ouahid *et al.*, 2023; Mochache *et al.*, 2020; Khumalo *et al.*, 2020; Olgay *et al.*, 2025). These distinctions significantly influence access to opportunities, societal roles, and individual needs. Research demonstrates that neglecting these differences perpetuates inequality and hinders societal progress.

Gender sensitivity seeks to challenge traditional stereotypes and promote inclusivity, addressing systemic inequities in key areas such as health, education, and governance.

The field of gender studies has revealed persistent disparities, including underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, enforcement of restrictive societal norms, and the prevalence of gender-based violence. In the Philippines, these issues are evident, particularly in political representation and educational opportunities. For example, while women are predominant in basic education teaching roles, their presence dwindles in higher education and leadership positions, reflecting enduring structural barriers.

Despite continuing progress toward gender equality, debates remain regarding the most effective strategies for achieving genuine equity. Some scholars argue for targeted interventions such as gender-focused training, educational reforms, and empowerment initiatives to address specific gaps in participation and representation. Others emphasize the need for broader cultural transformation to reshape deeply embedded gender norms and attitudes, arguing that meaningful change must extend beyond policy into social consciousness. These differing perspectives highlight the ongoing complexity of addressing entrenched inequalities in contemporary societies.

This study explores the lived experiences of Meranaw students in Maigo, Lanao del Norte, focusing on how gender sensitivity shapes their social, political, educational, and family interactions. Gender-sensitive practices are increasingly recognized as essential in promoting fairness, participation, and respect across various life domains. By looking at how people understand and deal with gender expectations in their own culture, this study shows how old traditions and new ideas about equality come together. It also helps explain how cultural beliefs still affect opportunities, participation, and how people see the roles of men and women in the community.

Specifically, the study examines participants' experiences in political participation, career advancement, educational opportunities, and broader societal gender equality, aiming to uncover how gender sensitivity contributes to social and cultural transformation. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, the study captures personal narratives and shared meanings, providing insights into both progress toward equality and the persistent influence of traditional norms. These findings are intended to inform policies, programs, and community initiatives that promote inclusive practices and equitable opportunities across political, professional, educational, and family spheres.

The findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equity by emphasizing the role of gender-sensitive practices in shaping inclusive policies and addressing disparities. This study addresses the following research objectives:
(i) To explore individuals' experiences of gender sensitivity.
(ii) To understand how these views influence social and cultural change.

This research aims to offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders, underscoring the importance of addressing both biological and societal dimensions of gender sensitivity. By contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of these issues, the study seeks to inform strategies that promote inclusivity, equity, and systemic change.

2. METHODS

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore how individuals perceive and experience gender sensitivity as a factor influencing social and cultural change in Mindanao State University- Maigo College of Education, Science and Technology, Maigo, Lanao del Norte. Fifteen (15) Meranaw participants from three departments—the Department of Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences; the Department of Computer Science; and the Department of Social Work—were purposively selected based on their willingness, availability, and ability to meaningfully articulate their experiences with gender sensitivity. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by an interview protocol developed from relevant literature, focusing on political participation, job opportunities, educational contexts, and gender equality. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and cultural respect, with interviews recorded upon participants' permission and supplemented by field notes. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with transcripts carefully reviewed, coded, and organized into emerging themes reflecting the shared meanings and lived realities of participants. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking, peer validation, and meticulous documentation were employed, thereby enhancing the authenticity and reliability of the findings

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The lived experiences of the fifteen Meranaw participants show a growing awareness of gender sensitivity as an important factor shaping their everyday social, political, educational, and family lives. Many participants expressed those men and women are equally capable in leadership and political participation, with one sharing, "Leadership is not only for men; women can also lead fairly and peacefully" (**P3**). In the workplace, participants described increasing openness to equal opportunities, although some still sensed lingering expectations tied to gender roles, as one noted, "Promotion now depends on ability, but sometimes people still think some jobs are for men" (**P10**). These findings align with recent studies highlighting that, while awareness of women's leadership and workplace equality is growing, structural and cultural barriers continue to shape opportunities and perceptions (Mutijima & Terzi, 2025) and See in (https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/202208/GEA%20Study%202022%20Full%20Report%20ENG.pdf?utm_source). Similarly, research shows that gender sensitivity and equity initiatives contribute to gradual social change, yet traditional expectations and norms remain influential in shaping daily experiences (Peralta-Jaramillo, 2025; Moscatelli *et al*., 2025). This suggests that participants' experiences reflect both progress in gender awareness and the ongoing negotiation of long-standing cultural norms.

In the domain of education, participants consistently described that both men and women are perceived as having equal intellectual capacity, yet cultural expectations influence how competitiveness and academic engagement are shaped. One participant remarked, "Both are smart, but boys are sometimes pushed to compete more" (**P5**) —a reflection of how social norms and educational expectations continue to affect learners' experiences. This resonates with research showing that gender norms shape educational trajectories and outcomes, where culture and social beliefs influence academic behaviors and gendered performance expectations as reported to (See in https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/gender-equality-ina-changing-world_e808086f-en/full-report/gender-gaps-in-educational-attainment-andoutcomes-remain_33ea8a2f.html).

Regarding broader gender equality within family and social roles, participants expressed mixed views. While many recognized that men and women share responsibilities, traditional norms about household leadership remained evident. A participant shared, "We believe in equality, but culture still expects men to lead at home" (**P4**), and another said, "Equality is improving, but change is slow because tradition is still strong" (**P1**). These reflections align with qualitative findings that traditional gender roles continue to shape family dynamics even as social norms evolve, with men often expected to fulfill decision-making and provider roles while women take on caregiving duties (Lee *et al.*, 2020). Scholars emphasize that cultural and socio-economic contexts influence the persistence of these roles, highlighting the complex negotiation between evolving gender sensitivity and entrenched gender expectations in families and communities (Eze *et al*., 2025; Rahmatullah F., 2025).

Participants in this study expressed a strong belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities in political participation. One participant articulated this view clearly, stating, "Leadership is not only for men; women can lead and make fair decisions too" (**P3**)—an affirmation of perceived gender capacity in leadership. Participants also highlighted that both genders can contribute meaningfully to community development, with several noting the important role women play in peace-building. One participant observed, "Women bring calm and fairness, helping to resolve conflicts peacefully" (**P7**), underscoring the value placed on women's roles beyond mere representation. These lived experiences resonate with recent evidence showing that gender-sensitive political participation enhances inclusive governance and community well-being, even as structural barriers to full parity persist globally, see in (https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/05/gender-equality-in-a changingworld_5a0af5ef/full-report/women-still-lag-behind-men-in-reaching-leadershiproles_8367265b.html and (https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/GEA%20Study%202022%20Full%20Report%20ENG.pdf and https://www.undp.org/governance/womens-political-participation). Research indicates that increasing women's representation not only broadens democratic legitimacy but also improves policy outcomes and peace processes, supporting the participants' view that when women engage politically, communities benefit from fairness, collaboration, and stability, as reported in (See in https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2025.pdf).

Participants in this study consistently shared that gender should not determine opportunities for career advancement, emphasizing that skills and qualifications, rather than gender, should guide professional growth. One participant stated, "Promotion should be based on ability, not whether you are a man or a woman" (**P2**), illustrating a strong belief in fairness and meritocracy. However, some participants expressed uncertainty about how roles are assigned, suggesting that gendered expectations may still subtly shape workplace practices. Many also described collaborative and respectful professional relationships between men and women, with one participant remarking, "Women I know are very focused

on their jobs—they really want to grow in their careers" (**P5**). Participants generally did not report overt experiences of discrimination, which may reflect perceived fairness within their immediate work environments.

These lived experiences align with recent research showing that while gender equity in career opportunities is widely supported in principle, gender biases and subtle barriers continue to shape employees' perceptions and experiences in workplace advancement (Hing *et al.,* 2023). Studies highlight that gender inequities often arise not from equal formal policies but from implicit biases, cultural norms, and organizational practices that influence role assignments and promotional paths (Hing *et al.,* 2023). Research also points out that gender-inclusive HR practices—such as transparent promotion criteria and equitable performance evaluations—play a significant role in helping women thrive and achieve career satisfaction, even in contexts where discrimination is not overtly acknowledged (Rasheed *et. al.,* 2026). This supports the idea that participants' perceptions of fairness may coexist with broader, more subtle forms of gender differentiation in workplace structures and expectations.

Participants expressed that men and women have equal intellectual ability and actively engage in learning. One shared, "Both boys and girls can excel; it depends on how much effort they put in" (P8). Some noted that men may be more competitive in certain contexts, but this was not universal. Participants were also unsure about gender differences in school completion, highlighting how cultural and social factors can influence educational outcomes. These experiences align with recent research showing that while gender gaps in education have narrowed, cultural norms and social expectations continue to shape participation and completion (Rizwan, 2024; Kix, 2024).

Participants shared mixed views on broader gender equality, combining progressive and traditional perspectives. Some emphasized that women's participation in the workforce does not disadvantage men, with one stating, "Women working doesn't take jobs from men; it only shows that both can help the family" (**P11**). On family responsibilities, participants recognized shared duties, noting, "Both men and women should take responsibility for family matters, including pregnancy and childcare" (**P8**). Nevertheless, traditional roles persisted, as several participants observed that men are expected to make final household decisions while women focus on child welfare. One reflected, "Men decide for the family, but women take care of the children; both have their part" (**P4**). Participants also acknowledged that achieving a society with true equality remains challenging, highlighting the ongoing influence of cultural norms and expectations on gender roles. These experiences align with research showing that gender equality in the family is progressing but is still shaped by deep-rooted cultural beliefs and social expectations (Rizwan, 2024; Chisamya *et al.,* 2012)

Finally, the participants' experiences reflect a community gradually embracing gender sensitivity and equality, while still negotiating long-standing cultural norms. These narratives highlight a strong belief in equal rights and opportunities across political, professional, educational, and family spheres, yet also reveal persistent traditional expectations that shape how gender roles are lived. As one participant captured, "Equality is improving, but change is slow because tradition is still strong" (**P1**). This suggests that gender sensitivity is contributing to the gradual transformation of social and cultural norms, while full gender equality continues to evolve.

3.1. Theoritical Framework

The findings of this study align with theoretical frameworks that attempt to explain gender sensitivity and differences within various societal contexts. Utilizing the Donabedian Model, the research emphasized how structural elements, processes, and outcomes collectively shape gender sensitivity. Structures such as organizational characteristics and individual attitudes influence how care is delivered, impacting perceptions of respect and inclusivity. This aligns with Donabedian's assertion that improved processes lead to better outcomes. For instance, respondents agreed on the importance of equal rights and capacities for men and women in political competition, reflecting the mutability of gender sensitivity through conscious efforts.

Additionally, theory of gender discrimination provided a lens to understand cultural ideologies and institutional behaviors that reinforce gender disparities. The findings reveal no significant gender inequality in job promotions or workplace assignments, indicating progress in promoting equity in professional settings. However, the uncertainty expressed by respondents regarding gender-neutral job assignment suggests room for improvement in eliminating biases in employment practices (Bobbit-Zeher, 2011)

The study also explored paradoxical practices, such as gender neutrality, gender normalcy, and gender passivity. These practices subtly sustain gender imbalances by ignoring or normalizing inequality. While the results indicate a general agreement among respondents on equal political rights and leadership capacities for both sexes, nuanced differences emerge. For example, men were perceived as slightly more competitive in certain areas, while women were seen as more focused on their careers (Claringbould and Knoppers, 2012)

Survey responses show that societal perceptions of gender roles remain influenced by cultural norms. For instance, while respondents agreed that women possess equal intellectual and leadership capabilities, uncertainty persisted about societal treatment and responsibilities, such as pregnancy and decision-making at home. This highlights the need for a broader societal shift to challenge entrenched norms.

Moreover, the findings suggest progress toward gender equity but underscore persistent cultural and structural barriers. Future research could further explore the intersectionality of gender, culture, and societal norms, particularly in educational and workplace settings, to develop actionable strategies for fostering inclusivity. Addressing these gaps will be essential for creating environments where men and women can achieve their full potential without bias or discrimination.

Additionally, to ensure clarity and understanding of the concepts used in this study, the following terms are defined:

(i)   Clinical Social Worker (CSW) refers to professionals who provide communication support through various strategies and modes tailored to individual rights, needs, and preferences. This study, it pertains to social workers offering coping mechanisms and therapy to victims of gender discrimination.

(ii)   Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) refers to a global treaty that addresses women's rights and aims to combat gender discrimination, helping women worldwide achieve meaningful changes in their daily lives. In this study, it refers to organizations and conventions established to address and assess issues related to gender discrimination.

(iii)   Educational Competition refers to ensuring fairness between men and women in academic settings, where no biases or unequal treatment occur. This study, it highlights intellectual engagement between men and women to achieve academic excellence on equal terms.

(iv)   Gender Equality refers to fairness between men and women, ensuring that strategies and measures are implemented to compensate for historical and social disadvantages, thereby promoting equitable opportunities. In this study, it refers to respondents' perceptions of fairness and equal opportunities for men and women.

(v)   Gender Mainstreaming refers to integrating gender equality perspectives across all stages and levels of policies, programs, and projects. This study, it relates to approaches and policies that address gender sensitivity based on the respondents' insights.

(vi)   Gender Sensitivity refers to the process of increasing awareness of the role of gender in societal and interpersonal interactions. This study, it pertains to the respondents' perspectives and understanding of gender fairness and dynamics.

(vii)   Job Promotion or Position refers to the unbiased advancement of men and women to higher ranks, roles, or positions within organizations. This study, it examines how gender influences eligibility and outcomes in professional advancements.

(viii)   Political Competition refers to the engagement of individuals in democratic processes central to governance. This study, it pertains to the participation and involvement of both sexes in political activities and roles.

(ix)   World Health Organization (WHO) refers to a United Nations agency responsible for international public health. This study, it pertains to respondents' perspectives on the organization's role in promoting gender equality and sensitivity.

3.2. Review of Related Literature

The results of this study underscore significant insights into gender sensitivity and its far-reaching implications across various sectors, including healthcare, education, and political participation. The research affirms that gender-sensitive approaches can improve access to resources and foster better outcomes, particularly in the healthcare sector. For instance, gender-sensitive healthcare practices enhance service delivery and outcomes for both men and women. These findings are consistent with who emphasized the critical role of culturally aware healthcare providers in achieving positive health results.

In the context of gender roles and their influence on social and political dynamics, the study aligns with that effectively implemented gender-sensitive policies ensure equitable access to opportunities and resources. This is particularly important in settings where societal norms hinder women's access to vital services and decision-making power. Furthermore, the study echoes concern regarding the insufficient implementation of international gender equality agreements, reflecting systemic challenges in achieving gender parity, particularly in politics and public service.

The study also explores the socioeconomic dimensions of gender sensitivity, revealing how institutional and societal barriers disproportionately disadvantage women. These findings align with who stressed the need for gender mainstreaming to effectively address these disparities. Similarly, Selvara Jana Donna Y. Stringer (2015) noted that women in male-dominated workplaces face unique obstacles, which reflect broader societal and educational challenges that undermine their advancement.

To foster truly gender-sensitive environments, the study emphasizes the necessity of cultural and institutional reforms. These include gender-specific medical education, policies addressing the vulnerabilities of both genders, and a more inclusive approach to political

representation. The challenges of institutional resistance to gender-sensitization, particularly in healthcare and education, echo findings that gender issues are often deprioritized by professionals.

Future research should examine the effectiveness of gender-sensitization programs across diverse cultural contexts, focusing on how different groups respond to gender mainstreaming in healthcare, education, and politics. Additional studies could investigate the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as class, race, and disability to provide a nuanced understanding of gender inequality. Targeted interventions addressing career progression barriers for women in male-dominated fields and challenging stereotypes within educational institutions also warrant further exploration.

Ultimately, the findings emphasize the urgent need for gender-sensitive policies in healthcare, politics, and education to address systemic disparities and promote social equity. These efforts are vital for creating inclusive environments that respect and empower all genders.

4. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of fifteen Meranaw participants on gender sensitivity and its influence on social and cultural life in Maigo, Lanao del Norte. The findings indicate that participants perceive men and women as equally capable in leadership, work, and education, while recognizing women's significant contributions to fairness, peace, and community development. Nevertheless, traditional gender roles, such as male household decision-making, continue to persist. These findings suggest that gender sensitivity is gradually shaping social norms and promoting inclusivity, although full gender equality is still in progress. Future studies are recommended to examine how perceptions of gender roles influence behavior in professional and social contexts, investigate the expanding role of women in leadership, and explore how education can challenge traditional gender stereotypes to foster broader gender equality within the community.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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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