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Women, Community, and Resistance in Cebu's Development Landscape

Mari Elise Gwyneth Lim 



Local Regional Studies Network

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Key Highlights

Policy Landscape

Cebu's pursuit of becoming a "globally competitive" urban center has accelerated large-scale modernization projects implemented largely through public-private partnerships (PPPs), including market privatization, reclamation projects, and coal-fired power infrastructure. While promoted as symbols of progress and economic growth, these initiatives have also generated contestations over displacement, environmental sustainability, and community welfare.

Main Argument

This paper argues that the lived experiences of grassroots Cebuano women leaders reveal the limitations and contradictions of mainstream development models that prioritize infrastructure, economic growth, and technical efficiency over social relations and lived realities. At the same time, these women cultivate forms of resistance, care-based leadership, and community-centered development that challenge dominant notions of modernization.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research approach using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) among six women-led or women-dominated people's organizations in Cebu conducted during the 2025 Local-Regional Studies Network (LRSN) Cebu Project. Additional data are drawn from interviews conducted during the 2024 LRSN Cebu Project on the implementation of KALAHI-CIDSS and Community-Driven Development (CDD).

Key Findings

Findings suggest that while development programs often frame women's participation as empowerment, women continue to experience gendered burdens, including emotional labor, domestic expectations, and limited influence over actual decision-making. Despite these constraints, women leaders actively negotiate power, organize collectively, and develop forms of leadership grounded in care, reciprocity, and collective well-being.

Policy Recommendations

The paper recommends more context-sensitive and gender-transformative approaches to development planning and evaluation. This includes moving beyond participation-based metrics toward assessing women's actual influence in decision-making, strengthening women's roles as political actors in local governance, and recognizing care work and relational labor within development initiatives through mechanisms such as the Gender and Development (GAD) framework under RA 9710.

I. Introduction

Cebu has emerged as one of the Philippines' fastest-growing urban and economic centers (SunStar 2024), marked by rapid modernization and large-scale development projects. Initiatives such as public market modernization, coastal reclamation, and the establishment of coal-fired power plants are often framed by state and corporate actors as indicators of progress, competitiveness, and economic growth. While these projects promise improved infrastructure and increased investments, they also generate profound social and environmental consequences for communities whose livelihood, community spaces, and futures are directly affected.

This paper will investigate the narratives of women involved in development projects and work for social justice amid dominant ideas of development often implied in many modernization projects. Development interventions frequently prioritize economic efficiency and urban aesthetics over the lived realities of local residents, resulting in displacement, ecological degradation, and heightened vulnerabilities. These impacts are unevenly experienced, with communities facing livelihood insecurities and environmental risks, while simultaneously being called upon to organize and sustain community cohesion.

Against this backdrop, this paper will focus on women community leaders and development workers in Cebu who navigate, negotiate, and contest dominant narratives of "progress." It will examine how women in affected communities experience development not merely as passive recipients, but as active agents who lead grassroots initiatives, articulate alternative visions of development, and engage in everyday forms of resistance. This paper aims to discuss how women in Cebu's affected communities experience, lead, and resist within the context of development, thereby foregrounding gendered perspectives that challenge technocratic and growth-oriented models of development.

II. Literature Review

A. Development and its Discontents

Post-development theory emerged as a critical response to dominant paradigms that frame development as a linear, universal, and technocratic process. Rather than alleviating poverty as it touts, development often only reconfigures social relations, thereby producing new forms of dependency and legitimizing

external intervention in the lives of communities as attested to by the experience in the Global South. At the core of post-development thought is the assertion that development remains a deeply contested concept, particularly in so-called “developing” countries like the Philippines. Wolfgang Sachs (1992,3) contends that development functions as a perception that models reality, instead of being a mere socio-economic endeavor, in that it universalizes Western notions of progress, economic growth, and modernization, while obscuring the plurality of ways in which societies define well-being. Arturo Escobar (1995) further argues that development discourse has actively constructed the “Third World” as a problem to be solved, legitimizing technical expertise, planning institutions, and economic rationalities as the primary means of intervention. Post-development argues that in mainstream development paradigms poverty, underdevelopment, and backwardness are portrayed as technical problems constructed according to dominant discursive resources. This manner of construction not only sidelines the truth of these Third World realities as outcomes of colonialism and global inequality, but also necessitates interventionist technical development initiatives. This critique against intervention is particularly evident in the historical role of institutions such as the World Bank, which have long promoted an economy-centric and technocratic understanding of development. Early development interventions post-World War II emphasized infrastructure, productivity, and market integration, operating under the assumption that economic growth would inevitably translate into social progress, even arguing for the necessity of this miserable experience (United Nations, as quoted in Escobar, 1995) as a precursor to progress. As Escobar (1995) notes, such approaches reduced complex social realities into measurable indicators, rendering communities legible only through numbers, statistics, cost-benefit analyses, and project outputs. James Ferguson’s (1994) concept of the “anti-politics machine” further demonstrates how development projects depoliticize structural inequalities by framing them as mere technical deficiencies, thereby expanding bureaucratic power while leaving underlying relations of domination very much intact.

Although institutions like the World Bank have attempted to recalibrate their development narratives through approaches such as Community-Based Development (CBD) and Community-Driven Development (CDD), post-development scholars remain critical of these shifts. While the participatory language of “community-based” and “community-driven” suggests inclusivity and empowerment, critics argue that such frameworks often retain the core logic of top-down development, often hiding behind the rhetoric

of community empowerment and participation. Participation becomes instrumental rather than transformative, with communities competing to be incorporated into pre-designed projects that still prioritize efficiency, donor accountability, and measurable outcomes. As post-development authors have already cautioned, these reforms may soften the language of development without fundamentally challenging its Western-centric assumptions or its reliance on expert-driven technical solutions.

Ultimately these post-development critiques reveal that despite institutional rebranding and the use of participatory rhetoric, the post-World War II foundations of development, particularly its technical, economic, and top-down approach to development, continue to shape contemporary development practice to this day. This persistence underscores the need to examine how development is experienced, negotiated, and contested at the community level, especially by marginalized sectors such as women, whose everyday engagements expose the contradictions and limits of dominant development paradigms.

B. Critique of CDD

Community-Driven Development programs, particularly those supported by the World Bank such as KALAHI-CIDSS in the Philippine context, are frequently promoted as mechanisms for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment effectively through the process of participation. Central to these claims is the assumption that through increased involvement of women in community planning, implementation, and especially in facilitation leads to meaningful empowerment outcomes. However, a growing body of critical literature (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Parpart 2010; Poncin 2024) challenges this assumption, arguing that participation does not necessarily translate into substantive shifts in gendered power relations.

Independent evaluations, including those conducted by the World Bank's own Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) (2017; Mansuri and Rao 2013), reveal that while CDD projects often achieve high levels of women's participation, evidence of long-term impacts on women's political agency, economic autonomy, or social status remain limited. Gender equality is frequently measured through output indicators. Examples such as attendance in meetings, where women usually take on secretarial roles, or representation in committees, where they represent male counterparts, rather than through outcomes that capture changes in decision-making power, control over

resources, or transformation of gender norms continue to abound in many of the narratives on the ground. As a result, women's empowerment under CDD is often procedural rather than transformative.

Emmanuelle Poncin (2024) elucidated how the process of "elite capture" of CDD processes has been characterized by the World Bank as "occasionally benevolent, with the alleged benefit of remaining local" thereby marketing CDD as the so-called better option with the efforts to improve the programs. In the same study, a coordinator even added how the hope of CDD creating a norm of participation, one of the touted goals of the program in its community-driven work, has been said to be very weak with almost no evidence of its impact in the communities' social order. And this is while CDD is touted to be "a silver bullet to solve a lot of problems" (Interview 4, 2011, as quoted in Poncin, 2024)

Furthermore, Poncin's (2024) interviews reveal that practitioners are very much well aware of the weak empirical data for the effectiveness of community-driven development and yet, this recognition rarely translates into the rejection, let alone seeing the approach in a different perspective in its touted results. Instead, interviewees described a consensus around the scaling and transplanting of CDD principles into other poverty-reduction initiatives as a way to improve performance (Poncin 2024). Criticisms are routinely framed as technical problems to be fixed such as changes in the implementation, the monitoring, or even the design tweaks of the project, rather than as real and existing challenges to the approach's fundamental validity and feasibility.

At the institutional level, Poncin's (2024) interviews emphasized how organizational incentives for the communities and their projects by the World Bank have made CDD an "attractive tool" regardless of how mixed the outcomes are on the ground. The respondents in the study have even pointed to a professional discourse of effectiveness and reform that legitimized continued investment in the approach and has bolstered the institution's image as a pro-poor actor. And yet informants also reported that inconvenient evidence of program failure frequently surfaced in projects. Some of these findings revealed how problematic results are often either downplayed or worse, removed from official narratives in order to protect programs from critique leading tensions and contradictions within the practitioner community itself, revealing the gap between rhetoric and reality.

Scholars further argue that CDD's participatory framework tends to instrumentalize women's labor. Women are commonly positioned as community facilitators, volunteers, and mediators. These roles expand their unpaid work and social responsibilities without necessarily granting them authority over development priorities. Reviews of gender in CDD note that without explicit strategies to address time poverty, household power dynamics, and social norms restricting women's voices, these participatory spaces instead reproduce existing inequalities rather than challenge them. Women's presence in development processes, thus, becomes conditional and constrained by these patriarchal expectations both within the community and especially from within the household.

More critical political economy analyses situate CDD's gender discourse within broader institutional imperatives. Its emphasis on empowerment and inclusion serves not only as a development strategy, but also as a legitimizing narrative for international development institutions (Mansuri and Rao 2013). The portrayal of CDD as "inherently empowering" often obscures the lack of robust empirical evidence demonstrating this sustained gender transformation. In this sense, empowerment rhetoric risks functioning as what feminist and post-development scholars describe as a "depoliticized language" that only highlights participation while sidelining deeper structural inequalities.

Taken together, the literature suggests that CDD's claims to gender equality must be examined critically and contextually. Empowerment cannot be assumed simply because women are present in development processes. Rather, it must be assessed in terms of how far women are able to influence agendas, redefine development priorities, and challenge patriarchal constraints, both within development institutions and in their everyday lives. This critique provides an essential lens for understanding why women leaders in Cebu, whose authority emerges organically from collective struggle and lived experience, often articulate more transformative visions of development than those offered by institutionalized CDD frameworks.

C. Gender in Development

Early attempts to address women's marginalization in development took shape through the Women in Development (WID) approach in the 1970s. The WID approach sought to integrate women into existing development processes by improving access to education, employment, and income-generating opportunities. However, feminist scholars have critically noted that WID

ultimately operated within the same modernization and growth-oriented paradigms it aimed to reform. Rather than challenging patriarchal power relations, WID often reinforced them by treating women as an untapped labor resource for economic development. Escobar (1995) characterizes this as a form of “modern patriarchy,” wherein women’s inclusion was instrumentally framed, subordinating their agency to productivity and efficiency while devaluing their organic contributions to community life and local forms of development.

Gender and Development (GAD) scholarship emerged from sustained critiques of earlier development frameworks that inadequately addressed women’s lived realities. Traditional gender roles—rooted in patriarchal divisions of labor and social expectations—have long shaped both women’s participation in and exclusion from development processes. Women are frequently positioned as caregivers, informal workers, and community managers—roles that are essential to social reproduction, yet systematically undervalued in development planning. As a result, women’s labor is often rendered invisible, while their participation in formal decision-making spaces remains limited or conditional.

In response to these limitations, GAD approaches shifted the analytical focus on women as isolated subjects to the broader gendered power relations that structure social, economic, and political life. Drawing on feminist perspectives, GAD emphasizes that development outcomes cannot be understood without examining how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, and locality. Scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), Caroline Moser (1993), and Aruna Rao (1991) critique universalized representations of “Third World women” as passive victims in need of rescue. Mohanty (1988), in particular, warns against Western feminist frameworks that homogenize women’s experiences and impose externally defined notions of empowerment, thereby reproducing colonial hierarchies of knowledge.

Within GAD, women’s agency is understood as contextual, relational, and embedded in everyday practices rather than solely in formal political participation. Moser’s (1993) work on gender planning underscores the distinction between women’s practical gender needs and strategic gender interests, highlighting how women often navigate development constraints pragmatically while simultaneously contesting deeper structures of inequality. Jane Parpart et. al (2002) further advances this critique by emphasizing power, discourse, and resistance, arguing that development must account for women’s own interpretations of empowerment rather than imposing normative feminist ideals.

These insights resonate with Rao's (1991) critique of development interventions that presume poor and grassroots women require modernization through externally defined models of progress. Rao cautions against the temptation to equate empowerment with the adoption of Western institutional forms, warning that such approaches merely substitute traditional patriarchy with a modernized, development-driven patriarchy—a solution conveniently offered by international development institutions such as the World Bank.

Gender and Development scholarship instead highlights how women in rapidly transforming communities demonstrate resilience and resistance amid development-induced disruptions. As development projects reshape livelihoods, environments, and social relations, women often emerge as social catalysts for change, mobilizing community networks, articulating alternative development visions, and negotiating with state and corporate actors. These forms of leadership frequently operate outside formal governance structures and may not be explicitly framed as “feminist” in the Western sense. Nevertheless, they embody a profound sense of empowerment grounded in lived experience, collective responsibility, and moral authority.

While post-development scholars such as Sachs and Escobar critique development as a Western, technocratic, and depoliticizing discourse, their analyses often under-theorize the gendered relations through which development is lived and reproduced. Feminist GAD scholars bridge this gap by foregrounding power, care, and everyday social relations. Mohanty's critique of colonial feminism parallels Escobar's analysis of development discourse, revealing how women in the Global South are produced as passive subjects of progress. Moser (1993) and Rao (1991) further demonstrate how development planning and participation frameworks confine women to gendered roles, while Behar (1990) and Lind (1992) emphasize women's capacity to negotiate power and construct collective political identities. Together, these perspectives allow for a feminist post-development lens that recognizes women not as targets of development, but as agents redefining development from below.

Ultimately, the contribution of GAD lies in expanding the discourse on development beyond technocratic solutions and local government dictates. By foregrounding women's agency, Gender and Development challenges the assumption that empowerment must conform to Western feminist or institutional models. Instead, it recognizes that women's everyday practices of care, resistance, and community leadership are able to constitute powerful

forms of development in their own right. These forms of development contest both traditional and modernized patriarchal structures while opening possibilities for more inclusive and socially grounded pathways to social change.

III. Main Discussion: Women's Lived Realities in Development Projects

In order to investigate the tension in the lived experiences of women leaders faced with modernization projects and their work in social justice, the study has employed a qualitative approach to gather the narratives of these women and their communities. Six local or people's organizations which were either constituted mostly by women or were led by women were chosen and were conducted with FGDs in order to draw out important narratives of how they navigate, negotiate, or even resist dominant narratives of progress. The study has also drawn from a focus group discussion in the previous 2024 project of Local Regional Studies Network Cebu (Jaducana 2025; UP CIDS 2025).

All participants provided written informed consent forms prior to the focus group discussions. To ensure confidentiality due to the sensitivity of certain information, participants were assigned pseudonyms instead of their real names. All research data utilized in this study, including the signed consent forms and audio recordings were stored in a password-protected digital storage and a locked filing cabinet, with document access only limited to the primary research team.

A. *The Double Burden of being "Bound Twice"*

In a focus group discussion during the 2024 project of the Local Regional Studies Network Cebu, community facilitators cited their experience of what will be referred to as a domestic burden of women:

"Walay sweldo, volunteer ra baya mi. Suwat gyud kag minungtas kung unsay inyong gikuan ana nga meeting namo sir. Pero okay ra sir, kay makakuba ka og dugang knowledge. Pasalamat gyud mi nga naka Kalahi...Kay sauna lage sir, anad gyud kag baligya baligya, hilak hilak. So nahimo gyud ko run sir, karong last kay BDC nako."

["No wages, we're just volunteers here. You have struggle to write out minutes of out meeting. But that's okay, I'll probably gain more knowledge. I'm thankful to KALAH!... Because before, you really had to get used to selling, cry and cry. It is better now, now that I'm a BDC."]

"Nya awayon pa na sa ilahang mga bana kay di na kalaba. Labi na seminar nya manglipstick man na sila mangadto, asa man ka muadto nga pula pula man ang ngabil?"

["And to think, these women would even enter arguments with their husbands because they would no longer be able to do their laundry. Especially during seminars and they would be wearing lipstick, where were these women going when their lips were so red?"]

"From the start dili gyud ko musugot ani nga positiona [as a community volunteer] kay as a daycare worker man ko sir, kay conflict siya ba pero ang akong kasingkasing, pagkuan nako nga para diay sa kalamboan sa barangay, didto ko nakuan nga okay ra diay kay makatabang ko sa barangay. Kay sauna, ang among ma problema pag naay seminar, pagfirst ani, weekly magseminar 5 days, naay 3 days, ma conflcit gyud akong klase unya wa man mi adto oy plete, mao toy amo dako nga suliran pero amo ra giforce kay para lagi sa barangay, mao toy usa nako sa nakakuan... Kay ang ako man gud, naa baya koy mga bata, magtudlo sa ko mao nang muingon ko sauna nga mutudlo sa usa mu proceed sa seminars, nya ang akong Kapitan kay ako man jud ang ikuan, nya kay kani laging di ta ulawon, edi maoy gipili mao nang nakuna pud ko didto kay dili na ka maulaw then magdala ka sa mga taw, dili baya lalim magdala og taw...Ako man gani gikuan ang akong kaugalingon, nga naa pa koy pamilya muana naman lamang akong bana, gasige naman lamang kag seminar seminar nya walay dakong sweldo, muana bag, muingon na lang pud kog, sige lang basta makatabang ta sa barangay."

["From the start, I never wanted this position because I'm a daycare worker. It's a conflict but my heart, when I knew this was for the development of the barangay. It was then that I thought maybe it's alright to help the barangay. Before, the problem was that when

we had weekly seminars, some would go on for five days, others three days, which would then conflict from classes. I wouldn't have any fare, which was a problem in itself but I really forced it because it was for the well-being of the barangay. Because for me, I have children, I also teach, which is why before I would teach first before proceeding to my seminars. But my (barangay) captain would always choose me to attend. I was really shy, but I chose to overcome that because I had to take care of people working with me...I even told myself, I still have a family. My husband would even tell me, 'you just keep on going on seminars when there's no big payout for those things,' and I would just respond with, 'that's alright, as long as it's for the barangay.']

These excerpts are drawn from interviews with community facilitators involved in various KALAHYAN-CIDSS projects across Central Visayas. While many of these women clearly articulate the “empowering” dimensions of CDD, particularly opportunities for participation in decision-making and community engagement, it is equally important to foreground the often-unacknowledged burdens and challenges that accompany their roles. Empowerment, as experienced by these facilitators, is not a simple or unqualified gain; rather, it is mediated by a complex set of responsibilities, pressures, and emotional demands that shape how they navigate their work.

As facilitators, these women must continuously balance multiple roles. On the one hand, they are expected to manage the social terrain of their communities, carefully negotiating relationships, mediating conflicts, attending to emotions, and maintaining social cohesion as they implement project activities. On the other hand, they are tasked with highly technical and administrative responsibilities, including documentation, reporting, coordination with local government units, and compliance with program timelines and standards. These dual demands place facilitators in a precarious position, where relational labor and bureaucratic performance are equally necessary for project success.

The pressure placed on facilitators, most of whom are women, is further intensified by the program's funding structure. The successful completion of each project phase often determines whether additional funding will be released, effectively positioning facilitators as key guarantors of the project's continuity. This creates a heightened sense of responsibility and anxiety, as delays or setbacks are perceived not only as technical failures, but also as personal shortcomings. Several facilitators expressed the belief that the

continuation of CDD programs (often referring specifically to KALAHI-CIDSS rather than the broader development approach itself) helps sustain the existing social arrangements within their communities. Conversely, the withdrawal of such programs is seen as a potential disruption that could lead to a reversion of community dynamics and a loss of the roles and recognition they have come to occupy.

Beyond these professional and communal expectations, facilitators must also contend with the demands of their domestic lives. Many continue to fulfill traditional household roles alongside their development work, leading to significant time constraints and interpersonal tensions within their families. The emotional labor evident in their narratives, marked by accounts of stress, tears, self-doubt, and internal conflict, reveals another layer of burden that remains largely invisible within official program narratives. This emotional work is carried both in public spaces of community engagement and in private spaces of the home. These experiences suggest that these women facilitators are, in many ways, “bound twice:” once by the structural demands of development work and again by enduring gendered expectations within their households and communities. Their participation in these development programs thus reflects not only moments of empowerment but also the reproduction of unequal burdens and disproportionate accountability.

B. Women’s Local Leadership and Collective Action

In contrast to the experiences of community facilitators in the previous section, the experience of grassroots women organizers and leaders differ in terms of the management and albeit, overcoming of this “double burden.”

“Basically, among ginahimo diri is really educating the women on the impact sa kini nga mga projects og environmental degradation. Aside from education, nag strengthen pod sa womens organizations. Mao na nga ang mga womens organizations sa 8 communities kay mao na amo gitabangan, like registration, inputs, education nila, nya mga VAWC cases. Nagsulod pod mi og mga intervention and pwede pod irefer sa ila mga communities. Numero uno maapektaran sad gyud baya ang kababayen-an sa reclamation. Though naa fisherfolk... although nakafocus mi sa womens, naa pod mi wider o broad involvement nga mu involve sa orgs sa fisherfolk. Lain-lain na siya.”

[“Basically, what we’re doing here is really education the women on the impact of projects and environmental degradation. Aside from education, we’re also strengthening the women’s organization. We’ve helped around eight communities through the registration process, inputs, education, and even with Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) cases. We also do interventions and help refer them to other communities.”s]

“Although wala’y ingon nga concrete projects nga economic mi naka-base, although naa mi livelihood skills training, pero unsaon mana siya kung in general walay tingog ang kababayan-an sa iyang barangay. Kung imo buot buna-hunaon, makatabang siya sa hinanali, naa siyay income, pero di siya sustainable. So, mao na, kinahanglan gyud i-empower gyud ang women. Sa amoang babin, specific nga nakaingon mi nga nakatabang pud ta sa kalambuan sa women in terms of their knowledge og ang ilang... kato, nawagtangang paglaum, hopefully nabalik-balik namo. Active kaayo ang womens sa barangay karon, so gina-encourage namo sila sa political education, kung unsa gyud diay good governance, nga dapat naa gyuy participation sa batakan, di kay sige tag reklamo pero kita mismo way gibuhay, nya di pa ta vigilant sa mga panghitabo, so mga womens organizations namo very active gyud sa Minglanilla nga mga LGUs.”

[“Although there aren’t concrete economic projects aside from livelihood skills, what can you do with them if the women do not have a voice in their barangay? These can provide income but they wouldn’t be sustainable. That’s why women should be empowered. On our part, we can say that we’ve really aided in the empowerment of women in terms of their knowledge, even to those who have lost hope. Now, the women of the barangay are incredibly active. We encourage them in their political education, especially in learning what it means to have good governance, and that means the participation of the grassroots.”]

“Katong mga original gyod na mga maguuma na mao gyuy mo tikad maoy pag sugod gyod ani. Kuan, kanang, sa kasinatian kay ang mga maguuma naa man gyod ang ilahang mga meetings, mga pag tuon, naa pod ang mga babae nang tambong pod para kabalo sila unsaon ang katong nasugdan sa ilahang bana. Suporta lang

pod gihapon. Mao to sa pagkawala sa ilahang bana, sila ang mo puli. Kabalo naman sila unsa among policy.”

[“The original farmers (referring to men here) they were really the ones who started all this (organization). And in our experience, women have always been involved in our education and discussions, women are also present so that they know how to contribute to what their husbands have started, like a support, you could say. So, when their husbands are gone, it is the wives, the women will be ones to take over. They already know our policy anyway.”]

Nag base mi sa kabintang. Kabintang sa kanang kinabuhi, sa panginabuhì sa mga maguuma kay aron naa pod mi maikapasabot sa uban nga miyembro nga wala naka sabot nga mag pamilya sad sila. Subay sa mga kinasinatian, masabtan ra man pod ni unsa sa nangulo...Pananglitan ang bana, mag uuma nga grupo, mga asawa, mga kababainhan nga usa ra gihapon ang maguuma. Mao nang pananglitan naay dialogue, pananglitan usa ka maguuma gi harass sa tag-iya sa kuan sa yuta, kuyog ang bana sa suporta sa pakig dialogue, kuyog ang mag tiayon nga miyembro, pananglitan kami, naay giharass didto, kamiy miyembro na mag tiayon, mag kuyog mi.”

[“We base it to our situation. The situation/condition of our lives, our livelihood as farmers, so that we can also have something to explain to our members who do not understand. Based on our experience, we can really just understand where they’re coming from. For example, the husband is part of a farmers’ organization, but so are the wives, and the women of the community. That is why, in the event that a dialogue is needed, such as when a farmer faces harassment from landlords, when the husband goes to help, so does the wife, who is a member herself of the organization. If anyone from the organization, whether man or woman is harassed, all members, even the married ones, go on and help them out together.”]

From the excerpts, grassroots women’s leadership in Cebu’s affected communities emerges not from formal mandates or externally imposed development frameworks, but from organic, community-based practices rooted in everyday survival, care, and collective struggle. Women-led organizations

and informal networks have become crucial sites where leadership is cultivated through lived experience, by organizing around livelihoods, environmental protection, housing security, and access to basic services. These forms of leadership challenge dominant development imaginaries by redefining “development” from below, not as infrastructure delivery or economic indicators, but as collective well-being, dignity, and the ability to shape one’s own community future.

In many of these communities, women have increasingly taken over leadership roles, often filling gaps left by local authorities or development institutions. Their leadership is relational and embedded, built through trust, moral authority, and sustained engagement rather than formal titles. This process reflects what Behar (1990) and Lind (1992) argue in their feminist anthropological work: that so-called “poor women” are not passive recipients of development but actively negotiate power, construct collective identities, and develop critical perspectives of the world through cultural and political struggle. Leadership, in this sense, is not bestowed, instead it is forged through everyday acts of resistance, care, and organizing.

This understanding stands in stark contrast with the narrow and limited framing of women’s empowerment within large-scale development programs such as the World Bank, supported KALAHI-CIDSS and other Community-Driven Development initiatives in the Philippines. While these programs are often celebrated for promoting participation and gender inclusion, empowerment is frequently reduced to women’s involvement in infrastructure-focused projects and procedural roles. Women are encouraged to participate as community facilitators, volunteers, or committee members, yet rarely as agenda-setters or political actors shaping the direction of development itself (World Bank 1999; Cornwall and Brock 2005; Bulloch 2017).

Although the World Bank and national development agencies regularly highlight their contributions to gender equality and women’s empowerment, such claims warrant closer scrutiny. What forms of empowerment are being promoted, and whose definitions of empowerment prevail? In practice, women’s roles in poverty alleviation efforts are often confined to administrative and mediating functions, tasks that extend their unpaid labor while leaving existing gender hierarchies intact. Empirical data from our 2024 project reveal that women leaders and volunteers within the KALAHI-CIDSS program continued to face significant gendered constraints within both their communities and households. Participation in community work frequently led

to domestic tensions, ranging from everyday quarrels to serious disputes over women “neglecting” their prescribed roles as wives and mothers.

These findings expose a central contradiction in institutional narratives of empowerment: women are encouraged to participate in development, yet are expected to do so without disrupting patriarchal expectations within the household and in turn, their own communities. As a result, participation becomes conditional and burdensome, reinforcing what feminist scholars describe as the double or triple workload borne by women. Rather than transforming gender relations, such models risk reproducing a modernized patriarchy under the guise of participatory development.

Unlike CDD frameworks that invite women into predefined roles, women leaders in Cebu often initiate agendas themselves, whether opposing reclamation, organizing livelihood alternatives, or confronting corporate actors. Leadership here is not a function of inclusion but of collective necessity.

By contrast, women leaders in Cebu demonstrate a markedly different trajectory. Rather than remaining at the margins of development discourse, they increasingly position themselves at the forefront of community decision-making and resistance. Their leadership challenges the deeply ingrained assumption that women’s roles in development should remain confined to domestic labor or “naturally nurturing” support functions. The lived experiences of these women reveal leadership capacities forged through environmental struggles, livelihood precarity, and social negotiation, capacities that defy stereotypes of women as secondary or auxiliary actors.

It is precisely through the choice to claim agency, that is to speak, organize, and act collectively, that women in Cebu cultivate an organic, community-based leadership grounded in their material conditions of life. As Behar (1990) and Lind (1992) remind us, women’s power is not abstract or externally granted; it is constructed in homes, farms, offices, and advocacy spaces, where women continuously negotiate authority and meaning while expanding their critical understanding of the world. In this sense, women’s local leadership does not merely complement development, it fundamentally reimagines it.

IV. Conclusion

A. Rethinking Development from Women's Perspectives

Women's everyday experiences in development-affected communities reveal the limitations of mainstream development models that prioritize infrastructure, economic growth, and technical efficiency over social relations and lived realities. For many women, development is not experienced as empowerment but as displacement, environmental degradation, increased care burdens, and heightened tensions. These experiences expose how dominant, top-down approaches to development often fail to account for gendered responsibilities and unequal power relations, rendering women both overburdened and underrepresented in decision-making processes.

At the same time, women's practices offer alternative ways to understand development and governance. Through community organizing, mutual aid networks, and collective decision-making, women redefine development as a process rooted in social reproduction, environmental stewardship, and communal well-being rather than purely pursuing technical and economic indicators. These practices challenge the technocratic logic of mainstream development by foregrounding relational accountability, shared responsibility, and locally grounded forms of governance. In doing so, women articulate development "from below," one that is responsive to community needs and shaped by lived experience rather than external expertise.

B. Power, Care, and Agency

While the confinement of women to gendered roles has been widely critiqued (Mohanty 1988; Moser 1993; Razavi and Miller 1995; Cornwall and Brock 2005), women's leadership in community struggles demonstrates that care is not antithetical to power. On the contrary, women's leadership often draws strength from care ethics, reciprocity, and a sustained commitment to collective welfare. These values which are historically devalued as "feminine" and apolitical now become sources of moral authority and political legitimacy in community contexts. Women lead not despite their engagement in care work, but because care provides the ethical grounding through which leadership gains trust and endurance.

From this perspective, women's resistance must be understood as both political and relational. It is political in the visible and organized forms it takes through community mobilization, leadership in education and training initiatives, participation in dialogues and consultations, engagement with the media, and most importantly, collective action. These actions challenge dominant development agendas and assert women's right to participate in shaping their communities' futures.

Simultaneously, women's resistance is deeply relational. It unfolds through everyday negotiations as women push against the boundaries of domestic confinement, redistribute care responsibilities, and renegotiate authority within households and communities. By stepping beyond the four walls of the home, women not only contest restrictive gender norms, but also expand the meaning of leadership and agency. In this sense, resistance is not limited to moments of confrontation; it is embedded in the ongoing processes through which women transform social relations, cultivate solidarity, and sustain collective life.

Together, these perspectives highlight how women's leadership embodies alternative forms of development and governance, ones that integrate power with care, resistance with responsibility, and agency with relational accountability. The experience of Cebu women leaders illustrates the transformative potential of grassroots women's leadership in redefining development. By actively shaping community priorities and claiming authority over their futures, these women are able to demonstrate how empowerment is not simply about participation in pre-designed projects that only draw results from technical and infrastructural results, but most importantly it is about exercising agency to enact sustainable and socially just change. Their brand of leadership highlights the importance of recognizing women as architects of development, whose decisions and practices integrate care, collective well-being, and in turn environmental stewardship. This case underscores the need to reimagine development policies so that they move beyond the top-down, technocratic models, and instead center on community-led initiatives that foreground equity and social justice. In doing so, these women leaders of Cebu provide a concrete example of how feminist and post-development perspectives can inform more responsive, locally grounded, and transformative approaches to development.

V. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen women's agency, leadership, and transformative participation in community development initiatives:

- Adoption of better gender indicators (or gender-transformative indications) in development programs

Development initiatives such as KALAHI-CIDSS may benefit from adopting more reflexive approaches to evaluate gender outcomes through gender-transformative indicators that move beyond simply measuring participation. While current monitoring frameworks often focus on quantifiable outputs such as the number of women attending meetings, these measures do not necessarily capture women's actual influence in decision-making processes. More meaningful assessments could consider whether proposals initiated by women are incorporated into barangay or municipal development plans, whether women are able to introduce or shape agenda items in planning discussions, and whether participation in community governance corresponds with greater autonomy within the household. At the same time, this paper does not propose universal gender indicators. Gender relations and leadership dynamics vary across communities, and rigid metrics risk reproducing the technocratic tendencies often critiqued in development practice. Instead, indicators should remain context-sensitive and responsive to the forms of empowerment emerging within local settings.

- Strengthening Women's Role as Political Actors

Strengthening women's role as political actors in development also requires moving beyond tokenistic participation by creating avenues for women to influence project priorities and community resource allocation. This may involve integrating grassroots women's proposals into municipal planning, ensuring representation for women's organizations, particularly those from informal sectors, within planning bodies such as the Municipal Development Council, and recognizing community volunteers and facilitators as legitimate development partners. Participatory practices such as rotating facilitation roles in planning meetings may also help broaden opportunities for women to exercise leadership. Such mechanisms support forms of organic leadership that emerge from lived experiences rather than externally imposed roles (Behar 1990; Lind 1992; Rao 1991).

- The Recognition of Care Ethics in Development Work

Finally, recognizing the role of care ethics in development work is essential in understanding women's leadership within communities. Women's engagement in community organizing often draws upon values of care, reciprocity, and collective well-being, yet the emotional and relational labor involved frequently remains invisible in development frameworks. One practical entry point lies in the strategic use of the mandated five percent Gender and Development budget under the Magna Carta of Women (Republic Act No. 9710). Local governments may use these resources to address barriers to women's participation, such as providing childcare during meetings, offering transportation support for community volunteers, or recognizing the unpaid mediation and organizing work carried out by women leaders. In doing so, empowerment is reframed not merely as technical participation but as the cultivation of community-centered development grounded in relational accountability and collective welfare (Mohanty 1988; Parpart et al. 2002).

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