

Research Article

Exploring the Role of Mothers as Breadwinners in Bukidnon, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Philippine households relied on men as family providers, as reinforced by the 1950 Civil Code. The 1988 Family Code, however, recognized equal roles for husbands and wives. With more women entering the workforce, many have become breadwinners. This study focuses on mothers in Bukidnon, Philippines who have taken on this role. This study employed qualitative methods through in-depth interviews with 13 mothers from different areas in Bukidnon, focusing on their role perceptions, their journey into becoming breadwinners, how they share responsibilities with their husbands, and the challenges they encounter. This study is analyzed through thematic analysis where the interviews are transcribed then organized into categories to identify common themes. Proper ethics procedures were followed and an ethics clearance was also secured. Findings of the study reveal that while the informants possess traditional views on household roles, they view breadwinning in a progressive light — seeing themselves as equally capable of providing for their families. However, family decisions still largely rest with their husbands; and despite their work and exhaustion, these women continue to fulfill their roles as wives, mothers, and even daughters. The study affirms the persistence of stereotypes in which women, even as primary providers, remain bound to traditional wife–mother responsibilities.

Keywords: Breadwinning Mothers, Family Dynamics, Multiple Roles, Women

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, significant changes occurred in the dynamics of families and gender roles, challenging traditional gendered responsibilities within households. One outstanding shift is the emergence of breadwinning mothers who actively contribute to the family income and often assume the role of primary or sole financial providers. From a traditional gender-role perspective, women are held as the household caretakers while men are the providers (Harth & Mitte, 2020). In the Philippines, ethnographic accounts reveal a more egalitarian arrangement among pre-colonial Filipinos where there was no strict adherence to gender roles nor the presence of rigid gender division of labor. But with Western colonization came the restructuring of the Philippine household which has resulted a sustained impact in gender relations within the Filipino household. Although the Philippine household is not organized strictly within these patriarchal systems, the husband is still the publicly acknowledged head of household and as such is expected to be the economic provider of the family. Conversely, the wife is credited primarily for her ability to have children; hence, socially assigned to take good care of the family (Alcantara, 1994). However, according to Medina (1991, as cited in Alcantara, 1994), Filipino women have always been engaging in economic activities and have been actively looking for ways to augment the husband's income. Although women are increasingly assuming the role of primary earner in households (Vitali & Arpino, 2016), women still continue to show up for household chores and childcare. Today, women are contributing an ever-greater share of married couples' economic resources. But despite its increasing prevalence, this topic remains underexplored.

Meisenbach (2010), emphasized that the rise of female breadwinner is an increasingly important concern; however, little research has been done about the topic.

The Philippine context on female breadwinning does not go far from its neighboring countries in the Asia Pacific region. In Indonesia, for instance, women are compelled to perform breadwinning duties because of three reasons: their husband's income does not meet the family's needs, the need for women to fill roles beyond just being a wife and a mother, and the women's need for power and achievements that may not have accomplished inside a family structure (Sumarlin, 2019, as cited in Usmany et al., 2025). This shows how becoming breadwinners is not only a personal choice but is more driven by economic circumstances. Vietnam, as similar in the Philippines, even when women take up paid work, the division of labor within households has remained. Wives are still primarily responsible for housework, especially that cultural norms do not promote gender equality (Marcen & Morales, 2022 as cited in Vo & Truong, 2023). Working mothers in Thailand also experience the same where many of them experience "double burden" particularly when balancing additional roles such as schooling or migrant work plus motherhood (Thinnam, 2013). In Malaysian context, women, especially low-income or single mothers, can be the main or sole earners. However, their roles as breadwinners often go unacknowledged in both policy and societal discourse (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025). Across these countries in the Asia Pacific region, including the Philippines, many women face almost the same situation — increased household economic contribution but remained to be perceived as primary caregivers.

Female breadwinning, defined as situations where women earn and contribute the majority or all of the household income (Meisenbach, 2010), has emerged as a topic of growing significance in contemporary society. This phenomenon challenges traditional gender roles and family dynamics, making it more relevant to be explored extensively. Studies suggest that the rise of female breadwinner households can be attributed to the poor economic outcomes of low-skilled men, male unemployment rate, influence of urbanization on family social systems, and having more women getting education (Vitali & Arpino, 2016; Akanle, Adesina, & Nwaobiala, 2018). When men experience job loss or face economic challenges, women are often compelled to assume the role of sole provider. Reports reveal that women's role to become the primary providers in the family is not only increasing in developed countries but also in the third world countries (Glynn, 2012).

While female breadwinning, as a population, has been of increasing importance, there has been a lack of literature that defines the key concepts of breadwinning as there is no universal conceptualization of the term (Sparham, 2019). Many studies have argued that breadwinning is a complex term with varying definitions which makes it difficult to be single-handedly defined. Hence, various studies have each of their own definitions of breadwinning. Some studies use breadwinning as categorizations to describe the polarization of financial arrangements as either 'breadwinner' or 'dependent' (Pahl, 1989, as cited in Sparham, 2019), or to distinguish them as the 'major earners' (Drago et al., 2005). The literature has shown how studies on female breadwinning mostly revolved around its technical and economic aspects, but less on the depth of the women's experiences. Warren (2007), points that evidences concerning the reasons behind their breadwinning roles and the choices they make are seldom investigated. According to Sparham (2019), breadwinning is often associated with economic concepts which undermines all the other issues around the breadwinning role, such as women's lifestyle and challenges. While there are varying definitions, the concept of breadwinning is acknowledged to be problematic due to the lack of literature that specifically defines its key concepts (Warren, 2007).

This study seeks to shed light on the roles and challenges of the breadwinning mothers, specifically in Bukidnon, Philippines. By examining these challenges, this study aims to understand the ways in which these women negotiate their roles and the strategies they employ to reconcile societal expectations with their personal aspirations. The shifting dynamics within the household due to the changing roles of women may lead to renegotiations of traditional gender roles, potentially challenging established power structures and affecting family dynamics. Through the investigation of the experiences of breadwinning mothers, this research aims to contribute to filling a gap in the geographical, methodological, and knowledge gaps on female breadwinning. Geographically, while previous studies directly exploring on breadwinning mothers mostly focused on Europe and South Africa, studies in the Philippine context remain limited, particularly in Mindanao. By focusing on breadwinning mothers in Bukidnon, this study offers a perspective that is currently underrepresented in the literature. Methodologically, there has been limited research about breadwinning, as previous studies have tended to be based on quantitative data (Vitali & Arpino, 2016). This study employs a qualitative approach to capture the lived realities of breadwinning mothers beyond the numbers. In this paper, we contribute to filling a gap by studying the challenges and issues of breadwinning mothers — exploring their struggles and coping strategies. Due to the term 'breadwinning' being contested, this study will define female breadwinning as the act done by a woman which includes majorly or solely supporting the family's financial needs. This research explores on their perception of their roles, their progression into becoming breadwinners, the ways they share responsibilities with their husbands, and the challenges arising from it.

With its increasing relevance, this study on breadwinning mothers gathers meaningful sentiments and real-life experiences to what it really means to be a breadwinner. By embracing the diversity of family structures and addressing gender inequalities, societies can create an inclusive environment that values and supports the contributions of both men and women in shaping family dynamics and social progress. This study could contribute to the discussions on the shifts and career trajectories that have transpired in women's experiences over time. In the academe, this research can also push boundaries and create new dialogues within academic literature. This study can contribute to the growing body of research in gender studies, with a specific focus on women's multiple burden emphasizing on their breadwinning roles. As this study challenges that traditional gender roles, it will open up new conversations that can pave the way for more inclusive and progressive take on women's struggles. This research will help provide insights that can inform policies and improve the well-being of breadwinning mothers. Addressing such issues can help them be given access to advancement opportunities.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a descriptive and qualitative approach. This method was used to describe the challenges that breadwinning mothers face as they perform their roles. The researchers used in-depth interviews. After all the data were collected, thematic analysis was performed. This approach allowed deep understanding of the grounded real-life situations of the informants.

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in Bukidnon, Philippines. The researchers purposefully selected and interviewed 13 breadwinning mothers from Bukidnon. This study defines breadwinning mothers as women who are financially supporting the household primarily or solely. This research used this term to refer specifically to mothers in their early to middle adulthood stage, aged 25-50 years, with or without a working husband, and at least one child present in their household. This operational definition served as the basis for participant recruitment. Only mothers who met this criterion were included in the study. The participants came from diverse backgrounds as professionals, farm and labor workers, and self-employed individuals. Given the qualitative and descriptive nature of the study, a smaller sample was sufficient to capture in-depth perspectives of the participants to which data saturation was reached. This sample size is also consistent with many qualitative studies on family dynamics and gender roles which commonly include 10-20 participants.

Instruments

The researchers used a two-part instrument to get the appropriate data needed from the informants. The first part included a socio-demographic profile that determined their age, educational attainment, household size, and their monthly income. The second part used an interview instrument as a guide in asking questions and probed the informants when necessary. The interviews were recorded and were transcribed for coding.

Data Collection

The study obtained qualitative data. After finding the target informants, the researchers then set the schedule of interview. Prior to the interview, the researchers explained the study before the informants were asked to sign the consent form. 30 minutes to 1 hour of their time were used to conduct the interview proper. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, at which point no new themes emerged.

Data Analysis

This research utilized thematic analysis in analyzing the qualitative data. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and translated prior to analysis. Interviews were thoroughly read and initial impressions were noted along the process. The informants' answers were categorized according to the study's research questions, specifically focusing on their perception of their roles, their progression into becoming breadwinners, the ways they share responsibilities with their husbands, and the challenges arising from it. For each research question, a matrix table was created which the columns represented the main interview questions and the rows represented the informants. After arranging the matrices, the researcher noted and highlighted interesting points or potential patterns. These highlighted points were then assigned codes that reflected the research questions. Related codes were grouped together to create preliminary themes. Themes that were overlapping each other were merged, themes that seemed repetitive were removed, and themes that were too broad were subdivided into specific concepts. The preliminary themes were refined to make them specific, clear, and meaningful. Narratives were crafted around each theme and provided quotes as evidences. The themes were also explained in relation to the research questions and to the existing literature. While the manuscript has two authors, all data processing and coding were performed by the corresponding author and was further reviewed by the second author to ensure coding consistency and validity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Informants

	Age	Career	Educational Attainment	Estimated Monthly Household Income	Household Size
1. Gina	42	Insurance Agent	Vocational		3
2. Lucy	43	Teacher	Bachelor's Degree	30,000	7
3. Gemma	50	Self-employed	College level	did not disclose	8
4. Minda	44	Farm Supervisor	High School	did not disclose	5

5. Susan	46	Food Storage Worker	Bachelor's Degree	60,000	7
6. Nancy	44	Direct Seller	Bachelor's Degree	25,000	6
7. Carol	31	Pharmacist	Bachelor's Degree	60,000	4
8. Janet	49	Medical Technologist	Bachelor's Degree	50,000	5
9. Judith	36	Virtual Assistant	High School	65,000	4
10. Sandra	43	Self-employed	Bachelor's Degree	20,000	
11. Josie	32	Accountant	Bachelor's Degree	140,000	5
12. Julia	49	School Nurse	Bachelor's Degree	50,000	4
13. Sanya	50	Farm laborer	Elementary	10,000	3

The informants included 13 breadwinning mothers aged 31 to 50, with household size ranging from 3 to 7. There is a variety of job and professions and can be categorized into white-collar jobs (professionals), blue-collar jobs (farm and labor workers), and self-employed (direct seller and virtual assistant). Most of the participants are bachelor's degree holders (8 out of 13), a few completed vocational school or high school (3 out of 13), college level (1 out of 13) and elementary graduate (1 out of 13). Their income ranges from ₱10,000 to ₱140,000 with some participants opted not to disclose their income. It is observable that while 8 out of 13 are degree holders and 4 are professionals, they remain to be in lower middle class (₱21,194 to ₱43,828) and middle class (₱43,828 to ₱76,669) based on the classification of Philippine Institute of Development Studies (PIDS).

Persistence of Traditional Views on Household Roles Despite Changing Economic Landscape

While efforts on mainstreaming gender and eradicating stereotypes has seen progress in the past years (Martin, 2025), the informants remain to hold traditional views on the roles of men and women in the household. They believe that men should be the provider of the family as they also believe that women are better caretakers of the children. The breadwinning mothers label the men as the “*baligi ng tabanan*” or the pillar of the home — someone who supports the needs of the household and keeps the family stable. They believe that fathers should be the providers because of their physical capabilities and are better decision-makers for the family. On the other hand, they also believe that women are considered to be the “*ilaw ng tabanan*” or the light of the home who should be managing the overall state of their children as they believe that there are certain tasks that are better done by women than men; especially in terms of taking care of the children. As women, they believe that they are more capable in raising their children because they can guide them better to become individuals who will uphold upright values. More importantly, women feel more at ease when they take care of their children and when their husband is the one working. Although they think that their husband can also guide the children, it is not in the same way that they can. As what one informant expressed,

“Lahi gyud kita mama. Lahi gyud ang boys. So, kana bitaw'ng ideal family nga ang husband gyud ang mu-trabaho, kay lahi ra gyud ilang mahatag na responsibility.”

(It's just different when it's the mom [taking care of the children]. It's also different with men. That's why, the ideal family setup is if father is the one working because the kind of responsibility that they can give is really different.)

In a similar thought, another informant also expressed how she thinks that the father should be the family's provider. When asked about what she thinks her husband should do, she answered,

“Syempre, ma'am, mag-provide, mag-asikaso, mag-tabang sa balay kay syempre duha ra baya mi, ma'am. Okay ra gyud ug naa ra gyud ko sa balay 'no niya igo ra bata akong atimanon, niya ga-trabaho baya ko. Mura'g sa akua, ma'am, okay gyud kaayo ug naa kay ka-timbang. Dili lang katimbang sa financial, katimbang pud sa mga trabahuon sa balay.”

(Of course, ma'am, he should provide, take care of us, and help me in our household chores because it is only the two of us. I really don't mind doing the chores as long as I'm at home only and I am just taking care of our child but, I am also working. For me, it is really a good thing to have someone to share the burden with. Not just in terms of finances, but also in handling all the household chores.)

As much as she wants to have a partner as a provider of the family, she also wants to have a partner in doing the household chores. However, most of the time, she does all these alone because her partner does not come home every day due to work.

The results reflect how women maintain gendered traditional beliefs on household tasks. Even as breadwinners, they remain to have cultural ideas that mothers are naturally better caretakers. Women have also exercised their agency in negotiating their reproductive roles that while they accept their husband to not be present sometimes, they still assert their desire for a partner whom they can share the burden with.

The related literature has shown how traditionally, women took care of the household and children whereas men took the role of the provider (Harth & Mitte, 2020). Bearing the financial burden of the family, breadwinning mothers are often branded as strong. While they take the responsibility of providing the majority of the needs of their family, they continue to fulfill the maternal roles expected of them. These result from the gender role socialization where individuals learn gender-related roles,

norms, and expectations through interaction with others. For breadwinning mothers, they feel obligated to fulfill maternal and household roles because of how it was reinforced in the society. This shows how gender roles have become deeply embedded and permeated to social institutions that even women themselves internalize such traditional ideas; hence, very difficult to change. Although breadwinning mothers now contribute the majority of the household income, caregiving responsibilities remained firm. This shows how their role as breadwinners do not always automatically mean an eradication or reduction of their caretaking roles, but more of an added role. These are continuously reinforced by institutions which makes it more difficult for women to fully renegotiate their roles.

Reframing Female Breadwinning as Empowerment and Pride

The breadwinning mothers hold traditional views on household roles but have a progressive view on their breadwinning roles. They believe that women are already capable in providing for the family, especially their financial needs. They feel a sense of pride in the breadwinning roles that they hold, considering that they are able to attend to the needs of their family and other relatives, especially their children. They see themselves as someone who is financially independent which makes them feel empowered about themselves. Informant Lucy (43) expressed,

“I’m proud nga provider ko ug kaning thankful sad ko nga maka-find ko ug ways ba to provide pud sa family.”

(I feel proud that I can provide for the family and I am thankful that I am able to look for ways to provide for their needs.)

Most informants, despite expressing their want to have a provider husband, have shown positive views towards female breadwinning. They expressed joy about being able to provide and juggle work and caretaking roles. They feel a sense of fulfillment and they feel blessed despite the challenges and see no problem about being the provider. They expressed a positive take on female breadwinning especially because they have agreed it with their husband. They only make sure that every financial decision one makes, the other one should be made aware of. The informants also rarely receive negative remarks from other people on them being the breadwinners. They think that it is already common for a woman to provide knowing that it is also needed for a family to survive. Although there are times when they would get asked about it, it does not really weigh that much on them. For them, breadwinning is not a matter of gender, but more of a response to the call of the times. For informant Janet (49), it is not a big deal anymore, what matters for her is that they understand each other. In this way, her beliefs challenge the traditional gender norms, rejecting the idea that breadwinning is a man’s role. More so, she believes that the father should still be equally involved in guiding the children and should share the responsibility at home. She expressed,

“Before, ang role sa father, ang first gyud is financial. Ambot lang ha sa karun, dili naman nako na gina-question. Dili na big deal gyud. Basta ang importante, magkasinabot gyud.”

(Before, the role of the father is to provide financially. I cannot really say anything now, because I don’t really question it. It’s not a big deal for me. What’s important is that we understand each other.)

Judith (36) also believes that people should adapt to the changes of today’s time and not just rely on the husband for financial provision. She expressed,

“Dili na gyud pareha sauna nga kinahanglan ang husband gyud ang mag-provide, sila gyud need mag-trabaho. Karon kay equal naman gyud ta. Karon praktikalan na gyud. Kung kinsa tong tan-aw nimo nga mas dako ug income, didto nalang gyud ta musunod kay unsaon. Lisod pud kaayo nato sundon tong sauna.”

(Today is really different compared to the situation from the past where it is the husband who works and provides. Now, we’re considered equal. We should be practical. Whoever has a higher income should take the lead because it does not anymore work if we keep on relying on the past.)

She affirms gender equality in economic roles by seeing men and women as equal and as well as critiques the strict adherence to traditional roles. This shows how the family dynamics has definitely changed over time. Traditionally, men have been seen as the supposed providers of the family. Now, women are taking up that role and are even owning up to it. Women today, as shown by breadwinning mothers, are breaking gender norms and are now exercising their freedom of choice. However, some informants have also expressed that if only their circumstance permits, they would rather have their husband become the provider so they could fully take care and raise their children. This is consistent with women’s traditional views on household roles. Because they believe that women are naturally nurturing, it is better to have the mother as the caretaker compared to the fathers.

Redefining Gender Roles through Women’s Increased Productive Roles

Productive role comprises of work done by both women and men for payment in cash or kind (Moser, 1993). Men are typically expected to earn money for the family while women are expected to undertake domestic tasks (Eagly, 1987). However, the breadwinning mothers exemplified in this study went beyond the traditional expectations. As someone who earns higher income than their husbands, not only do they provide majority of the family’s needs but they also perform other activities related to the productive role such as budgeting and making big decisions for the family.

When the informants entered marriage and were faced with situations when their husband’s income no longer suffice their needs, they needed to step up. As someone with more stable income than their partner, they pay most of their bills — including but not limited to — rent, electricity, water, internet, food, insurance, children’s tuition, and loans. As their children grew up, their needs were also increasing. They looked for other ways to increase the family income. They took it into their hands to look for job to sustain their increasing needs. Because of the call of the times, they needed to help earn as one source of income would not be enough to support a growing family. This is why some of the informants did not just stop with having one source of income but others also looked for sideline jobs.

This study revealed that whoever earns more has automatically been assigned to handle almost all responsibilities — makes big decisions, strategizes, and finds way to make their circumstances better. While some informants were able to completely handle all their expenses and can afford to make their husband stop work to take care of their children, not everyone has the privilege to do so. In turn, they work extra hours to fulfill both of their reproductive and productive roles.

As breadwinners, they take the responsibility of making sure that every member of the family is afforded with their needs. They keep track of the bills and makes sure that there is money saved for emergencies. When things go out of track, they go out of their comfort to find ways to earn. Some would even work on multiple jobs and expand their skillset for added credentials. Since family is their priority, they oftentimes neglect their personal needs and prioritize their children first. They will only settle or attend to themselves once their family is already settled. As the primary decision-maker in the family, some informants would avoid getting inputs from their husbands because of their play-safe personality and the incapacity to take risks. Some informants would even say that they have a heavier job than their husband as they are the ones strategizing for the family's overall well-being.

While the informants' productive roles have increased, it did not diminish their continuing involvement in reproductive roles. Many of them still carry the double burden and second shift expected of them — proving financially and caring for the family all at the same time. This is what Hochschild (1989) refers to as the “second shift” where it exemplifies how breadwinning mothers carry not only the financial burden but also the emotional labor that comes along with their unpaid caring roles such as taking care of their children, preparing for their food, and maintaining an organized household. The emotional labor is often expected more of women, reflecting societal norms about caregiving. Despite juggling deadlines, schedules, and appointments, breadwinning mothers are expected to attend to their children's needs, care for them when they are sick, and fulfill all the household needs. This shows how reproductive roles go beyond the usual food preparation but extends to the responsibility of attending to the family's overall emotional load. Additionally, earning more meant having to make decisions for the family. This shows how the decision-making power in the family is heavily tied to economic contribution. The more a member financially contributes to the family, the more say they have in making decisions. With this, not only does gender play a role but is also intersecting with economic factors. And since they are also breadwinners, this emotional load intersects with financial labor where women worry about bills, manage their finances, and the first to attend to their family's problems.

Husbands' Increased Reproductive Role as Compensation for their Weak Economic Power

Most of the informants' husbands have been actively working as partners to their wives — filling in roles when their partners are too busy to do it. The reproductive role comprises the child-rearing responsibilities and domestic tasks required to guarantee the maintenance and reproduction of the labor force (Moser, 1993). Some of the informants have expressed that their husbands are now the ones who have been performing such roles. Due to their busy schedules with their respective jobs, they cannot attend to all the needs of their children. With that, their husband takes over doing the laundry, washes the dishes, and cooks food when they are too tired to do so. Their husband would help their children prepare for school and sometimes attend to their emotional needs while they are busy fulfilling their financial needs.

Some informants would say that they have switched roles with their husbands — them doing more of the productive roles while their husband is more on caretaking and household work. When they gave birth, the husbands of some informants became the full-time house-husband who takes care of their children while they are working. Some informants are not that involved with the household chores and in taking care of their children because it is their husband who does more of it. Although they take turns on some tasks, some informants would also say that they can already count on their partners when taking care of their children. One pattern observed is that, when the husband earns lesser, either he contributes more by doing the household chores or does not even try to anything to alleviate their situation. For informant Janet (49), she does not have to monitor everything because her husband does it for her. She said,

“Actually ako, dili man gyud pud ko ingon ng hands on kay ang akong husband ang hands on.”

(Actually, I wouldn't say I'm really hands on because it's my husband who is more involved.)

This role reversal continues to challenge the traditional gendered divisions of labor in the Philippines where women have long carried the heavy load of both paid work and caring roles. A similar pattern can be observed in neighboring Asian societies such as Vietnam. In their study on gendered division of household labor in Vietnam, Teerawichitchainan et al., (2010), showed that while traditional gender-role attitudes persist among young married couples, Vietnamese husbands are now involved in budget management and childcare compared to earlier marriages. However, the increased involvement of the husband, particularly in Northern Vietnam, does not appear to be accompanied by any significant decline in the wife's contribution. In terms of chores, wives reportedly perform a larger percentage of the work despite economic changes and government efforts to redefine gender relations. The structural changes that occurred in Vietnam pushed changes that challenge traditional attitudes toward gender roles. In this study, while some informants were able to rely on their husbands, some struggle to juggle both their reproductive and productive tasks as their husband tend to underperform. Despite the shifts in physical tasks, informants remain to carry the emotional load and the overall coordination of household tasks and childcare responsibilities. Even when their husbands increasingly contribute more to practical tasks, women continue to bear the responsibility of caring roles. This is heavily shaped by the deeply embedded gender and cultural norms that Filipinos hold. At times, there is even a sense of extended family pressure when women are unable to fulfill the societal expectations of maternal duties. In this study and as seen in other studies in Asian context, men's increased reproductive role only happens when the wife earns more — suggesting that household shared work is conditional and only happens when men are unable to financially provide, rather than a progressive shift towards an egalitarian

relationship. This shows that men's increased performance in reproductive roles is their way of compensating what they could not fulfill in terms of productive responsibilities.

Women Negotiating Power to Make Space for Men's Masculinity

Being a breadwinner for these mothers meant looking for all possible ways for their children to live a comfortable life. Such values did not resonate with some of the informants' husbands. Their husbands would rather settle for less as long as the basic needs have already been provided. But for these mothers, they think that the provision of basic needs is not enough to sustain the family as they also want the best for their children. In this way, breadwinning has become a source of stress for some because aside from having to work and provide, they still have to constantly look for ways to fill in what's lacking.

Despite these challenges, some informants continue to adjust how they feel about their situation for the sake of their husbands. Women became wary of their husband's emasculation because they now hold the role of main financial providers. They get worried that their husbands might feel like they are overstepping on their roles as the pillar of the home. To resolve this, they lessen their strong personalities to make space for their husband's masculinity. One informant who holds multiple positions and responsibilities, a decision-maker herself, still relies on her husband as her adviser. Trying to avoid conflict, she would adjust so she does not make her husband feel like she is doing everything. She stated,

"Bisan baliktaad ming duha, dili nako ginapakita sa iyaha nga akua tanan. Sometimes, ang mga burden, sometimes bug-at na ba so nga akua tanan."

(Even if our roles are kind of reversed, I don't make him feel like I'm doing everything because sometimes, it gets heavy doing it all.)

Another informant expressed being supportive and submissive to her husband and believes that she should be a suitable partner for her partner. Despite being the main provider, she still supports the leadership of her husband and believes that a family should only have one head and that should be the father. She respects the decisions of her husband, gives further support, and makes sure she can serve him. She said,

"So mas mo shine siya kung the more nga gaka supportahan siya, gaka acknowledge pud siya sa iyang asawa."

(The husband shines the more he gets supported and gets acknowledged by his wife.)

Men are oftentimes labeled as the "pillar of the home" because they are seen as the primary providers and protectors, reflecting traditional gender role expectations in many societies. However, this reason is not consistent in families where the breadwinner is the mother. Because even though these men are not the main providers of the family, they are still often referred to as the "pillar" by their wives simply because they are the men in the family. This happens because the reproductive roles which is often done by women are seen as unimportant, hence, unpaid (Power, 2020); therefore, not as important as performing productive roles. Since men are associated with being the provider, having nothing to provide may affect men's masculinity and could ripple to their families. In turn, their wives help them create spaces to allow them to continue asserting dominance. This reveals how gender roles are deeply embedded in our culture. This continues to shape how the informants view their roles and even adjusts in order to follow what they think as culturally appropriate. Even when women already shoulder the economic burden, many still feel the need to preserve the image of their husbands. This is among the consequences of the strong influence of hegemonic masculinity, where people constantly create spaces for men to maintain their position. This shows how men's dominance is made possible not only through income but also with women's accommodations. Breadwinning mothers, in a way, amplifies the persistence of hegemonic masculinity, allowing their husbands to create their own spaces of power without having to exert financial dominance. In this manner, women's advantageous economic positions as breadwinners does not automatically dismantle symbolic hierarchies nor create equal power in households.

Extended and Lifelong Breadwinning Shaping Women's Family and Community Roles

The breadwinning role is not new for some of the informants for they have been doing it way before they got married. Growing up in a family with lesser financial support from parents, some of these breadwinning mothers had to take matters into their hands and look for other sources of income in order to support their own needs and even their family's needs. At a younger age, they already learned how to earn on their own. Handling most of the family's expenses is not new to them. Most informants are the eldest daughters of their family who grew up bearing the responsibility of supporting their parents and siblings. Now that they already have their own families, they still continue to extend such help. Some informants were working students during their early years. Because of financial limitations, they needed to help earn to support their studies. The informants who were the eldest in their family felt that it is their responsibility to uplift their family's financial situation. They learned to hustle on their own and supported themselves during their school years. Doing it for their own family this time brings a sense of pride knowing that they now have more to give to them.

Being able to look for ways to provide for their family brings out a sense of agency wherein they are actively taking actions for their family's well-being. This shows how breadwinning is not only economic but there is an emotional meaning attached to the act of provision. In this way, breadwinning is seen as a source of pride and gratitude.

While women's empathetic and kind characteristics are seen as stereotypes, researches often prove these to be true. According to Alvarado (2022), women are more likely than men to report feelings of empathy for those suffering and may be carrying a heavier emotional burden than men. The informants' ability to see other's struggles as their own shaped how they view themselves and act on it over the years. This goes to say how their breadwinning role is not simply rooted out of necessity, but is also driven by long-standing existence of values and empathy. Their early exposure on financial challenges has brought them a strong sense of independence and resilience.

In Filipino culture, children often take on the role of family “breadwinner,” providing financial support and sharing family responsibilities. This is often shaped by parental expectations and influenced by the child’s understanding of the family’s needs (Quindoza et al., 2025). In this case, the economic nature of breadwinning intersects with social and cultural norms where the eldest children in a Filipino family is expected to carry the family’s burden. They carry this expectation for so long that despite having a family of their own, they still have to respond to the needs of their parents and siblings. However, what sets apart from these two different breadwinning roles is the shift in their motivation. Previously, as children, the informants’ breadwinning tendencies are often influenced by their family’s lack of financial resources. Today, as parents, although driven by necessity, breadwinning is mostly expressed as a fulfillment and pride.

While women’s breadwinning roles can be traced back to their younger years, now that they are married, it further outstretches to their parents, extended family members and even their neighbors. According to Gayoba (2023), Filipinos are deeply relational — supporting their parents, including family members outside of their household, despite already having a family of their own. Whenever there are immediate needs asked by siblings, parents, or other relatives, these breadwinning mothers are quick to extend their helping hand. When asked if they also give financial support to other family members, one informant responded,

“Yes, naa gyud ma’am. Dili gyud malikayan. Kaduha man gud ko naminyo. Second husband naman nako ni sya kay na-widow naman ko atong first. So naa gyu’y mga instances nga akong mga sister-in-law nako didto sa pikas, mangayo’g tabang sa akua. Kung naa ko’y akua, dili gyud malikayan nga muhatag pud. Syempre kay imo man pung ma-feel nga kung ikaw sa imong kaugalingon ug sila’y nanginahanglan, unya ikaw to, di ka tagaan, malain pud biya ka nga nakita nga naa man ko’y akua unya dili ka hatagan.”

(Yes, I can’t stay away from it. I already married twice; this is already my second husband because I got widowed from the first. So, there are really instances where my [previous] sister-in-laws, would ask help from me. If I also have [money], I would also extend it to them. Of course, because I know the feeling of not being helped. It’s also not a good feeling knowing that I have resources but I don’t extend it.)

Additionally, informants continue to help their parents, especially those who are the eldest in the family. Even if they have their own family to support, they still continue to give allowances to their younger siblings, oftentimes giving money for their parents’ groceries. If they do not do so, they feel guilty about it; especially if their parents are already senior citizens. Some would also extend help to their own relatives or to the relatives of their husbands. Knowing how it feels to be in need, they willingly extend it to others as long as they have something to offer. Some of them constantly provides financial support to their nieces/nephews for their tuition or extra allowance.

Sometimes, even with tight budget, these women continue to help other people to the point of borrowing money just so they could give. Even if sometimes their immediate family members complain about their generous acts, these women still continue to do so. They do this because they feel guilty when they cannot help even with the small things. This gesture manifests that women’s kindness goes beyond the corners of their home and even spreads throughout the community.

Supporting their parents and siblings financially can be fulfilling but sometimes it would also weigh on them. As the eldest, some informants are already bearing so much responsibility in their work and motherhood roles that having to extend more help to others exhaust them at some point. Aside from the breadwinning duties, some of these women also have responsibilities outside of their reproductive and productive roles. Some of them perform leadership roles in their community, participate in volunteering activities, attends weekly gathering sessions in their churches, and other activities. In the related literature, Moser (1993) referred to this as the Community Managing Role which comprises activities undertaken by women at the community level. It is voluntary unpaid work, undertaken in their free time.

The study shows that the informants remain to hold traditional perspectives on their roles but hold progressive views on their roles as breadwinners — recognizing their capacity to provide and to stand for their family. Their breadwinning role did not come instantaneously, but was shaped by years of stepping up as providers in their respective families as siblings and daughters even before they were married; while some had to step up when their husband’s income did not suffice their family’s needs.

In collectivist cultures commonly observed in Asian countries, adult children are expected to contribute to the household economy, support aging parents, and extend help to other family members. They often assume the responsibility of providing financial, emotional, and instrumental support towards them. Especially where formal welfare and long-term care systems are weak, adult children continue to provide for their aging parents (OECD, 2025). According to Albertini & Mantovani (2021), in the Philippines, older people have historically been dependent on children. *Utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) is a Filipino cultural trait where children are expected to provide care and assistance to their parents in old age (Reyes, 2015, as cited in Albertini & Mantovani, 2021). For the informants of this study, breadwinning does not only mean providing for their nuclear family but extends outside their household. This cultural obligations and extended kin expectations sees breadwinning as not only an economic activity but also a relational one.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the roles of breadwinning mothers — their role perceptions, their progression into becoming breadwinners, the ways they share responsibilities with their husband, and the challenges that come along with it. This research contributes to the literature on breadwinning mothers in various ways. It provides evidence from Mindanao, Philippines, a setting largely absent in existing research that is mainly dominated by Western and urban-centered studies. By grounding in the lived experiences of breadwinning mothers, this study also contributed qualitative results to a quantitatively-dominated research topic.

The study revealed that the breadwinning role of women does not necessarily put her in a more powerful position. Breadwinning does not guarantee dominance in decision-making or to an automatic shift in the traditional roles. Instead, it became an added burden to women, which has left a space for the traditional image of male leadership. The study has also found that gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in the society that even a progressive, economically dominant role held by women could not change their traditional gender roles; even so, it adds an additional burden to some rather than a role replacement. In this sense, breadwinning mothers are actively redefining family roles through their financial contributions and active rejection of traditional and gendered division of labor, negotiating their responsibilities in paid work and caretaking roles, yet they remain constrained by entrenched cultural expectations. This pattern also reflects in other Asia Pacific settings such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia where women assume primary or sole breadwinning while still bearing caregiving responsibilities and expectations (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2010; Thinnam, 2013; Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025). Across these contexts, women's financial contribution often coexist with persistent traditional gender norms, showing that economic empowerment does not automatically put them in a more powerful position. Therefore, while the presence of breadwinning mothers presents progress, it also shows limitations in terms of a more flexible and inclusive arrangements. On the other hand, the increased involvement of men in reproductive roles only happens when the wife earns more, suggesting that their involvement is conditionally driven rather than a sign of equal status. Even with this, women continue to create spaces for their husband's masculinity in fear of overstepping their entrenched traditional role — an underexplored dimension of breadwinning in Asia Pacific contexts.

The government should adopt measures to help women manage their work and caring responsibilities. These measures should be immediate and grounded in research and must ensure that women are well-represented in the response planning. Informants also struggled with traditional expectations shaping their overall workload. Thus, this study highlights that policies should take into account the changes in the family dynamics where breadwinning mothers can reshape their experiences through research-based awareness programs that address societal gender norms. Gender role socialization also emphasizes the influence of church as an agent of socialization influencing gender norms. With this, the Catholic church, for example, may incorporate topics on shared work and changing family dynamics during Pre-Cana seminars for couples who are about to get married. Moreover, because the informants consistently described difficulty managing both paid work and childcare responsibilities, it is recommended that workplaces establish family-friendly spaces or daycare facilities to help address women's struggles at work while having to attend to their children. Additionally, the government can create policies on flexible working conditions such as remote work options, staggered shifts, or compressed work weeks.

Further studies may use various methods especially quantitative with more participants involved. They may also explore more on the psychological and emotional dimension of female breadwinning as related to the socio-political factors. In this way, addressing the gaps in this new family dynamics become more efficient as it can pave way for more inclusive arrangements.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The study observed research ethics consideration to protect the identity of the research informants and provided a transparent process that accurately described their experiences. A permit from the Research Integrity and Compliance Office of Mindanao State University – Iligan Institute Technology (MSU-IIT) was secured with a UERB Code: UERB-2025-00070.

The researchers explained the informed consent using their local language to each of the informant, explaining their rights to remain anonymous or their choice to not answer uncomfortable questions. They were also informed of their right to stop their participation at any time without consequences. To minimize the risks, the researcher explained the nature of sensitive questions and ensured a safe, confidential, and supportive environment to the informants. Sensitive topics were handled with care and the researchers made sure not to cross any bounds of the research process and have always put the informants' welfare as a priority.

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