

The families of fallen soldiers in South Cotabato: Stories of loss and support

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ABSTRACT

Armed conflict and insurgency in Mindanao, especially in the southern part of the region, have resulted in the deaths of many soldiers serving in the Armed Forces units. Widowed wives carry the dual responsibility of coping with grief while raising their children, often without sufficient economic or emotional support. This study explores the lived experiences of families of fallen soldiers in South Cotabato, with particular focus on their narratives on emotional and economic challenges, as well as the government support systems that sustain them. The research design of this study is a narrative research design; the study employed in-depth interviews with wives of fallen soldiers with dependent children through thematic analysis. The researcher used snowball sampling to identify all research participants. This study used an interview guide questionnaire to gather data from the wives of fallen soldiers residing within the municipalities of the Province of South Cotabato. Findings revealed that while government-provided pensions, housing programs, and educational support offered some relief, families often faced unmet emotional needs. Despite existing policies and programs aimed at assisting bereaved military families, there remains a limited understanding of how these families navigate loss, maintain resilience, and continue their daily lives in the aftermath of loss. Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of remembrance and memorialization activities in honoring the sacrifices of their loved ones, which provided both solace and motivation to be resilient. These findings underscore the need for holistic support programs that integrate financial assistance, mental health services, educational opportunities, and community-based networks. In conclusion, this research contributes to the limited local scholarship on the context of fallen soldiers in the Philippines by providing an understanding of the lived experiences of families of fallen soldiers. It calls for policy improvements, targeted interventions, and strengthened community support mechanisms to ensure the wellbeing and resilience of bereaved families. The study not only informs military and government agencies but also advocates for a more empathetic societal response to the families who bear the enduring impact of service and sacrifice for the nation.

Keywords: Fallen soldiers, bereaved military families, grief and resilience, government support systems, South Cotabato.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mindanao region is often flagged as an unsafe region among the three major regions in the Philippines. Armed conflict, structural violence, and insurgency, especially in the southernmost part of the country, led to the loss of military personnel, leaving families behind that has to face the problem of loss and bereavement, insecure future, economic and emotional uncertainties made more difficult when small children are involved. This largely unexplored topic is important not only to families left behind but also to policymakers grappling with the need to know whether the benefits given to the widows and orphans are enough to compensate the pain and loss experienced by the bereaved families of men who served the country while mostly still in the prime of youth and what can be done to assuage the conscience of the nation. The narratives of bereaved families expose one area of inquiry that is mostly spoken only in silent condolences and solicitations but also deep inside is the feeling that after the burial and public acknowledgement of the heroism of the man in uniform who passed away, the widow and his orphans will have to face an uncertain future. This paper sought to highlight not only the pain and loss of families left behind but also the one attitude Filipinos are well-known of through centuries of colonialism, war, and history of armed conflict caused by insurgency. This word most often read in social media when talking about Filipinos - resilience.

The families of fallen soldiers, especially the wives, served as an important source of information for this study. Their narratives of loss do not only focus on how they managed grief, but also on their experiences with the economic aspect of their everyday living, along with the emotional challenges they encounter. The data on the families of fallen soldiers shed light on how military families sustain life in the face of these kinds of challenges. This study will likewise clarify the sacrifices of brave men serving the nation and the human cost of war on the families left at home waiting for their loved ones' return, particularly women who must endure longing while meeting the needs of their dependent children.

The human cost of war leaves not just the situation of the country but also the well-being of the families left behind. Men in uniform who are killed in action in line with duty are regarded as fallen soldiers. These fallen soldiers sacrificed their lives for the nation; they gave their lives out of love for duty, nation, and the future of their loved ones.

In Mindanao, with its peacekeeping missions initiated by the government to identify insurgent groups, communities had witnessed families left behind due to the human cost of war. The loss of military personnel is often regarded as a symbol of national heroism and personal pain. For the families of fallen soldiers who are left behind, grief becomes a daily companion, yet so does resilience. Hence, in a world where death is considered constant along with change, families of fallen soldiers often find themselves caught between pride and pain, navigating a path shaped by cultural expectations, religious beliefs, and institutional support.

Through historical records, in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis, this study examines the narratives of the families of fallen soldiers in the Province of South Cotabato, looking into how they navigate loss, the human cost of conflict, and the prominence of honor and sacrifice. Fallen soldiers in South Cotabato become more than symbols of patriotism; they represent solutions that will serve as an eye-opener to people, helping them understand the dynamism of ideological perspectives and never forget their heroic deeds. Through a narrative lens, the research aims to feature the intricacies of loss and the enduring repercussions of military nature on civilian life.

Statement of the problem

This study features the lived experiences of the families of fallen soldiers in South Cotabato, sought to understand how they maneuver the emotional domain of loss, comprehensive support, and how they memorialize their loved ones, as well as, how the government and the community provide support for them. This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How do families of fallen soldiers narrate their experiences of loss and remembrance in relation to economic and emotional aspects?
2. What sort of cultural practices surrounds the memorialization in military families?
3. How do families of fallen soldiers describe the support they receive from the government, specifically in terms of economic assistance and emotional support?
4. In what additional ways can government and communities recognize and compensate the families of fallen soldiers?

METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the philosophical worldview, research design, research locale, study participants, research instrument, data-gathering technique, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the trustworthiness of the study.

The study was guided by a constructivist philosophical worldview, which posits that individuals construct meaning from their experiences through interaction with their social world. This aligns with the study's aim to explore and understand the lived experiences of families of fallen soldiers by capturing their personal narratives, emotions, and meaning-making processes. Rather than seeking one objective truth, the research embraces the multiple realities these families construct in the wake of loss. The families of fallen soldiers, with their lived experiences of losing their loved ones as members of the military and how they coped with the loss while showing resilience and receiving assistance from the government, their family, and friends, serve as the central focus of this inquiry.

The researcher adopted a qualitative research design for this study. Data sources included observation and participation with the people being studied, in-depth interviews, documents and texts relevant to the study, and the researcher's accurate impressions and reactions. Specifically, this study adopted a narrative research design. Narrative research design in qualitative research involves synthesizing data from individuals' experiences and stories. Researchers carefully analyze stories from individuals to understand how they make meaning of their experiences. The story emerges through interactions and dialogues between the researcher and the participant, which is a collaborative feature. Narrative stories highlight individual experiences and accentuate unique identities (Creswell, 2014). Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this research aims to uncover the purpose of participants' testimonies about what it is like to lose a loved one for the security of the nation, as seen through their own lenses and experiences. Interviews were designed to reveal the shared structures and meanings of these lived experiences.

The study was conducted in the Province of South Cotabato, located in the SOCCSKSARGEN region of the Philippines. The province has a rich history shaped by its indigenous peoples, settlers, and the agricultural industry. South Cotabato is an embodiment of success and a place for developing dreams, as reflected in the tagline of its celebrated festival: turn dreams into reality. Over many years, South Cotabato became an independent province in the Philippines and has attained phenomenal progress. However, South Cotabato has a long list

of pioneering immigrants who faced the challenges of nature and the vagaries of politics. Before the turn of the 20th century, the area that would later become South Cotabato was inhabited by diverse groups including Muslims, Blaans, Manobo, and Tbolis, and these diverse groups and differing cultures have together adapted to this diversity today.

The Province of South Cotabato, as part of SOCCSKSARGEN, serves as a gateway to the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area. In this context, the families of fallen soldiers in South Cotabato carry a unique burden, encompassing the emotional trauma of loss, the social challenges of rebuilding life, the moral weight of their loved ones' sacrifice, and the government policies designed to help the families stand alone and to lessen these consequences in order to maintain peace and order in society. The province has a land area of 3,935.95 square kilometers (1,519.68 square miles). Along with it, General Santos City, the tuna capital of the Philippines and home of the champions, was included in SOCCSKSARGEN, expanding the province's total land area to 4,428.81 square kilometers (1,709.97 square miles). The Province of South Cotabato is located in the southernmost part of the Mindanao Region, bordered by the provinces of Sarangani, Sultan Kudarat, and Davao Del Sur.

The study participants were the families of fallen soldiers located in the Province of South Cotabato who have lived experiences with a military member who lost their life in battle during active duty. This group includes wives with dependent children of the fallen soldier, taking into account the criteria of inclusion and exclusion. Their experiences and perspectives provide valuable insights into the roles of soldiers and families, including social initiatives, during this time. The selection of participants focused on ensuring diversity in background and roles to present a comprehensive understanding of fallen soldiers' contributions within the socio-cultural and historical context of the Province of South Cotabato.

The researcher used quota and purposive snowball sampling to identify and select participants. Ten participants were interviewed for this study, a number considered sufficient to answer the qualitative questions. For purposive snowball sampling, the researcher sought participants in the community with assistance from the South Cotabato Local Government Units, government officials, and the Military Veterans Group. The participants were purposively selected based on the depth of their knowledge and experience. They were spouses with dependent children of fallen soldiers and came from different families.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully established to ensure the selection of participants who are directly relevant to the study. With respect to inclusion, participants were required to be legal wives of fallen soldiers, and wives must have had dependent children with the fallen soldier, whether biological or legally recognized, at the time of the soldier's death. The soldier must have died in the line of duty while on active military duty and must have actively served in the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Participants must live within the municipalities of the Province of South Cotabato or be accessible for virtual interviews, and the soldier's death must have occurred within the ten-year time frame from the start of the study. Conversely, the exclusion criteria disqualified wives who remarried, separated, or divorced after the soldier's death, and wives who do not have any dependent children of the fallen soldier. Deaths due to non-service-related causes such as illness or accidents off-duty were excluded, as were cases involving soldiers who were reservists or members of any other non-combatant organization under the AFP. Participants residing outside the Province of South Cotabato were likewise excluded, along with cases in which more than ten years have passed since the fallen soldier's death.

The primary research instrument used in this study was an interview guide questionnaire. This tool was carefully designed to elicit rich, meaningful responses from participants about their lived experiences, particularly their experiences of loss across economic and emotional dimensions, memorialization practices, and government support

systems. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the instrument, a validation process was undertaken, including peer review by colleagues and experts in qualitative research who examined the interview guide and offered feedback on the clarity, relevance, and sensitivity of the questions. This helped refine the instrument to avoid bias and ensure alignment with the study's objectives. With ethics committee approval, the instrument was submitted to the institutional ethics committee, which reviewed it for ethical soundness, respect for participants' dignity, and protection of their rights. The ethics committee approval confirmed that the questions were appropriate and that the study adhered to ethical standards of research involving human participants.

Before conducting this study, the researcher requested the participants' approval to conduct the interview via formal written communication. Upon approval of the request, the researcher sent another letter to the study's target participants, inviting them to participate in a 30-minute to 1-hour interview. The researcher used snowball sampling to identify all ten research participants. Snowball sampling is a chain method in which the initial research participant refers to another prospective participant with the same characteristics of interest (Johnson, 2014). The researcher informed and assured the research participants that all responses would be collected, treated with the utmost confidentiality, and used solely for educational purposes.

Securing participants for this study presented significant challenges due to the rarity and classified nature of the target population. The study focused on the families of fallen soldiers in South Cotabato, specifically wives with dependent children of personnel killed in action (KIA) within the past ten years. The inclusion criteria were particularly demanding, as KIA incidents do not occur frequently and many of the fallen personnel were unmarried at the time of their death. Consequently, identifying eligible participants required careful coordination, sensitivity, and persistence, given both the limited number of qualifying families and the need to respect their privacy and circumstances.

The researcher utilized and analyzed previous data relevant to the subject concerns. Narrative research data from this study were carefully analyzed through the generated codes. The researcher examined patterns, relationships, and comparisons from the in-depth interviews to link the participants' individual stories. The researcher applied manual coding techniques to the interview transcripts through a process that unfolded in three systematic steps. In the first step, examining the transcriptions, the researcher carefully reviewed each transcript line by line, identifying meaningful words, phrases, and expressions, which were then assigned as initial codes to capture the essence of participants' responses. In the second step, merging codes, similar or related codes were clustered together, reducing redundancy and forming broader categories, ensuring that recurring ideas across participants were consolidated into coherent patterns. In the third step, creating unified themes, the categories were synthesized into overarching themes that represented the central meanings of the data. These unified themes reflected the participants' lived realities, including their experiences of loss, economic and emotional challenges, memorialization practices, and the government support system. By following this step-by-step manual coding process, the researcher ensured that the themes were firmly grounded in the participants' own voices, providing a rigorous and faithful representation of their narratives and highlighting both emotional and socio-economic dimensions of their lives.

Ethical considerations in this study included protecting participants' rights, obtaining permission to use content, and undergoing institutional review. The researcher asked for permission to access the research site and obtained approval to conduct the study. Upon approval, the researcher distributed a consent letter to the participants to obtain their consent

to participate. The researcher set a schedule that accounted for the participants' availability once they accepted the invitation. Furthermore, the researcher informed the participants that the in-depth interview for the study was recorded on audio tape and transcribed by the researcher onto paper.

To uphold academic integrity, the study was submitted to Turnitin's plagiarism detection software, which confirmed that the content is original. The study obtained a similarity score of 4%, which is well within the institution's 5% threshold, qualifying the paper as original and acceptable under the academic integrity guidelines. The low percentage reflects proper citation and independent writing, ensuring that the work meets the required standards. This declaration reflects transparency, ethical responsibility, and adherence to scholarly standards.

In establishing the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher used the procedures Merriam (2009) advised when conducting a study. The researcher employed techniques such as member checking, audit trails, thick descriptions, and careful assessment of cases with discrepancies. The credibility of the study is important to evaluate the validity of the data. To maintain the study's details, such as the data-gathering procedures, the researcher applied dependability to the study's methodology, including thematic coding and analysis. Consistency was also applied in the study to compare findings from different sources and to identify inconsistencies in the data. Lastly, the researcher disclosed her own interest in the study to ensure the neutrality of the results and to analyze and interpret the data thoroughly. To ensure the credibility of the study, the researcher cited primary sources, including participants' testimonies and academic studies, to support the conclusions drawn from the gathered data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis organized into five sections corresponding to the research questions guiding the study. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, with participants selected through purposive sampling. The participants are primarily middle-aged women who have remained unmarried since the loss of their spouses during active military service, with family structures varying between one and three children ranging from kindergarten to high school level. The majority of participants are unemployed, with only three holding jobs, reflecting economic vulnerability alongside their caregiving responsibilities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted with participants coded as P1 through P8, and the gathered data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings across the narratives. The discussion that follows is grounded entirely in the data gathered from participants and is interpreted in direct relation to the research questions of the study, which focus on narratives of loss and remembrance in relation to economic and emotional aspects, cultural practices surrounding memorialization in military families, government support received in terms of economic assistance and emotional support, and additional ways through which government and communities can recognize and compensate the families of fallen soldiers.

Narratives of loss and remembrance in relation to economic and emotional aspects

The human cost of war greatly affects the different aspects of the lives of the families left behind, specifically those with dependent children. Families of fallen soldiers described the overpowering emotions of sadness, shock, and grief experienced upon learning of the loss of military personnel who were selfless in contributing their lives to securing and protecting the nation. For some, the situation was intensified by the unexpectedness of events and the obligation to explain the loss to their dependent children. The thematic analysis of participants' narratives revealed three recurring themes under this category: overpowering grief but staying

strong mentality dominates, economic resilience amid financial strain, and emotional resilience and family bonds amid loss.

Overpowering grief but staying strong mentality dominates. The first perceivable narrative claimed by the families of fallen soldiers is that of grief accompanied by a deeply internalized need to stay strong. Staying strong in this context does not mean suppressing sorrow; it means finding ways to honor sacrifice while continuing to live with courage. Participants narrated how they were informed of the incident causing the death of their husbands, and their accounts reveal that the military family set-up is far different from civilian ones. The nature of the job brings worry to the families left at home when the husband is stationed miles away for the call of duty. Participant 1 explained that life revolved around the husband's departure for work and his coming home since this is the nature of the job as a soldier, and that this was understood because it was a sacrifice for the country. This statement indicates that the tagline of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, "Honor, Patriotism, Duty," embedded in military training appears strong in the consciousness of the wives left at home, perhaps as part of psychological preparation made by husbands every time they left home to report to duty. The understanding that protecting the state is part of their job, and the discipline to expect any eventuality, gave the wives full understanding of the sacrifice made by the husband.

However, the situation was markedly different for dependent children of military personnel. They tend to experience increased risk in the emotional aspect of their lives, especially when the cause of death is due to military service such as being killed in action in an encounter or military operations (Kaplow et al., 2013). Participant 1 shared that children were aware of their father's job as a soldier and knew that it was not safe, and that they also experienced trauma and found it hard to accept what happened, confirming that bereaved military children are particularly vulnerable even when they possess awareness of the risks their fathers faced. The narratives of loss brought an understanding that families were left feeling uncertain about the future, and despite the emotional pain, many of the wives emphasized the importance of staying strong for their children's sake.

The most common account of how participants received the sad news was a call from a Military Officer. Military families were described as happy families despite the nature of the profession, sustained through consistent calls and messages that helped the family feel loved not just for the country but also for their husbands. Wives who were informed by phone were in denial about the incident, arguing that they were still in contact with the other party minutes before it occurred, suggesting that in a snap of time, things can happen. Participant 2 described the overwhelming shock and devastation upon receiving the news, sharing that it felt like the sky had collapsed, that the phone was thrown, screaming was uncontrollable, people around came running out, and her head was hit against the cement from rolling around, because she never expected that this would happen to her husband, and the feeling was unbearable, overwhelming, and shocking. These narratives highlight how unbearable and overwhelming grief can be for families of fallen soldiers, and how trauma often accompanies the process of acceptance. Participant 3 shared that though the nature of a soldier's job was known, when he was at work, the worry never disappeared because the job was dangerous, yet the family was truly very happy before the husband died in an encounter in Patikul, Sulu in 2020.

The deployment of military personnel and its consequences are consistent with what has been emphasized in the related literature. Being assigned to hazardous locations and staying far from home was a constant reality in their lives. When patriotic and civic duty are strongly emphasized, families of military personnel may feel pressure to accept personal sacrifices as a national obligation, even at high personal cost, and this military duty is linked to the requirement to carry out assigned tasks without inquiry under any circumstances, including

when doing so puts one's life at risk (Skripkina et al., 2021). Soldiers were able to update in real time regardless of their distance from the deployment site, and the deployment's consequences affected not only spouses and children but also parents, siblings, and close friends, all of whom deal with emotional challenges. However, because it disrupts relationships and daily routines, the soldiers' absence has a very distinct and tangible impact on their partners and children (Heiselberg, 2017). The suddenness of events and the sacrifice made in service to the nation become the foundation for ongoing remembrance among families left behind.

Emotional resilience and family bonds amid loss. Resilience refers to the ability to remain steady and bounce back after a fall, be it personal or collective. For families of fallen soldiers, resilience is not merely about moving forward regardless of the downfall; it is about perspectives and actions while finding ways to grow, heal, and reestablish meaning in life (NASEM, 2019). Despite the risks and long separations, military families were built with resilience and tightly knit family bonds, with moments spent together, no matter how brief, filled with love, laughter, and a deep sense of connection reinforced by sacrifice, understanding, and unswerving support for one another.

Participant 5 expressed that moving on is not a choice but a necessity, since destiny is beyond anyone's control, sharing that life must continue because the reality is that fate cannot be held, and that moving forward is necessary because there are still little kids depending on her. Before the loss, families still experienced a strong feeling of happiness despite the distance caused by military deployment. Participant 8 shared that before the husband died, they were a happy family, and that though he was far away and seldom went home, he tried to spend time and bond even once, and the children would be very happy, making this a source of strength. The most painful realities of loss included leaving behind very young children with little to no understanding of what had happened. Participant 5 shared that she and her husband were married for only 2 years and 7 months, and during the time of his loss, their children were 7 months and 4 months old, and that she always showed them the picture of their father because they really did not have memories together, and that through this she tended to feel strong for her children. Families hauled the heavy responsibility of explaining an unthinkable loss in ways children could gradually come to understand, while holding on to the cherished bonds that once made their family complete.

Participant 4 expressed that it is very hard to lose a loved one, especially when the reason is sacrifice for the nation, describing it as very heavy at the same time carrying it with pride because he sacrificed for the nation. This sense of honor and pride frames the loved one's death as a sacrifice for the country, which gives meaning and value to the loss and helps families carry a feeling of dignity and admiration despite grief. Participant 8 shared that it took about a year to realize the need to rise up for the children, noting that even without being totally healed, the children were still depending on her, which became the compelling reason to continue. Participant 2 shared that she kept going back to the hospital for almost a year because of anxiety and panic attacks, and could no longer take care of her children or even herself, but realized that the situation should not be prolonged because the children were already pitiful having lost their father and could not afford to lose their mother too. Participant 5 shared that she kept shopping online to forget and to stay busy so she would not remember, and that while it was not completely effective, it was helpful because without trying to move on, what would happen to the children who were still so young. Families of fallen soldiers indicate acceptance of circumstances as an important component in psychological adjustment, and they carry their cherished family bonds as a motivation to move forward because life requires everyone to continue.

Economic resilience amid financial strain. Financial struggles faced by the families of fallen soldiers after the loss of their husbands create uncertainty and fear about providing for their dependent children, especially since many had no job at the time and relied solely on their

husbands as the family's breadwinner. Participant 6 shared that before, she worked as a nurse and they did not experience any financial hardships because both were working, but when he asked her to stop working after having children, he supported everything, took good care of her, and when he was gone, she struggled a little, which is why she needed to work for their child. Participant 3 shared that she did not know how to give everything her children needed because when her husband passed away, she was not employed and was only a housewife, and really did not know if she could provide what was needed since the only one working in their family had been her husband. The Review of Related Literature runs parallel to these participants' narratives, as families who are left behind tend to experience economic difficulties that add to their grief (McGill et al., 2024).

Participant 7 shared that although there is a monthly pension providing a little security, the heaviness of everyday struggle was deeply felt, especially when hospitalized with no one to rely on for expenses and medication, and that the memories and sacrifice of the husband as a soldier give strength not to give up regardless of how hard the situation is. Participant 4 expressed that it is hard, very hard, and that the monthly pension received by her and her child helps them manage their everyday needs as a family. Participant 8 added that what is received as of the moment is only a monthly pension, that the child is still studying though there is government support for education, and that she works full time as a mother hoping the pension will be increased because the prices of commodities are rising. The resilience of the families left behind shows how personal loss can create ongoing challenges, but also how love and remembrance can become powerful sources of strength in facing adversity.

Cultural practices surrounding memorialization in military families

Military families in the Philippines develop distinct cultural practices to honor and memorialize their loved ones who have served and sacrificed for the nation. Cultural practices surrounding memorialization help military families navigate grief while upholding traditions of remembrance, contributing to emotional wellbeing and the continuation of legacy across generations. The thematic analysis of participants' narratives revealed three major themes: faith and ritual as anchors of remembrance, digital practices of remembrance, and public honor in memorialization.

Faith and ritual as anchors of remembrance. Military families often reside in close-knit communities alongside other military families, where they feel safe, honored, and supported (Fisher et al., 2023). Part of the tradition for overcoming adversity in a traditional culture such as the Philippines is to have strong faith, including praying and other rituals, which guide and help families left behind deal with the heavy burden they experienced. Participant 7 shared that the family tends to remember the fallen through praying, hoping that he will guide them. This ritual reflects both grief and resilience: grief in the longing for presence, and resilience in the belief that love and sacrifice continue beyond death. Through prayer, families of fallen soldiers honor the memory, sustain hope, and find comfort in the idea that their loved one still watches over them. Participant 8 shared that the mother of her husband, being a devoted Catholic, would ask to bless the grave in the cemetery, that they ask for protection, and that sometimes they feel his presence, honestly. For Filipino military families, praying is as important as remembering a loved one, and literature on the families of fallen soldiers in the Philippines confirms that they honor their loved ones through spiritual practices and tend to seek guidance through prayer as part of Filipino traditions (APA, 2021).

In Islam, families of fallen soldiers ask guidance from Allah, and Participant 4 shared that they pray to Allah and know that the fallen is in a good place right now. As Muslims, they

observe ceremonies such as 3-, 7-, 20-, and 100-day observances, which are rooted in Islamic tradition and represent the community's support for the families of fallen soldiers. Islamic religious practices and beliefs shape the grieving process by fostering acceptance, providing comfort, and reinforcing the idea that the deceased remains in a state of peace and divine care. These spiritual and ritual practices serve multiple purposes across different faith traditions: they honor the memory of the fallen, ease the emotional burden, and reinforce that the fallen loved one continues to watch over and guide the family.

Digital practices of remembrance. Modernization has led to the widespread use of technology, including the incorporation of social media platforms into people's lives, and bereaved family members, especially surviving spouses, use social media to remember and honor the sacrifice made by their loved ones through posting pictures with captions that honor the fallen. A review of related studies reveals that there is no existing literature in the Philippines that specifically addresses the remembrance of fallen soldiers through digital means, and while policies and programs focus on pensions, welfare assistance, and material support, there is a clear absence of scholarly work exploring how widows and children remember their loved ones through visual memory-keeping such as displaying photographs, keeping portraits, or using digital platforms to preserve their legacy.

Since children were left behind at an early age and have no memories of their fathers who fell in the call of duty, the surviving parent actively creates ways to keep the father present in their lives. Participant 5 shared that she always shows her children the picture of their father because they really do not have memories of him, reflecting how visual rituals such as photographs become important in everyday life because they help children recognize people they do not remember. Participant 6 shared that there are times that the family posts about the fallen on Facebook so that it will be a memory someday and serve as a reminder of what he sacrificed. In today's generation, social media platforms serve as ongoing memorial spaces, enabling families to actively construct, revisit, and share memories, especially when physical presence is no longer possible. These posts become a digital ritual and reminders for the family and community of the love, service, and ultimate sacrifice given, blending tradition with contemporary practice and ensuring that the memory of the soldier continues to guide and inspire. Participant 8 shared that since the children were still very young, they have many pictures together with their father, and that videos were also preserved so the children can see and hear their father's voice, ensuring that the sacrifice and life of the soldier remain vivid and offering comfort and strength to both family members and the community.

Public honor in memorialization. The community shows its support by honoring a fallen soldier with high respect for the families left behind. Public commemoration for fallen soldiers refers to how the community appreciates and understands the nature of the sacrifice made by military personnel in service to the nation, and public memory created by the community serves as an instrument of awareness, honoring the selfless actions of men in uniform. In this aspect, public recognition for fallen soldiers acts as a way of not forgetting the story behind the death of a soldier (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Participant 6 shared that sometimes someone would see them in the cemetery and ask about the fallen, and that the respect of people is deeply felt, especially because it is about a fallen soldier's death, with people showing high respect. Such acts of recognition provide strength to children and families, helping them move forward while continuing to honor the memory of the fallen.

Participant 7 shared that there is a big help when unity from the community and relatives is involved in honoring the sacrifice of the husband, that prayers, visitations, and a simple show of respect and valuing of his sacrifice give healing, and that it is a reminder that the life and sacrifice of the husband is not forgotten, giving strength to the children to move forward while remembering him. Filipinos honor their loved ones through traditional ways beyond spiritual practices and rituals, and the community, being hospitable, conducts programs

to commemorate the sacrifice of fallen men in uniform (Nepomuceno, 2023). Participant 6 shared that during events like *Araw ng Mga Bayani*, they place a flag along with relatives on the grave to remind them of his heroism. Such rituals of remembrance are parallel to broader cultural activities in which families and communities honor fallen heroes on occasions such as National Heroes Day, Day of Valor, and Independence Day. When a nation loses a citizen whose life embodies service and sacrifice for national defense, the act of public recognition and respect becomes more than a ceremony; it is a collective expression of gratitude, mourning, and unity that honors the contributions and legacy of the departed, ensuring that their deeds are remembered not only by those closest to them but by the entire community they served.

Government support in terms of economic assistance and emotional support

In shaping the emotional wellbeing of its constituents, the government plays an important role. Government institutions provide assistance programs to families of fallen soldiers to help them regain stability, grounded in the basis of Executive Order No. 110 signed by former President Rodrigo Duterte on April 07, 2020, which serves as a cornerstone policy providing financial assistance and other benefits to the families of police, military personnel, and tri-bureaus who are killed or permanently incapacitated while performing their duties (CSBP - DILG, 2020). The thematic analysis of participants' narratives revealed three major themes under this category: comprehensive government support, sustained but insufficient financial support, and unmet emotional and psychosocial needs.

Comprehensive government support. Families of fallen soldiers narrated programs they received from the government along with their effectiveness for the family. This finding aligns with existing literature indicating that support from the government under the Department of Interior and Local Government, such as the Comprehensive Social Benefit Program (CSBP), was established to assist families of fallen soldiers and ensure that recipients accept the government's support. The benefits and assistance provided under the CSBP include the Special Financial Assistance of a total of 500,000 usually released in 2 tranches, Social Welfare Assistance through the Department of Social Welfare and Development enrolling families in the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program with a monthly rice subsidy of 20 kilos or its cash equivalent, Shelter Assistance under the National Housing Authority, Health and Medical Care assistance including payment of PhilHealth and maintenance assistance from the Department of Health, Educational Assistance, and Employment Assistance (CSBP, 2022).

Regarding the monthly pension, Participant 3 shared that one of the support systems received from the government is a monthly pension for her children and herself, that all of them divide the pension, and that when children reach 21 years old, the pension will automatically be cut off. The survivorship pension for the Armed Forces of the Philippines provides monthly benefits to surviving spouses and dependents, typically amounting to 75% of the base pay and longevity pay of the deceased personnel, under the AFP Pension and Gratuity Management Center at Camp Aguinaldo. For survivors of fallen soldiers killed in action, the basic survivorship pension computation follows the established framework of Presidential Decree No. 1638, whereby the pension is based on the base pay and longevity pay of the next higher grade than the permanent grade held by the soldier at the time of death, with the surviving legal spouse entitled to 75% of the deceased's monthly retirement pay divided equally with the dependent children. In this study, it was found that most participants' husbands who were killed in action held the ranks of Private and Corporal. Using the salary grades of 2026, the survivor pension for a Private promoted to Private First Class is computed as 31,774 multiplied by 75%, yielding a survivor pension of 23,830; for a Private First Class promoted to Corporal, the

computation is 32,410 multiplied by 75%, yielding a survivor pension of 24,307; and for a Corporal promoted to Staff Sergeant, the computation is 35,314 multiplied by 75%, yielding a survivor pension of 26,485. This explains why many participants expressed that the pension feels insufficient today, as inflation and rising costs reduce its real value, since the pension amount is tied to the salary grade at the time of loss and does not automatically adjust to current pay scales.

For housing programs, the National Housing Authority provides meaningful support to the families of fallen soldiers in South Cotabato, assisted by NHA XII, which grants housing benefits in Guardian Hills, Bawing, General Santos City, and Sofia Ville, Lagao, General Santos City. The NHA - Region XII housing programs for families of fallen soldiers show that among Killed in Action beneficiaries, 116 received housing units, 15 received house construction, and 14 received house repair, for a total of 121 KIA beneficiaries served, while among Killed in Police Operation beneficiaries, 27 received housing units, 13 received house construction, and 1 received house repair, for a total of 28 KIPO beneficiaries served, bringing the overall total across all categories to 143 housing units, 18 house constructions, and 15 house repairs, serving 176 beneficiaries in total. Participant 1 shared that they received a comfortable housing program under the assistance of the National Housing Authority.

Regarding educational assistance, the government also considers the welfare of dependent children of fallen soldiers through the Armed Forces of the Philippines Education Benefit Scholarship program, covering school-related costs to give children the opportunity to continue their studies without adding financial strain to the family. Executive Order No. 110 mandates scholarship grants for all surviving children up to the college level, with tuition and miscellaneous fees covered by the government, and also encourages siblings of fallen soldiers to join the service (CSBP - DILG, 2020). Participant 4 shared that there is a scholarship provided by the government for their child under AFPEBSO. Regarding healthcare, since the pillar of the family was unable to continue PhilHealth contributions, the government provides healthcare support to the families left behind, with insurance coverage subsidized by the government, removing the need for regular contributions. Participant 2 shared that the government sponsors the monthly contribution for PhilHealth. Additionally, participants shared that on the night of their husband's death, families received monetary assistance along with groceries provided by different AFP units, reflecting both institutional aid and community care working together to ease the burden, strengthen resilience, and honor the sacrifice of fallen soldiers. Participant 6 shared that when her husband died that night, they were given monetary assistance, and there were also groceries given from different units of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Participants shared that while immediate monetary assistance was provided without delay at the time of a soldier's death, the processing of claims for insurance, housing benefits, and tranches took significantly longer. Participant 6 noted that while some benefits were received, they still needed to be processed, and that claims take a long time to process and to arrive, reflecting how resilience is tested not only by grief but also by bureaucratic challenges. Participant 2 shared that a claim was received just recently after waiting for 5 years, but expressed gratitude that there was at least something worth waiting for. There are reports from the families of fallen soldiers that they feel left behind by government agencies through processes that are hard to meet and depend on (Santos, 2020).

Sustained but insufficient financial support. Though government programs from different agencies regularly provide assistance to families left behind, the amount is not enough to fully meet their basic needs. The incomes of both parents in a household could sustain financial security for the family, but since one spouse had to forgo employment opportunities, the entire family relies on a single source of income, and if the sole provider passed away, the dependent family would struggle to meet their needs. Families who are left behind tend to

experience economic difficulties that add to their grief (McGill et al., 2024). Participant 7 shared that there are times when the monthly pension is not enough, especially when she was hospitalized and did not have someone to help find another source of income, yet expressed gratitude for the support given by the government, which became her source of strength to move forward in life.

Participant 5 shared that if she were not employed, she would struggle totally with milk and daily needs, and that having a job makes it not as heavy, illustrating how the adequacy of the monthly survivor pension often depends on whether the surviving spouse is employed. Participant 1 shared that while government support is a big help, it is not sufficient to provide for the needs of the family, especially since she has 2 children who are both studying and whose education she really supports. The limited sources of support such as the monthly survivor pension and the presence of the child serve as motivation to keep going, providing both financial assistance and emotional strength, but families of fallen soldiers make clear that assistance is sufficient only if at least one family member has a job.

Unmet emotional and psychosocial needs. Emotional well-being is an important aspect of human life, and while families of military personnel who access emotional care and support tend to recover faster than those who do not experience counseling (McGill, 2024), the findings revealed that participants did not receive emotional support from the local government and agencies following the death of their husbands. This absence of support stands in contrast to the literature, as families narrate being unable to receive care, comfort, or understanding from the government in difficult situations. Though families of fallen soldiers may receive financial assistance or material help, there is a lack of counseling, empathy, or psychosocial programs that could help them cope with stress, loss, or personal struggles, especially for the children.

Participant 3 shared that while the support of the government is felt, it is not felt in terms of the emotional aspect, because all the programs are mainly livelihood seminars, education scholarships, and housing programs, and expressed hope that programs providing counseling or therapy will also be given. Participant 4 expressed that emotionally, the support is not enough, and that she has not experienced counseling. Participant 2 shared that neither she nor her children have encountered any counseling. Participant 7 expressed that while the ceremonies, remembrance, and programs provided after the husband's loss are comforting, there is hope that the government will provide and give importance to counseling to help ease the emotional burden carried especially by the children. Emotional care in the Philippines is sometimes hardly accessible to the families who want to undergo counseling and related therapies, and while the government has made it a priority to establish economic support, it has not achieved the same level of sustained emotional programs found in the western part of the world, where comprehensive support programs for the families left behind include sustained emotional programs that help families move forward and heal from pain (CHR, 2021). The literature is consistent with the study's findings that the government was partially successful in providing monetary and tangible assistance, but that financial aid alone cannot guarantee an improvement in the emotional well-being of families of fallen soldiers, as dependent children of military personnel tend to experience increased risk in the emotional aspect of their lives, especially when the cause of death is due to military service (Kaplow et al., 2013).

Additional ways the government and communities can recognize and compensate the families of fallen soldiers

Given the economic uncertainties in today's situation, families left behind and pensioners struggle to budget the monthly pension received from the government to provide

their basic needs in order to survive. The thematic analysis of participants' narratives revealed two major themes regarding additional ways the government and communities can recognize and compensate families of fallen soldiers: advancing lifetime security and sustained emotional support.

Advancing lifetime security. Beneficiaries of military pensions emphasized that while government assistance for education is helpful, the rising cost of living makes it difficult to sustain families on pension alone, and that pensioners should be included in any increase, as the current support is no longer sufficient to meet daily needs. Participant 8 shared that what is currently received is only a monthly pension, that her child is still studying though there is government support for the schooling, and that she hopes the pension will be increased because the prices of today's commodities are rising, and that pensioners like them as beneficiaries should be included in any pension increase. Participant 4 expressed the hope that the pension will be increased because the prices of goods these days are high. Participant 6 expressed gratitude for the programs provided by the government and hoped that the pension could be increased because it is fixed, meaning that if prices are high, the pension will remain the same, and that the concern is only for the pension itself to be increased. For the families, a pension increase would greatly benefit not just the widowed spouses of the fallen soldiers but entire families and their dependent children who rely on this support for daily necessities, as current amounts are no longer sufficient to cover basic living expenses due to rising costs and economic uncertainties. The narratives of participants contradict the literature's portrayal of adequate support, revealing a gap between policy and practice, where policy documentation frames assistance as sufficient but the participants' voices reveal economic strain and unmet needs.

Sustained emotional support. Emotional care is as important as material care, yet emotional support in the Philippines has become inaccessible to many because it is not fully available, and the military institutions sometimes fall short in providing assistance for the emotional well-being of the dependents left behind. Participant 3 shared that they should give notice to counseling for the families of fallen soldiers because, like her, she has never experienced it, and that so far, among the benefits received, counseling is the one that should be given importance. This finding does not align with existing literature, which often assumes that counseling services are readily available and accessible to military families, underscoring a gap between what is documented in research and what is actually experienced. Participant 6 shared that while the support of the government as well as the people around is felt, there is hope that counseling will be provided to help lessen the heaviness carried and to guide those who are left behind. Participant 7 expressed that above all, emotional support is very important because the loss of a loved one who served and sacrificed for the nation is like a wound that will not recover easily.

Participants emphasized that while material government programs such as pensions and educational assistance are valuable, they are not enough on their own, and that families of fallen soldiers require holistic support, including counseling, emotional guidance, and psychosocial interventions, to truly help them heal, rebuild resilience, and sustain both themselves and their children. Dependent children of military personnel tend to experience increased risk in the emotional aspect of their lives especially when the cause of death is due to military service such as being killed in action (Kaplow et al., 2013), and military families who access emotional care and support tend to recover faster than those who do not experience counseling (McGill, 2024), reinforcing the participants' call for sustained emotional programs alongside financial aid to ensure that beneficiaries are supported not only materially but also emotionally and socially.

Taken together, the findings presented across all four research areas of this study provide a coherent, comprehensive, and internally consistent account of the lived experiences of the families of fallen soldiers in South Cotabato. The thematic analysis confirmed that

narratives of loss and remembrance are shaped by three interconnected themes of overpowering grief managed through a staying strong mentality, emotional resilience sustained through cherished family bonds, and economic resilience amid financial strain resulting from the abrupt loss of the family's sole breadwinner. Cultural memorialization is sustained through faith and ritual anchored in both Catholic and Islamic traditions, digital practices of remembrance including photographs, videos, and social media postings, and public honor expressed through community solidarity and national commemorations. In terms of government support, the study found that comprehensive programs under Executive Order No. 110 of 2020, including survivor pensions computed at 75% of the deceased soldier's base pay, NHA housing assistance serving a total of 176 beneficiaries in Region XII, educational scholarships under AFPEBSO, and PhilHealth coverage, provide meaningful but insufficient economic relief, as participants uniformly reported that pension amounts are fixed and fail to keep pace with rising commodity prices, with one participant waiting 5 years to receive a claim. Emotional support remains a critical and largely unmet need, as no participant reported receiving counseling or psychosocial services despite the deep trauma experienced by both surviving spouses and dependent children. Participants unanimously identified pension increases and the institutionalization of counseling and psychosocial programs as the most urgent additional ways through which the government and communities can better recognize and compensate the families of fallen soldiers. These findings collectively address all research questions of the study and contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge on the intersection of grief, economic vulnerability, cultural memorialization, and institutional support systems for military families in the Philippine context. The insights generated in this chapter provide a strong empirical and analytical foundation for the conclusions, recommendations, and implications for policy and program development presented in the succeeding chapter of this manuscript.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of families of fallen soldiers in Cotabato, specifically within the municipalities of the province of South Cotabato, under the thematic focus of Stories of Loss and Support. Employing a qualitative approach, the study conducted in-depth interviews with participants who were purposely selected based on specific criteria, namely wives with dependent children of soldiers killed in action in the line of duty. The data gathered were subjected to thematic analysis through coding, yielding findings organized around four central areas: the experiences of loss and remembrance in relation to economic and emotional aspects, the cultural practices surrounding memorialization in military families, government programs in terms of economic assistance and emotional support, and additional ways for the government and communities to recognize and compensate the families of fallen soldiers.

The families of fallen soldiers recounted profound experiences of grief and loss upon being informed of the death of their loved ones in military service. Economically, the families left behind sustained their basic needs through survivor pension assistance provided by the government, though the adjustment from the income levels available during active military service, which included bonuses, commutation, long pay, and allowances, to a fixed survivor pension placed considerable financial strain on households, particularly those without additional sources of income. Emotionally, families struggled to accept the loss of their loved ones, yet demonstrated remarkable resilience grounded in the honor and pride they attributed to the sacrifice made for the nation. Wives of fallen soldiers also found purpose and motivation

in their children, which provided them with hope and encouragement to continue forward in life despite their grief.

With respect to cultural practices surrounding memorialization, families of fallen soldiers honored their loved ones through a combination of faith-based rituals and digital practices. Prayer served as a primary means of maintaining a connection with the deceased, with both Islamic and Christian traditions, as well as community-based observances, playing meaningful roles in collective remembrance. Digital practices likewise became an integral dimension of everyday life for bereaved families, who preserved memories through photographs, videos, and social media platforms. These digital records allowed families to revisit shared moments, hear voices, and visually reconnect with the deceased, providing comfort and emotional sustenance. Public honor and community recognition further contributed to the emotional fortitude of grieving families, as social respect and acknowledgment validated the significance of their loved one's sacrifice and instilled a sense of dignity and pride in the family's ongoing life.

Regarding government support, the study found that families of fallen soldiers benefited from a range of programs under the Comprehensive Social Benefit System of Executive Order 110 of 2020, which assisted families with benefit claims, along with housing programs through the National Housing Authority in Region XII, PhilHealth premium coverage under the Department of Health, and educational scholarships for dependent children through the Armed Forces of the Philippines Education Benefit Scholarship. While families expressed gratitude for these programs, they also noted that compliance with conditional requirements across different agencies and lengthy processing periods created administrative burdens that slowed their access to promised benefits, though they remained hopeful about the assistance they were entitled to receive.

Among the additional concerns raised by families, the most prominent was the call for an increase in the monthly survivor pension to keep pace with the rapidly rising cost of living and the economic uncertainties of the present market. Families described persistent difficulty in budgeting their pension, particularly those who relied on it as their sole source of income. Beyond economic concerns, families identified a significant gap in emotional and psychosocial support, noting that neither the surviving spouses nor the dependent children had access to counseling or structured psychosocial programs. This unmet need underscored the inadequacy of financial assistance alone in addressing the holistic well-being of bereaved military families.

The implications drawn from these findings are both immediate and far-reaching. The narratives of loss shared by the participating families illuminate the deeply human cost borne by those left behind when soldiers are killed in the line of duty in hazardous areas across the region of Mindanao. The resilience exhibited by these families, rooted in cherished family bonds, communal faith practices, and the honored memory of their loved ones' sacrifice, reflects a profound capacity for forward-looking adaptation even amid sustained hardship. At the same time, the findings make clear that existing support structures, while meaningful in their intent, fall short of comprehensively addressing the economic and emotional dimensions of bereavement experienced by military families. The integration of traditional memorialization practices with digital platforms further illustrates how families draw upon both inherited cultural frameworks and contemporary tools to sustain bonds with the deceased and find ongoing meaning in their loss. The study affirms that government programs, while valued and appreciated by recipients, require stronger implementation mechanisms, more accessible delivery systems, and broader scope to adequately serve the families they are designed to support.

In light of these findings and their implications, several future directions are recommended to deepen understanding and improve outcomes for families of fallen soldiers. The government is encouraged to adhere to its policy of engaging in peace negotiations as a

means of reducing armed conflict in Mindanao and mitigating the human cost it continues to impose on military families. A thorough review and revision of existing policies governing benefits for the families of fallen soldiers is also warranted, as administrative barriers, gaps in implementation, and insufficient awareness among beneficiaries undermine the accessibility and effectiveness of the support mechanisms outlined in executive orders. Strengthening monitoring systems and establishing more efficient benefit delivery processes are essential steps toward ensuring that intended assistance truly reaches and meaningfully benefits the families for whom it is designed.

Wives of fallen soldiers are further encouraged to seek additional sources of income to achieve greater financial stability and secure their children's futures, given that survivor pensions alone are frequently insufficient to meet long-term household needs in the current economic climate. Local government units are encouraged to strengthen programs and services that provide counseling, emotional support, and mental health interventions for bereaved families, with particular attention to the dependent children of fallen soldiers who must cope with loss during formative stages of development. Establishing accessible mental health clinics through government partnerships would represent a meaningful step toward addressing the psychosocial needs currently unmet by existing programs. Ultimately, the study affirms that supporting the families of fallen soldiers demands a holistic approach that attends not only to economic assistance but also to therapeutic, counseling, and developmental programs that nurture emotional healing and create genuine opportunities for future growth. Future researchers are encouraged to build upon these findings by exploring related dimensions of grief, resilience, policy implementation, and community support among military bereaved families in other regions, thereby broadening the evidence base for more responsive and compassionate policy and practice.

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