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In Defense of the Country: Narratives of Women Members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in Visayas Command

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Abstract
This study explores the experiences of women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines in Visayas Command, Cebu City, Philippines. Specifically, it determined the following: experiences of the informants in the performance of their duties, the strategies employed by the informants in addressing the problems encountered in the performance of their duties and the aspirations of the informants to improve the quality of their services in the community.
This study utilized the qualitative research method employing the transcendental phenomenological approach that involves thematic content analysis. This study was conducted in the Armed Forces of the Philippines Visayas Command, Cebu City, Philippines. There were twelve selected informants of the study, four from each major branches --Philippine Navy, Philippine Air Force and Philippine Army.
Findings revealed twelve emergent themes. For positive experiences, themes include Breaking Boundaries: Empowering Equality and Capability, The Art of Balancing Work and Family and From Sacrifice to Success: Personal Growth and Fulfillment in the Service. For negative experiences, themes include New Horizons: Sadness in Reassignment, Duty First: Struggles of Delayed Leave in the Military and Navigating Gender Inequality and Harassment. For the informants strategies in addressing the problems encountered, themes include Adaptive Leadership in Diverse Military Contexts, Boosting Inner Strength and Building Coping Mechanisms and Service Beyond Frontier Zones. For the aspirations of the informants to improve the quality of their services in the community, themes include Family as a Source of Motivation, Commitment to Service Excellence and lastly is Gratitude for Benefits and Support. In conclusion, despite the gender-related programs implemented by the Armed Forces of the Philippines, many women continue to face significant challenges in balancing their roles as soldiers, wives, and mothers. However, the informants believe that these challenges have been instrumental in shaping them into more resilient and effective soldiers in the present.

Keywords: Experiences of Women Members of Armed Forces of the Philippines, Transcendental Phenomenology, Criminal Justice, Cebu Philippines

1. Introduction

In many parts of the world, internal conflict often challenges government authorities and threatens public safety. This situation does not only hinder the functioning of the government but also affects the safety of

the citizens. To safeguard the country's internal security and to uphold national policy, the government created the Armed Forces. In early years, the context of war and maintaining national security have been viewed as predominantly male responsibilities as it requires physically demanding task and the societal norms associated within the military service. However, as the world evolved, the role of women has been a subject of increasing interest and recognition worldwide for their unique perspectives, skills, and strengths that enhance the overall effectiveness of the armed forces operations.

In terms of national security, the Philippines has Armed Forces of the Philippines, which is established to defend national security, it constitutes the military forces of the country and has three main branches mainly the Philippine Army, Philippine Navy and Philippine Airforce. Out of all these branches, there are only few numbers of Women in uniform are being recognized. Miranda (2020), said that among the groups or agglomeration of women, it is the women in the reserve force who are expected to contribute more to peace development by virtue of their affiliation and understanding of the military organization and their role and status as civilians. With the growing positive perception on women empowerment and the pursuit of a gender action agenda among government agencies, including the AFP, the participation of women in peace development efforts is anticipated to increase in the future.

Despite the growing support of gender empowerment in public institutions, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies that highlights the lived experiences of women in the armed forces. While women continue to play significant roles in military operations, their lived experiences, personal and professional challenges, and their aspirations are seldom highlighted in existing literature This study therefore aims to explore the lived experiences of women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in Visayas Command, Cebu City, Philippines. By giving voice to their narratives, this study seeks to address the gap in understanding gender dynamics within the field of armed forces and contribute to the development of a more inclusive military policies for women in uniform and gender aware environment as these women plays a vital role in various operations and activities that contribute significantly to the overall security of the Visayas region.

Statement of the Problem

This study explored the experiences of women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in Visayas Command, Cebu City, Philippines. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of the informants in the performance of their duties?
2. What are the strategies employed by the informants in addressing the problems encountered in the performance of their duties?
3. What are the aspirations of the informants to improve the quality of their services in the community?

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research method employing the transcendental phenomenological approach to query the experiences of women members in the armed forces. Transcendental Phenomenology was selected because it is grounded in the concept and condition in which the researcher will set aside all the preconceived ideas (epoche) to see phenomena through unclouded glasses, thereby allowing the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge with and within their own identity (Moustakas, 1994). Moreover, phenomenology is a type of research that seeks to explain the nature of things through the way people experience them. It translates literally as the "study of phenomena." In other words, it is the study of the meaning these things (or phenomena) have in the minds of the audience you're studying. It is also being

said that only the audience's views matter, the people who have experienced the phenomenon (Good, 2023). Thus, the researcher's personal assumptions and perceptions about the phenomenon should be irrelevant.

Research Environment

This study was conducted in the Province of Cebu particularly in Lahug Cebu City where the Armed Forces of the Philippines Visayas Command Headquarter is located. The Visayas Command is located at Camp Lapu-Lapu, a military installation of the Armed Forces of the Philippines that is located in Lahug District of Cebu City, Philippines. It is currently the headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Visayas Command. Visayas Command has a primary mission of conducting prompt and sustained joint air, sea, and land operations, including military operations in the whole Visayas region. For the task of securing more than 18 million people in three regions; 16 provinces; 39 cities and 369 municipalities, VISCOM employs two Joint Task Forces: the Joint Task Force Spear stationed in Camp Macario B Peralta in Jamindan, Capiz, and the Joint Task Force Storm in Camp Vicente Lukban, Catbalogan City, Samar. The Naval and Airforce component units, the Naval Forces Central in Naval Base Rafael Ramos in Lapu-lapu City, and the Tactical Operations Wing Central of the Philippine Airforce which is stationed at Brigadier General Benito N Ebuen Air Base in Mactan, Cebu, and the Army's 53rd Engineer Brigade for combat support operations and engineering civic action programs (Visayas Command, AFP, n.d).

Research Informants

The informants of this study are the selected women who are currently members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines that are assigned in the Visayas Command. Since the Armed Forces of the Philippines has three main branches, therefore there are at least twelve (12) informants in general. To be specific, there were four (4) women informants from the Philippine Navy, four (4) from the Philippine Air Force and four (4) from the Philippine army who are actively serving the organization for at least three (3) years. Selection was carried out using a homogeneous and purposive sampling where the researchers recruit participants who can offer a meaningful perspective on the phenomenon of interest and who share a certain lived experience (Gill, 2020). With these types of informants, the researcher can ensure that she can collect a quality information that helps her in better understanding the vital part roles of every military women officer in the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Research Instrument

The primary data collection tool used was a semi-structured interview guide for the individual in-depth interview to enable the researcher to identify and select a detailed narratives on the experiences of the women members in the Visayas Command. The interview guide was validated by the adviser, research panelist, and the dean of the Graduate School. The interview guide contained informed consent forms to formally invite the informants and for them to freely and voluntarily provide information needed in the study. The consent form was signed by the informants as a sign of their willingness to be part of the research. The researcher also asked permission to use an audio recorder device to easily transcribe all the data gathered.

This guide consisted of open-ended questions covering range of topic objectives. The first part of the interview guide deals with the positive and negative experiences of the informants in the performance of their duties. The second part deals with the strategies employed by the informants in addressing the problems encountered in the performance of their duties and the third part deals with the aspirations of the informants to improve quality of service in the community. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in the informant's workplace to ensure comfort and confidentiality.

Data Collection

After the approval of the interview guide, informed consent form and transmittal letter from the institutional heads, the researchers formally submitted it to the Visayas Command Headquarter. Before the conduct of the interview, the Civil-Military Operation Office contacted the researcher to proceed to their office for an interview about the research topic. After the interview the researcher was forwarded to the Human Resource Management/ Personnel office to discuss matters involving the qualified participants. Few weeks after, the researcher received a permission that she is now allowed to conduct her study. Informants received an informed consent form and interview guide, each personnel were briefed about the objectives, scope, and ethical safeguards of the study. Before the conduct of the interview, the researcher gives the participants a consent form that outlined the purpose of the interview and its confidentiality. The researcher manually distributed and collected consent forms from the informants. During the interview procedure, the researcher used an audio recorder to collect information. Moreover, during this stage the researcher chose a congenial environment to put the informants at ease and elicit candid comments. Following each in-depth interview, the researcher transcribed and translated the recorded responses into English.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis is utilized to analyze and cluster interview answers in common themes for interpretation. In this research, recorded responses to interviews were analyzed deductively to obtain discrete, key themes that are relevant and specific to individual categories. The process involves transcription where there is a need to transcribe the data from the recorder into the computer. Its purpose is to easily edit the manuscripts by eliminating typographical errors and contradictions. The second step is checking and editing the transcripts, preparing the data for further analysis; analysis and interpretation categories were developed, coding and data reduction were completed, and trends in the data were identified. After collecting all the data, the researcher began to form a clear understanding of the information. The researcher coded the data, conducted a content analysis by looking for specific words from which different themes can be identified. The researcher then performs the third step which is generalization, the findings of individual interviews will be generalized and identifies its similarities and differences. The fourth step is verification; the researcher this time checked the validity of interpretations by reading the transcripts again. This allowed the researcher to verify or modify hypotheses already arrived at previously.

Ethical Considerations

To uphold ethical standards, the researcher secured approval for the research protocol that was granted by the review panel of University of Cebu Main-Campus Research Ethics Committee. This study follows the principle of beneficence where there is a need to focus more on maximizing the potential benefits that the informants will receive after the completion of this study. It is followed by the principle of non-maleficence where the researcher sets boundaries that respect the perspectives, insights and well-being of the informants. To avoid any problem, the informants were informed that if they feel any sensitive questions they have the right to skip or withdraw from the study. To ensure fairness, the researcher guarantees that the informants were selected based on the standard criteria given and to ensure justice, the researcher always acknowledged and recognized the participation of the informants because without them the study would not have been successful. And lastly, it follows the principle of autonomy where informants receive an informed consent form that clearly explains the purpose of the study, the process, how their information will be used, and their possible benefits from the study. They were also informed

that their participation is voluntary and that the data that will be gathered from them is safe from disclosure and reassured that their identities would remain confidential if they wanted so.

3. Results and Discussion

Three emergent themes were developed for each sub-problem, drawn from the common responses of the informants. These themes are listed below which highlight both the positive and negative experiences of the informants, their strategies in addressing challenges within the work environment, and their aspirations.

I. A Positive Experiences of the Informants in the performance of their duties

1. Breaking Boundaries: Empowering Equality and Capability. This theme emphasizes the significance of fostering equal opportunities and recognizing the potential of all individuals, irrespective of gender. Gender and Development (GAD) programs in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) are a testament to this commitment. Women in the AFP have shattered traditional barriers, taking on leadership roles, commanding units, and performing tasks traditionally assigned to men, such as infantry operations, air force and naval responsibilities. Informants have shared their experiences of gender equality being genuinely practiced, noting that tasks are assigned based on capability rather than gender. Despite challenges such as physical demands and societal expectations, women in the AFP have demonstrated resilience, skill, and dedication, proving that competence and capability know no limits.

Informant 5 emphasizes how the Gender and Development program in the Armed Forces of the Philippines helps women attain leadership roles, as shown by her position as a senior staff member in the Visayas Command.

"So, if we talk about describing the work as a member of the Armed Forces of the Philippines as a woman, we now have the Gender and Development program in the AFP, which I truly believe is doing well, especially when it comes to assignments and positioning which you can see that, like me, I am a woman and yet I'm in a top position as Staff in the Visayas Command". (IDI5:SS5).

Informant 10 observed genuine gender equality in the workplace, where tasks were not assigned based on gender, and women, including herself, performed roles typically associated with men, demonstrating their capability and confidence.

"In my first year, I didn't feel any difference between men and women because gender equality is genuinely observed here. Based on my work experience, we don't assign tasks based on gender. There's no such thing as tasks exclusively for women. Whatever the men do, the women do it as well. It's not mandatory, but we know we are capable of doing it. Personally, I know I can handle the tasks that they do – I've done escorts too, and whatever tasks are typically assigned to men, I do those as well". (IDI10:SS3).

Informant 2 also shared her unique experience as an infantry officer where she leads a combat operation under challenging conditions.

"It's a bit different from the experiences of most female soldiers I know because, in my case, my specialization is infantry. When we say infantry, these are the soldiers who climb mountains to search for the enemy. As a 2nd lieutenant, I've already experienced leading combat operations. In leading combat operations, I've operated while on my period, suffering from migraines, fever—things that are usually associated with the challenges faced by male soldiers in the field. I've experienced all of that while carrying the same load as the regular soldiers, which is an average of 35 pounds, not even including the weight of the rifle and ammunition. That's just the weight of the clothes and supplies" (IDI2:SS7).

Informant 12 shared that despite being one of only two women on the ship, she successfully commanded male subordinates of lower rank, earning their respect and cooperation without any issues.
"On the ship, there were only two women, including me, and I commanded the men who held a lower rank than me. They respected and followed me, so there were no issues" (IDI12:SS7).
This theme is supported by Competence Motivation Theory by Susan Harter (1978) which highlights how individuals are motivated to demonstrate competence across various domains, such as cognitive, physical, and social, and how success in mastery attempts, coupled with socio-emotional support, fosters perceptions of competence and control. In the context of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), this theory resonates with women's experiences of demonstrating resilience and skill in traditionally male-dominated roles, such as infantry operations and naval leadership. By successfully performing challenging tasks and receiving recognition for their efforts, these women experience enhanced perceptions of competence, proving that capability transcends gender and societal expectations.
The study of Castillo (2017) revealed that strong gender and development programs enhance women's participation in leadership roles and improve their retention rates in the armed forces. A gendered approach is indeed an important element not only in managing any organizations human capital but also in adhering to the larger principles of justice and equity in the development agenda. The study was able to show, albeit in a limited scope, how women empowerment helps in ensuring that the AFP, specially the PN, can retain its best female uniformed personnel.
Furthermore, according to Philippine Army (2019) the role and status of women has been comprehensively evolved and it became more responsive in terms of career-pathing and deployment due to the changes in their policies. There is also a significant increase of numbers of women's occupying key position above and beyond participating in various military decision-making in the security sector. In fact, at present these women are serving as platoon leaders, company commanders, intelligence personnel, civil-military operations practitioners, pilots, and even as members of special operations units. Indeed, the women of the Philippine Army are successfully breaking the barriers of gender stereotype.
2. The Art of Balancing Work and Family. This theme showcases the remarkable dedication and adaptability of women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), who skillfully manage dual roles with determination and creativity. Despite the endless time demands of military duties, these women excel in their service while maintaining their responsibilities at home. Supported by Gender and Development (GAD) programs, understanding superiors, and their own personal techniques, they navigate the challenges of work and family life seamlessly. Single women dedicate themselves fully to their duties, while married individuals balance parenting, household tasks, and professional obligations.
Informant 2 shared that, despite the office job being less physically demanding, its nature often extends beyond regular hours. To manage her responsibilities effectively, she developed personal Techniques, Tactics, and Procedures (TTPs) to balance her roles as a soldier, mother, and wife.
"The main point is that, although it is an office job, it's not physically demanding, and there are times when you cannot be too concerned about office hours. As long as the nature of your work calls for it, whether it's already beyond the regular 8 to 5 office hours, you just have to work. With that, I've developed some personal TTPs (Techniques, Tactics, and Procedures) in how I manage my role as a soldier with an office job, as a mother, and as a wife". (IDI2:SS3).
The informant 7 shared that being a mother of three is her primary role, but balancing work and family was challenging in the past, leading to her husband's early retirement to focus on their children while she fulfilled her duties in the AFP.

"My role here in the AFP, particularly in VISCOM, begins with being a mother of three. I feel blessed because my children are already grown up. However, in the past, it was a real challenge for my husband and me since we were both in the same line of work. That's why my husband decided to retire early to focus on our children, who were living on another island. It was necessary because we took an oath to render our duties, to fulfill or help the command achieve our mission". (IDI7:SS1).

The informant 9 shared her gratitude for the armed forces providing quarters for married personnel, which has allowed her, as a single mom, to manage her work, office duties, and family responsibilities despite the challenges of being solely responsible for her children.

"Actually, I am one of the married individuals here. I'm thankful because the armed forces provided quarters for married personnel. Currently, I'm a single mom, as it's been over two years since my husband and I separated, leaving me solely responsible for my kids. I'm thankful because I can manage my office, my work, and my family since they are here with me". (IDI9:SS1).

Informant 1 shares that as a mother she must strategically choose to her child undergo homeschooling in order for her to accommodate both professional responsibilities and parenting.

"They are here in Cebu, but I don't let them attend because there's no one to watch over them. So it's hard for me, because I live in Talisay, and I have to travel every day, and I can't manage dropping them off. I chose homeschooling for my child because if I get assigned to Manila again, like we sometimes in the Navy, we can be transferred back to Manila. For me, homeschooling makes sense since the tuition won't be a waste. Even if I move to Manila, homeschooling will still work just fine". (IDI1:SS4)

This theme is supported by Albert Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory because it emphasizes individuals' belief in their ability to succeed in challenging tasks, highlighting resilience, adaptability, and effective problem-solving. Women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines demonstrate strong self-efficacy by managing the dual demands of military service and family responsibilities. Their ability to approach difficult tasks, recover from setbacks, and develop personal strategies (TTPs) to navigate these challenges reflects high self-efficacy. The confidence these women have in their capacity to fulfill their roles as soldiers and mothers showcases their determination and inspires others to embrace their potential in balancing work and family commitments

This study of Pepito (2023) examines how married female military personnel in the Philippine Air Force balance their work and family responsibilities. It highlights the challenges of work-family conflict, stress management, and job satisfaction. The findings reveal that while family responsibilities significantly impact work performance, strong organizational support and gender-sensitive policies help mitigate these challenges, allowing women to excel in both roles.

3. **From Sacrifice to Success: Personal Growth and Fulfillment in the Service.** This theme encapsulates the transformative journey of women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), where challenges serve as steppingstone to personal and professional growth. Despite enduring emotional and physical hardships such as extended time away from family, demanding workloads, and navigating male-dominated spaces these women emerge stronger, gaining invaluable skills, confidence, and purpose. From fulfilling inherent responsibilities and following career paths to overcoming obstacles in promotions and contributing through unique initiatives, such as vlogging or social media, their dedication has brought them success and fulfillment. Many women highlight the ability to support their families, sustain life goals, and explore new opportunities as key accomplishments. Through resilience, adaptability, and commitment, women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines transform sacrifices into triumphs, inspiring others and showcasing how service fosters growth and purpose.

The informant 2 shared that following her career path, despite having a family, significantly contributed to her progression. By that, during promotions there are limited but highlighting her dedication to her career.

"Despite having a family, I followed my career path, and it helped me in the sense that whenever there was a promotion, I didn't have to explain much. As one of only three female infantry officers in the entire army (I'm the second), whenever there was an interview or review of my information, it was clear from my summary that my assignments, awards, and everything about my service were listed. This made it less likely for me to be questioned, as they could see that I was following the career path. So, it was a big factor in my career progression" (IDI2:SS16).

The informant 3 uses moto-vlogging and social media to showcase military work, promote safe environments, and contribute uniquely to the organization through her passion for travel and lifestyle.

"Personally, I'm a moto-vlogger, and at the same time, I can influence other people by showing them how we work in the military and what they should expect. I also have a passion for lifestyle, so whenever I travel on my bike or have rides, I tour people around. You're free to go here because the insurgency was stopped because of the military's joint task force. Through social media, this has been my unique way of contributing to the organization". (IDI3:SS6).

The informant 10 shared that she has fulfilled her childhood dream of joining the AFP and is now focused on sustaining it.

"Since I was young, this has truly been what I wanted to do, so it's no longer just about achieving my goal - It's now about sustaining it, because I've already achieved my goal when I graduated from training" (IDI10:SS4).

Informant 12 shared that joining the armed forces allowed her to gain unique experiences and explore parts of the Philippines that she might not have reached as a teacher, whose work is often limited to the classroom. This opportunity expanded her perspective and enriched her life in ways she cherishes.

"I have a lot of experience, because if I become a teacher, I am just within the four corners of the room. But when I joined the armed forces, I got the chance to explore the whole Philippines (though not completely) and visit places you wouldn't think you'd be able to reach". (IDI12:SS4).

Self-Efficacy Theory of Albert Bandura (1977) is the most applicable to this theme. It emphasizes the power of an individual's belief in their ability to overcome challenges and succeed, which aligns with how women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines transform sacrifices into personal growth and professional achievement. By drawing on their confidence to navigate physical hardships, emotional challenges, and career obstacles, they build resilience and mastery over their roles, ultimately fostering a sense of fulfillment in service.

Service members' self-efficacy can significantly impact their experience and performance in the military. Self-efficacy is associated with trusting oneself and having the internal belief that one can complete activities or tasks, which is especially valuable in the military when tasks can be multistep, complex, dangerous, and high stress. Self-efficacy affects Service members' careers in the military in various ways, including influencing their professional performance, especially under pressure, likelihood of retention, leadership quality, and other aspects of life in the military, and servicewomen's self-efficacy is especially important to their experience in the male-dominated military due to gender discrimination challenges they must overcome (Fales, et al.,2022).

I.B Negative Experiences of the Informants in the performance of their duties

1. New Horizons: Sadness in Reassignment. This theme emphasizes the negative experiences that comes with adapting to new assignments in military life. They said that the sudden shift from a familiar unit to a new environment requires significant adjustments to both daily routines and interpersonal relationships. Although reassignments can evoke sadness, particularly when they disrupt one's comfort zone as noted by another respondent, they also present valuable opportunities for growth. For mothers, this transition is even more challenging, as it often involves separation from their children and the added burden of managing family responsibilities within a 24-hour work environment.

The informant 6 described the challenge of adjusting to a new environment and unfamiliar colleagues after being reassigned from a unit she had grown accustomed to working with daily.

"The adjustment is when you're used to being in one unit, and then suddenly you're reassigned. You have to adjust to the new environment and to the people you weren't used to being with every day" (IDI6:SS7)

Informant 5 shared that although her reassignment was a great opportunity, she felt sad because she wasn't ready for it and had to leave her comfort zone.

"There was a time when I was reassigned, but that reassignment was actually a good reassignment. It just happened that I wasn't ready for it, so I felt sad. The reassignment was a great opportunity, but of course, when you're taken out of your comfort zone, it's only natural to feel sad" (IDI5:SS14).

Informant 11 shared that as a mother, being assigned to Manila meant leaving her children in the province, which was emotionally difficult. With limited breaks like Rest and Recreation (R and R), she felt saddened by not being able to fully witness her children's growth, as the cycle of leaving and returning repeated itself.

"The sad part of me is that, as a mother, there were times when I was assigned to Manila, and I have to leave my children in the province. The only break we had in headquarters was R and R (Rest and Recreation). It made me sad because I couldn't fully keep track of my children as they grew up. It felt like I gave birth, left them with my mother, then came back, and the cycle just repeated". (IDI11:SS9).

The informant 1 reflected that career demands often involve personal sacrifices, including strained relationships.

"I didn't want to be assigned here in Cebu because Manila is much better, especially since my husband is also a soldier and is based there. We really argue about it; he tells me not to be assigned here, and it's fine if I stay there. But if I choose to remain in Manila, I wouldn't get promoted. So, I eventually got promoted here. We are far from each other, and he rarely comes home because he's currently part of the PSG (Presidential Security Group) tasked with providing security for the president". (IDI1:SS6).

The theme can be effectively explained using Self-Efficacy Theory of (Bandura, 1994), which centers on an individual's belief in their ability to organize and execute actions required to manage prospective situations. Military reassignments often involve abrupt transitions into unfamiliar environments, requiring individuals to rapidly adapt their routines and build new interpersonal relationships. For mothers, this challenge is compounded by the emotional toll of separation from children and the added responsibility of managing family obligations within demanding work conditions. According to Bandura, individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to view such difficult transitions as opportunities for mastery rather than threats, thereby persisting through setbacks and ultimately developing greater competence. This perspective frames reassignment not solely as a disruptive event but as a catalyst for personal and professional growth, where belief in one's capabilities plays a central role in successful adaptation.

According to Russo, T., & Fallon, M. (2015), family dynamics and the individual differences of each family member can impact their stress. For families in the military, stress occurs regularly due to factors such as reassignment, deployment, and the frequency of changes. For some families, the stress that occurs over time helps family members to develop resiliency. Learning to cope with stress can teach skills in adapting to stressful lifestyle factors (e.g., mobility and relocation). Members of many military families develop these skills, while other families need a strong supportive network to facilitate their adjustment to military lifestyle stress.

2. Duty First: Struggles of Delayed Leave in the Military. This theme captures the emotional and practical challenges faced by service members when their need for personal or family time is postponed due to the demands of duty. The responses reveal a recurring struggle among military personnel, especially mothers, who must often prioritize work responsibilities over urgent family matters. These testimonies highlight the emotional toll of being denied leave during critical moments, such as caring for a sick child or spending time with family during school breaks. Despite these hardships, respondents demonstrate a deep sense of commitment and sacrifice, reflecting the rigid expectations of military life. Their stories underscore how the lack of autonomy over personal time can lead to emotional strain and feelings of helplessness yet also reveal the resilience and enduring dedication of those who continue to serve despite personal costs.

Informant 11 faces challenges balancing her military duties with parenting, especially when her child is sick. She and her husband are both soldiers, struggling to take leave, leaving her to handle everything on her own. This lack of control over her personal time is discouraging.

"When your child gets sick and you're not allowed to take leave, or when it's really needed, sometimes you feel being in a low moral state. It's hard, especially since my husband and I are both soldiers. His job is as a gatekeeper, so it's really difficult for him to get leave when there's an urgent need. During these moments, I feel low moral because he can't just leave whenever he wants, so I end up being the one to attend to everything for our child. That's when I really feel down because even if I need to be there for my child, my boss won't allow me to take leave, and you don't really have control over your own time" (IDI11:SS7).

The informant 7 shared her experience of dealing with an inconsiderate superior, recounting how her request for leave during her children's semestral break was denied despite her willingness to compensate for it. This experience left a lasting emotional impact, reinforcing her desire to retire and prioritize her family.

"Sometimes, there are bosses who are inconsiderate when it comes to work. As women, there are times when I ask to go home because it's the time for my children's semestral break, but I wasn't allowed, and I had to write a formal letter. It's not that our senior was really harsh, but it really hurt my feelings. Even now, I still remember it, and it makes me think that when I retire, I'll finally be able to spend the time I've been longing for with my family. ack then, our Chief of Staff disapproved of my request, and I tried explaining that it was just leave, I was even willing to pay for it, but it was still denied" (IDI7:SS9).

This theme can be interpreted through the concept of Expert Performance Theory, which emphasizes the development of competence and expertise through consistent exposure to challenging conditions, goal-oriented tasks, and opportunities for improvement (Ericsson, 2008). In the military context, delayed leave is not just an administrative issue, it reflects the prioritization of operational readiness and performance under pressure. Service members, particularly those balancing family roles, are frequently placed in demanding situations that require them to function effectively despite personal sacrifices. As seen in the

narratives, individuals endure emotional strain when they are denied time to care for their children or reconnect with their families. However, their continued commitment despite these hardships demonstrates how they adapt and refine their ability to manage stress, maintain discipline, and uphold professional standards in high-stakes environments. Over time, these repeated exposures to high-pressure circumstances contribute to the development of expertise in navigating the complexities of military life, including decision-making, emotional regulation, and task prioritization. Thus, while delayed leave presents personal challenges, it also serves as a context where service members cultivate resilience and professional growth through lived experience.

The study of Irish et al., (2021) states that access to paid family leave policies was linked to a reduction in psychological distress among parents. However, there was no significant relationship observed between these policies and children's behavioral issues. The effects of paid family leave varied depending on demographic and socioeconomic factors, with some groups benefiting from the policies while others experienced adverse outcomes.

3. Navigating Gender Inequality and Harassment. This theme highlights the struggles encountered by women in the military, where gender-based discrimination and harassment remain significant challenges. The participants' testimonies reveal a range of challenges from sexual harassment to systemic bias and lack of gender sensitivity. Despite their competence and dedication, female service members often encounter unequal treatment, lack of trust in their capabilities, and limited consideration for their well-being. These challenges are rooted in deeply ingrained biases within a traditionally male-dominated institution.

Informant 4 describes her distressing experience of harassment and fear. This highlights her challenges especially when she is assigned during night shift.

"This is related to what I told you about my duty. I was on duty at that time, it was dawn, and I had a colleague who I'm not sure if he was also on duty, but he was in the office. He called me, asking if I wanted to drink some water, and since I was really thirsty, I went inside. But then he locked the door because he was trying to... I wasn't scared of him, but I was worried because I was carrying a weapon on my side. It was dawn, so there was no one around. If I screamed, no one would hear me. So, he locked the door, attempting something, and even grabbed me". (IDI4:SS12).

The informant 2 shared that in 2010, she was relieved from her role simply because she was female, highlighting the intense discrimination against women in combat operations at the time.

"In my case, I was relieved simply because I was female. The discrimination against women was that high back then—there was a lack of trust. It was in 2010, and it wasn't as accepted back then that women could operate in such roles. Combat operations are physically demanding, and you're carrying 35 pounds of supplies and a rifle" (IDI2:SS22).

Informant 3 shares her previous experience where she feels an intense stress due to the negative treatment and the lack of recognition in the military that made the environment unhealthy, leading to her decision to leave.

"Actually, one of the reasons why I fled here is because of how they treated me. Instead of them being glad that I'm a big help to the division because I work so hard, I set aside my pride, just saying yes and yes, and accepting the punishments. But it reached to the point where it was no longer healthy for me. It really got to the point where the stress was too much, which depended a lot on the environment. In the military, you really have to be strong in your will, emotions, mentally, emotionally, and physically because

everything is tested here. Fortunately, since coming here to the Visayas Command, I haven't encountered those same issues" (IDI3:SS10)

The informant 9 recounted a challenging experience from 2012 when older soldiers treated women differently. While pregnant in her first trimester, she was assigned physically demanding tasks despite her condition, highlighting a lack of understanding and support for women at the time.

"It was a long time ago, actually, I wasn't assigned here yet. My experience back then was that the treatment of the older soldiers was different compared to now, where things are more balanced. Before, my senior was really strict. I had an experience once when I was pregnant, in my first trimester. He made me clean the windows, and he made me work under the heat. At that time, he didn't understand that I was pregnant and I would faint sometimes, but he still gave me that kind of work. That was around 2012. That was one of my bad experiences, where it felt like they didn't understand how women feel" (IDI9:SS5)

Competence Motivation Theory of (Horn, 2014) is best suited for this theme as it focuses on the motivation to engage in tasks and demonstrate competence, emphasizing the importance of mastery attempts and the role of social and emotional support in fostering motivation. In the context of gender inequality and harassment in the military, women often face challenges that undermine their sense of competence, such as discrimination, harassment, and exclusion from certain roles. These negative experiences can erode their self-confidence and motivation, leading to feelings of frustration and decreased morale. However, when women receive recognition, validation, and social support for their capabilities, their motivation to succeed and perform can be revitalized. This theory highlights the resilience of women who, despite facing significant barriers, continue to demonstrate competence and persevere in the face of adversity, striving for equality and recognition within a male-dominated institution.

Bonnes (2023) explores the pervasive issues of sexual harassment, assault, and gender discrimination experienced by women in the U.S. military. The study reveals how deeply embedded masculinity within military culture fosters environments where abuse persists despite formal prevention policies. Victims of sexual harassment and assault are often revictimized when they disclose their victimization to friends, family members, police officers, doctors, nurses and lawyers thus, it highlights institutional failures in support and accountability. It also emphasized in this study that these systemic problems have endured for decades, severely affecting the mental health, career advancement, and overall well-being of servicewomen, and calls for meaningful structural reforms to address gender-based violence in the armed forces. Moreover, the findings in the study of Hicks (2021) indicates that gender inequality does still exist in the defense industry and males, veterans, and those with higher education are more likely to be promoted. Men are also more likely to become veterans which has historically been the dividing line for women in the fight for equality.

II. Strategies employed by the informants in addressing the problems encountered in the performance of their duties

1. Adaptive Leadership in Diverse Military Contexts. This theme signifies how women in the Armed Forces address the unique challenges they encounter, particularly in adapting to new and diverse work environments. The responses show that women in the military often demonstrate resilience and flexibility in the face of unfamiliar roles, inter-service differences, and varying expectations. These women use their leadership skills to navigate difficult situations, adapt to new tasks, and work effectively in multidisciplinary environments. They also face gender-specific challenges such as discrimination, lack of guidance,

and feelings of demoralization. However, they persist by relying on their adaptability, seeking support from colleagues, and focusing on personal and professional growth.

The informant 3 explained that her success in vlogging and the connections she gained, particularly with politicians, caused resentment among some seniors. They believed she had unfair advantages and should experience the same struggles they faced early in their careers.

"Through vlogging, I gained a lot of influence and connections, so most of the time, the people who approach me are politicians, and they want to be connected with this person, with my boss, the commander. Of course, there are seniors who are not happy about it because they think I have more privilege than them. They believe that I should go through the same difficulties they went through when they started, but each person has a different journey" (IDI3:SS11).

Informant 8 shares that adjusting to a new role can be tough, especially when expectations differ. Taking on new administrative tasks may feel overwhelming at first but can lead to growth over time.

"My colleague told me that I should try my best because in VISCOM, you can't just rely on your rating; you also need to learn to do admin work. In the Navy, we believe in putting the right person in the right job. I said I really can't handle it here, I was overwhelmed with so many requests. They didn't really give me any guidance on how to do things or where to take things, but I tried, and I managed to handle one year here" (IDI8:SS14).

The informant 8 shared that working across different branches of service presents unique challenges, as adapting and building connections can be difficult. Being in a senior position adds to the pressure, especially when offering feedback, which may sometimes result in tension or miscommunication.

"The branches of service here are different. I can really compare it to our experience in the Navy, Army, and Air Force because it feels like I'm experiencing something here that I can't feel from them, since their fields are different. Then, I'm wondering how I'm going to do this, and it feels like I might even be singled out by other branches of service because I've given advice to other branches as a senior" (IDI8:SS20).

Informant 11 shared that, despite having more authority now, transitioning to the Visayas Command brought new challenges. While she is confident in her role, unfamiliarity with the army and air force organizations has limited her command approach. Unlike in the navy, where she knew everyone, she feels like she is starting over, uncertain about how her methods will be received.

"Now, I have more authority, so I don't have any problems. It's not about being a woman member, but here in the Visayas Command, there are three major services present. Since I'm new, I'm not very familiar about the army and the air force organization. For me, there's some limitation in my command because I'm not sure if my approach is okay with them. In the navy, I knew everyone, but here, I find myself wondering, 'Wait, who is this? Can they do this or that?' It's like that. It feels like starting over in that sense" (IDI11:SS11).

The theory that is best suited for this theme is Expert Performance Theory of Erickson (1993). This theory emphasizes the importance of continuous learning, adaptation, and the development of skills through experience, feedback, and practice. In the context of the military, women navigating diverse roles and environments demonstrate adaptive leadership by refining their performance, overcoming challenges, and developing the skills necessary to succeed in various military contexts. Their resilience and flexibility align with the idea of gradually improving performance and mastering new tasks through experience, even in the face of adversity.

To adapt themselves to the new military environment, the military men and women must recognize the duty of a military person, get accustomed to special way of life in the Army and be on alert for military

operations. The military service is a special career. The role of a military person is decided by his or her duty and obligation to society and restricted by the career and norms of society. Military persons have common personal characters, which are influenced by military operational environment and their lifestyle is characterized by collective or group form, connected by common goals of their operations, and based on special way of living as a group. They must adapt themselves to this form of life and interpersonal environment. Their adaptability to military operations is a comprehensive one, which requires tough physical strength, strong wills, high level of coordination and enhanced personality (Yang, J. et al., 2009).

2. Boosting Inner Strength and Building Coping Mechanisms. This theme focuses on personal decisions and self-driven strategies of women in the armed forces to handle challenges. It highlights the importance of cultivating patience, emotional balance, and focusing on what is within one's control. The informants emphasized coping through self-reliance, seeking help when needed, staying patient, managing expectations, and maintaining a positive mindset. Additionally, techniques such as prayer, meditation, and gradual adaptation to new environments were mentioned as effective coping strategies, helping individuals navigate tough situations with resilience and clarity.

The informant 6 shared that patience is essential in challenging situations. She emphasized focusing on what can be done and seeking help from coworkers who might be able to assist.

"You have to extend your patience because even if they get angry, there's nothing you can do. Just focus on what you can accomplish and then seek help from your coworkers; maybe they can offer some assistance" (IDI6:SS1).

Informant 5 emphasized that patience is essential in her role, particularly when dealing with people, as it requires more understanding compared to handling non-responsive supplies or logistics. She highlighted patience as a key virtue, especially for women in this field.

"It is inherent in women to be patient. You can't be in this job if you don't have a lot of patience because you will be dealing with people. And as you know, dealing with people is different from dealing with supplies or logistics. People have minds, they think, unlike supplies that don't speak. Patience is truly a virtue" (IDI5:SS10).

Informant 4 shares that she believes in faith, self-belief, and positive affirmations to stay strong, while also emphasizing the importance of living in the present and managing current challenges in the armed forces.

"Prayer, just pray and trust yourself, and keep on chanting that you can do it. It's like a way to boost your courage. For me, I focus first on the present and think about tomorrow later" (IDI4:SS22)

Informant 11 emphasized that effective leadership hinges on patience and adaptability. By investing time in observing, understanding, and building rapport with diverse branches, leaders can foster smoother collaboration and ensure tasks are executed efficiently.

"You really need to take it slow and get to know them. When I first entered the office, of course, I had to observe because the approach here is different as compared to when you were in the navy, where everyone is from the same branch. So, take it slow, study, and get to know the people. Over time, it becomes easier to talk to them and coordinate with them regarding the tasks you want to accomplish" IDI11:SS13).

Competence Motivation Theory of Harter (1978) is the best theory that is suited for this theme. It is focused on how individuals are motivated to engage in tasks to demonstrate and develop their competence. It emphasizes the role of positive feedback, mastery experiences, and social support in fostering a sense of competence, which in turn enhances motivation and emotional resilience. The strategies described such as patience, seeking support, and maintaining a positive mindset align with the idea that individuals are

motivated to overcome challenges and increase their effectiveness through mastery and perceived competence.

Bjarnesen, M. (2025) states that despite an increased focus on gender equality and a more welcoming attitude to military women, persistent norms of masculinity remain challenging for women in military settings. At the same time, young military women may have found new ways of navigating the burden of visibility that women in minority often struggle with. For example, while gendered performance pressure remains a reality, strategies of disassociating oneself from other women, in line with previous theorizing, do not appear to be a dominant coping strategy. This generation of women entered the military under different circumstances than those who paved the way. The reassurance of being strategically prioritized may have inspired new ways of navigating a fear of visibility, in contrast with previous generations who often rejected the idea of female networks within the organization. Young military women of today might therefore be more inclined to fight structural challenges. Given the gendered challenges military women still face, it remains to be seen whether these forms of gendered empowerment will be enough to retain them.

3. Service Beyond Frontier Zone. This theme underscores the dedication and commitment of military personnel who serve in remote and high-risk areas beyond their comfort zones. It highlights their adaptability to unfamiliar environments, perseverance amid limited resources, and willingness to make personal sacrifices. Their stories reflect true selflessness and resilience, as they continue to push their limits and fulfill their duties for the greater good.

The fourth (4th) informant shared that her first and second assignment was challenging as she was the only woman in their area and faced uncertainty.

"My first assignment was in Jolo-Sulu, and that was the biggest challenge for me as a woman because I didn't know what would happen to me. On top of that, I was the only woman there, and I was with my officer who was a pilot. I was also assigned in Zamboanga. The real challenge for us women is being far from family, especially if you're a mother, because you will leave your children behind" (IDI4:SS17).

Informant 4 further added that as a woman who is a frontliner, she find it difficult when there is no basic necessities available in the area.

"When Yolanda hit, it was really difficult because when we first arrived, we couldn't immediately retrieve the dead bodies. Of course, when we got there, the floods were still there, and the struggles were even harder because I'm a woman. There were no proper facilities, no place to use the restroom, and the surroundings were barren, with no plants or greenery. What made it even harder was dealing with the families of the victims -it was difficult to explain to them, and hard to figure out how to help and manage the situation" (IDI4:SS19).

Informant 11 described her experiences in Zamboanga as a ghost town during the 2013 conflict and the Marawi siege.

"At that time, it was like a ghost town because the war was still ongoing around 2013, and not long after that, the Marawi siege followed. It was far, but Zamboanga was still on high alert. It was really intense because the Muslims knew that the police were already gathering in the area. It was very close to the police headquarters, and that's where the conflict centered" (IDI11:SS11).

The informant 2 shared that experiencing childbirth alone was a profound test of her resilience and independence, embodying the sacrifices required to balance duty, service, and personal life.

"Another unique experience was that I gave birth at night, but my family was in Leyte, my husband's family was in Zamboanga, and my husband was assigned to a different location. I literally gave birth

alone. Since I was by myself at the hospital, I gave birth at the military hospital in Manila. The next day, I discharged myself and went home because there was no one to assist me. I didn't have the support of my family". (IDI2:SS10).

It is best anchored on Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1977), which emphasizes an individual's belief in their capability to perform tasks and overcome challenges. This theory aligns with the experiences of women in the military who are assigned to remote and high-risk areas, where strong self-belief and confidence are essential to endure hardships and accomplish their missions. Despite being far from their families, facing limited resources, and working in male-dominated environments, these women demonstrate high self-efficacy by viewing difficulties as challenges to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided. Their persistence, adaptability, and resilience in unfamiliar situations reflect how strong self-efficacy enables them to remain committed, maintain composure under pressure, and continue serving with courage and purpose beyond their comfort zones.

The study of Lioupi, C. (2024), examined numerous studies in understanding the relationship between self-efficacy and decision making in operational contexts which demonstrates the complexity of this phenomenon. Findings consistently showed that higher levels of self-efficacy were linked to improved decision-making outcomes across diverse tasks and scenarios. Therefore, high self-efficacy enhances soldiers' confidence in handling uncertainty, promotes emotional stability under stress, and sustains motivation to complete missions despite personal hardships.

III. Aspirations of the informants to improve the quality of their services in the community

1. **Family as a Source of Motivation.** This theme highlights the importance of family as it serves as a profound source of motivation that drives the women in the armed forces to persevere and excel in their demanding roles. Many express that their commitment to military service is rooted in their desire to provide financial stability, security, and a better future for their loved ones, reinforcing their dedication to both personal and professional growth. Beyond financial motivations, family instills a deep sense of purpose, inspiring these women to navigate the challenges of military life with resilience and determination. Despite the physical and emotional hardships of their profession, they view their work as both a fulfilling duty and an opportunity to uplift their families. Their ability to balance responsibilities at home and in the AFP highlights not only their adaptability but also the importance of strong support systems in enabling them to thrive. Ultimately, family remains the cornerstone of their drive, shaping their perseverance, success, and unwavering commitment to their role in the military.

The informant 11 expressed her unwavering commitment to working hard for the future of her children and her own, emphasizing her dedication to building a better life for her family.

"I continue to work hard for the future of my children and also for my own future, for my family". (IDI11:SS23).

The Informant 3 feels inspired by the thought of bringing her daughter to live with her, appreciating the affordable housing and safe environment which she hopes to get her own unit soon.

"If there's something that could inspire me, it's maybe the thought that if I could bring my daughter here, I could be even more inspired. That's what's great here because we can rent a cheap apartment for five hundred pesos, and it's a two-story place. I can even bring my parents if they want to live here. And it's a safe environment for my child because she's a girl. Maybe the only thing I lack right now is being able to get my own unit". (IDI3:SS22)

The informant 10 emphasized that her motivation comes from her family, as her efforts ultimately benefit them. She also acknowledged that soldiers' benefits extend to their dependents, making her work even more meaningful.

"It's truly about family regardless of whether they're far or near, when you ask reflect on why you're doing this, it's because it's for your family. And it's not just about the benefits for myself; we all know that the benefits for soldiers are also given to their dependents". (IDI10:SS14).

The informant 8 reflects on the importance of balancing family support with personal growth, emphasizing the goal of creating a better life and attaining financial independence. This highlights a strong sense of responsibility and determination to succeed.

"I'm inspired because I'm a single parent now, and my child is already in college. I enrolled them in pharmacy. I told them, 'Work hard, my child, maybe you can get your license, and we can open our own pharmacy". (IDI8:SS23).

This theme is supported by Self-Efficacy Theory of Albert Bandura (1977) in which it emphasizes the role of belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. The women in the armed forces are driven by their motivation to provide for their families, and their ability to persevere through the challenges of military life is deeply connected to their belief in their own capabilities. It also suggests that individuals who have strong confidence in their abilities are more likely to persist, overcome obstacles, and achieve success. The women in the military demonstrate this as they navigate both professional and personal responsibilities, relying on their resilience and determination. Their family acts as a reinforcing factor, strengthening their belief that they can succeed despite hardships.

This highlights the importance of family support in fostering resilience and motivation, making it highly relevant to understanding how women in the armed forces persevere in their roles. The findings contribute to literature on family-work enrichment, reinforcing the idea that strong family motivation enhances professional success and commitment (Abid, et al, 2020).

2. **Commitment to Service Excellence.** This theme focuses on the experiences of the informants which are deeply rooted in both professional duty and personal conviction. Informants expressed a strong desire to enhance the quality of their service in response to the diverse and demanding roles they play from disaster response to national defense. This commitment is not only institutional but also highly personal, as seen in continued service beyond retirement eligibility, driven by unfulfilled aspirations and a sense of purpose. Others volunteer their time for ROTC and awareness programs, showing real patriotism. These accounts illustrate how service excellence is sustained through self-motivation, patriotism, and the belief in making a meaningful contribution to both the organization and the nation.

The informant 5 highlighted the diverse roles of the AFP, including responding to calamities, emergencies, and territorial defense challenges. She emphasized the need to improve service quality to fulfill their mission and ensure the Philippines has a capable Armed Forces to defend the nation.

"The AFP has numerous responsibilities and plays a vital role during national calamities we are there. During national emergencies, we are there. In territorial defense, especially now with the challenges we face, we want to improve the quality of our service because only then can we accomplish our mission. Only then we can proudly say that indeed, we are able to do our job and that the Philippines built an Armed Forces capable of defending the nation." (IDI5:SS25).

Informant 5 further shared that her dedication to the Armed Forces of the Philippines stems from personal conviction. Despite being eligible for retirement after 21 years of service, she remains motivated by her dreams and desire to contribute to the organization's improvement.

"I am inspired to work more because, actually, I have been in the service for 21 years, and I can retire anytime. The reason I'm still here is more of a personal choice. They say it's because of family, yes, because I still have my parents and I'm still taking care of their needs. But that's not enough; it should be your personal conviction. It should always be like that—that I'm still here because I know I still have something to contribute, I can still do something for the betterment of the organization. I'm here because I still have dreams for myself, I still want to buy a BMW car. Like I always say, what we have are dreams—if you don't have dreams, then there's no purpose in existing. So, I still have dreams for myself, and that's why I'm here. Most importantly, I can still contribute, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines is still worth serving". (IDI5:SS29).

The informant 2 highlights that serving the country is more than just a duty, it's a personal commitment fueled by patriotism. True dedication leads to contributing beyond official responsibilities, driven by genuine love for the nation rather than mere obligation.

"My personal advocacy is that I became a soldier because I wanted to serve my country. Right now, I'm in VISCOM, but on weekends, I'm supposed to be with my family. However, my hours are now devoted to ROTC. I'm actually the ROTC Commandant of CTU. This is purely voluntary; it was supposed to be a different unit, but I'm doing it because I feel patriotic. For no other reason except that I want to serve my country. That's really it" (IDI2:SS39).

The statement of Informant 10 emphasizes the goal of reaching a wider audience, including both youth and adults, to increase awareness.

"I'll improve it to expand the target audience, not just focusing on this specific area or group. It would be better for us if we engage more people to increase awareness - not just among the youth but also among adults, because sometimes adults aren't aware that certain programs or services already exist". (IDI10:SS11).

This theme is supported by Harter's (1978) Competence Motivation Theory, which states that "individuals are motivated to engage in activities in order to feel competent, and successful experiences enhance their perceived competence and reinforce their motivation." This is evident in how the informants pursue continued service, take on volunteer roles, and strive for improvement, not out of obligation, but from a personal drive to contribute and grow. Their actions show how perceived competence and meaningful achievement fuel sustained motivation in military service.

Romero-Hall, E. (2020), states that the reasons why female military women joined to serve the armed forces because it is an opportunity, a calling, and the post-military life benefits such as retirement they will receive. On the other hand, other participants felt motivated to join the military because of their patriotism, while others had familial ties to the military and future retirement benefits.

3. Gratitude for Benefits and Support. This theme highlights how recognition of the support and benefits soldiers receive from the government fosters a sense of responsibility and gratitude. This leads to their commitment to improve the quality of their service, both professionally and personally. Soldiers' dedication to excelling stems from the acknowledgment of the trust and investment placed in them by their organization, ensuring they reciprocate with enhanced professionalism, skill improvement, and meaningful contributions.

The informant 5 explained that they aim to improve because serving the community and people is their core duty and oath in the service**.**

"Why do you want to improve? Because this is our bread and butter, community service, serving people. We are bound to serve. When we join the service, we take an oath that we will serve the people. It's our

job to serve, to deliver and fulfill that promise" (IDI5:SS24)
Informant 9 states that she is motivated to perform well because of the bonuses and benefits she receive.
"The fees I receive from the AFP, hospitalization, everything. Isn't it inspiring? Where can you find a job like this? You really get inspired because you're paid properly and there are many other benefits". (IDI9:SS13).
The informant 6 highlighted the positive side of their life in the military, noting that they are provided with all their needs, such as increased subsistence allowance and higher salaries, which contribute to maintaining high morale.
"The positive side is, even though this is the life we live, always here, we are given everything we need. For example, our increased subsistence allowance, higher salary, ultimately it makes us feel high morale". (IDI6:SS22).
Informant 11 emphasized that serving in the Armed Forces of the Philippines is more than just a career, it's a profound responsibility. She believes the support it offers should inspire gratitude and be reciprocated through dedicated and high-quality service.
"The Armed Forces of the Philippines has provided us with a livelihood, so as a return, we should strive to elevate the quality of service we give to the AFP. We should also be thankful because without this opportunity, things could be more challenging compared to other jobs. So, being grateful, you should also give the kind of service you're expected to provide" (IDI11:SS14)
The Competence Motivation Theory of Harter (1978) is best suited for this theme as it explains how the support and benefits soldiers receive from the Armed Forces motivate them to improve their performance. The recognition of these benefits, such as bonuses, allowances, and healthcare, fosters a sense of responsibility and commitment. Soldiers are driven to perform well because they perceive their success as a reflection of their competence and control, which increases their intrinsic motivation. This positive feedback loop encourages continuous self-improvement, as soldiers seek to excel in their duties to repay the trust and investment placed in them, ultimately contributing to their professional growth and the success of the organization.
Balibay (2018) states that the AFP asserts that programs on Gender and Development have been on-going since the Armed Forces of the Philippines started accepting women in the military ranks. Same privileges and opportunities in terms of pay increases, additional remunerations, and benefits and awards are being accorded to men and women in uniform. According to her, there are also a report that states that there are equal considerations in terms of the area or field of assignment are given to both men and women in the AFP.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for law enforcement agencies and their support system.
Implication for Practice
To address the negative and the challenges experienced by the women in the Armed Forces, it is recommended that:
The Women members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines must receive a more tailored support system that acknowledges and addresses different challenges such as more flexible leave policies or improved childcare options that could further ease the burden of women soldiers, allowing them to better navigate their dual roles as military personnel and as mothers because although there is an existing Gender and

Development program that offers initiatives like Gender Sensitivity Training and workshops on GAD-related laws, there are still significant challenges in balancing family responsibilities with military duties. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) must continue to strengthen and expand its existing Gender and Development (GAD) Program to promote gender equality and inclusivity through targeted programs and active participation in national and international gender-related advocacies. Additionally, ensuring the full implementation of the Gender-Based Violence Referral System (GBVRS) and increasing awareness of these resources will empower women soldiers to report and address issues of harassment and violence with confidence.

The Department of National Defense (DND) can strengthen gender inclusion in the armed forces by expanding leadership training and mentorship programs, ensuring women are represented in decision-making roles and specialized combat positions. Implementing stricter anti-harassment policies, gender-sensitive mental health support, and inclusive workplace initiatives will create a safer and more supportive environment. Encouraging gender-neutral recruitment and promotion practices, along with flexible work arrangements and childcare support, can help address systemic barriers. Additionally, regular gender sensitivity training and awareness campaigns will foster a culture of respect, equality, and inclusion, empowering women to build long-term careers in military service.

For aspiring women, the documented experiences provide valuable guidance and inspiration, equipping them with a realistic understanding of military life and the fortitude required to overcome challenges while pursuing both personal and professional excellence.

The Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) should strengthen their gender-sensitive policies and support systems within local government units (LGUs) and other allied agencies that work closely with the armed forces. This includes implementing a mandatory gender awareness and sensitivity training for all military personnel, establishing a safe environment for all and in promoting an inclusive leadership development program for women in uniform. Through this, the DILG can help create an enabling environment that actively addresses workplace discrimination, gender bias, and unequal career advancement opportunities, ultimately empowering women in the armed forces to thrive professionally and personally.

The Local Government Units (LGU) can support women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines by fostering stronger civil-military collaboration through gender empowerment and gender-responsive programs. This includes recognizing and integrating the unique roles of women in peacekeeping, disaster response, and community security efforts. institutionalize budgetary support for programs that address the unique needs of women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines. This includes allocating funds for gender-responsive initiatives such as mental health services, maternity care, child support facilities, leadership training, and reintegration programs for female soldiers. By providing dedicated financial resources, LGUs demonstrate concrete support for gender equality in the military sector and help ensure that women in uniform are equipped, empowered, and protected both in service and in their communities.

The community plays a vital role in supporting women in the Armed Forces not only as a beneficiary of the services but also as an active observer and participant in promoting their welfare. As part of the community, they can monitor and report any forms of discrimination, harassment, or gender-based violence they have observed that women in uniform may experience to foster accountability and transparency. They can also engage in community-based programs that support women soldiers such as providing real time intelligence to gather important information, attending local military activities such initiatives like information drive on preparedness on the roles and responsibilities of soldiers during

disasters and calamities. By playing these roles, communities can help create a more inclusive and empowering environment that values the contributions and well-being of women in the military.

Implication for Future Studies

Based on the findings of this study, future research should delve deeper into the lived experiences of women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines, particularly focusing on the balance between military duties and family life across different assignments and roles. Researchers could explore on how these women address the different challenges they have encountered especially on the different field, division, units and offices of the Armed Forces. Such studies can provide a deeper understanding of the gender-specific barriers and coping strategies, contributing to the development of more inclusive and supportive policies for women in uniform.

They must also explore the long-term impact of reassignments on the career progression and personal well-being of women in the Armed Forces. Even if reassignment is part of their sworn responsibility as soldiers to enhance their operational readiness, it may create disruptions that can affect not only to their professional development and promotion opportunities but may also adds emotional stability and work-life balance especially for mothers. Future research should investigate how these transitions influence familial relationships especially for mothers who are raising children and how women cope with the demands of reassignment, separation from loved ones, and the need to constantly adjust to new environments. Understanding these dynamics can shed light on the emotional resilience required of women in uniform and inform the development of support systems that address both their professional and personal challenges.

Additionally, future studies might assess the effectiveness of the Gender and Development (GAD) program of the armed forces and explore how its various initiatives enhance gender sensitivity and inclusivity within the military environment. Future researchers could delve into a comparative study which involves similar field or cross-cultural analysis that could further provide best practices for supporting military women, ultimately contributing to more informed policy development and empowerment strategies for women in the armed forces sector.

CONCLUSION

This study uncovers the crucial role of women in the field of armed forces, highlighting both the positive and negative experiences that these women face in the performance of their duties. The positive experiences derived from Breaking Boundaries: Empowering Equality and Capability, The Art of Balancing Work and Family. From Sacrifice to Success: Personal Growth and Fulfillment in the Service in contrary, these women also experienced negative experiences such as New Horizons: Sadness in Reassignment, Duty First: Struggles of Delayed Leave in the Military and Navigating Gender Inequality and Harassment. Despite these challenges, women members of the armed forces of the Philippines in Visayas Command demonstrate strategies to address their concerns such as Adaptive Leadership in Diverse Military Contexts, Boosting Inner Strength and Building Coping Mechanisms and Service Beyond Frontier Zones. Aside from this, they were also aspired to improve the quality of their services in the community because they said that Family as a Source of Motivation, Commitment to Service Excellence and lastly is Gratitude for Benefits and Support. The findings emphasized the necessity for a more tailored institutional support, to strengthen and expand its existing Gender and Development (GAD) Program, to expand their leadership training and mentorship programs and to foster stronger civil-military collaboration and lastly the need for further research to delve into the various experiences of women in

the armed forces across the Philippines. This comprehensive approach is crucial for maintaining the effectiveness of armed forces operations in defending and protecting our country.

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