# Beyond the Altar: Negotiating Identity, Piety, and Patriarchy Among Filipina Converts to Islam in the Bangsamoro

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how five Filipina women in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, negotiated religious identity, piety, and agency after converting from Christianity to Islam through interfaith marriage. It asks how marital expectations, family relationships, embodied religious practices, and access to Islamic learning shaped their experiences of becoming Muslim within a minority-Muslim setting. The study used qualitative narrative inquiry and life-history interviews with five purposively selected participants who had been actively engaged in their Muslim communities for at least one year. Interviews were conducted in person or by video call, with participants responding in Tausug, Binisaya, or Filipino; transcripts were translated into English and examined through manual thematic analysis. The findings indicate that conversion often began as a practical condition for marriage rather than as a fully developed theological decision. Over time, however, some participants described a shift from converting for the sake of a husband toward sustaining religious practice through their own understanding of and relationship with God. Prayer, hijab, ritual cleansing, and participation in religious gatherings helped make religious identity visible and meaningful, while madrasa attendance and Qur'anic learning enabled participants to ask questions and interpret teachings more independently. Family acceptance was not automatic: participants navigated tensions with natal relatives and in-laws, and some used patience, restraint, and respectful conduct to manage conflict. These practices should not be read simply as passive submission or straightforward resistance; their meanings emerged within specific relationships and moral commitments. The article proposes "relational moral interiorization" as a way to describe how faith is gradually interpreted and incorporated through everyday practice, family negotiation, and reflection. The study contributes a context-specific account of religious agency among Filipina converts in the southern Philippines and highlights the need for accessible religious learning and supportive community relationships.

**Keywords:** Conversion; Filipina converts; Gender and Islam; Religious agency; Bangsamoro

## INTRODUCTION

The experiences of women who convert to Islam within the context of marriage provide a compelling entry point for examining the intersections of gender, faith, and family life in Muslim societies. In Southeast Asia, where Islam exists alongside diverse cultural traditions and social arrangements, conversion is rarely reducible to a purely theological decision. More often, it unfolds through everyday negotiations shaped by kinship ties, marital expectations, and the demands of community life. Within such settings, embracing a new faith is not only a matter of belief, but also of navigating relationships, obligations, and belonging within the domestic sphere. While a growing body of scholarship has explored Muslim women's agency in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, the experiences of women in minority-Muslim contexts—particularly in the southern Philippines—remain relatively underexamined.

This study focuses on Filipina women in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi who converted to Islam through interfaith marriage. It examines how they negotiate religious commitment, marital expectations, and patriarchal family structures within the Bangsamoro context. Drawing on narrative inquiry and life-history interviews with five participants, the study traces how conversion evolves over time—from an initial response to marital conditions

toward a more reflective engagement with faith. The accounts of the participants suggest that marriage, motherhood, and family relations are not merely private or domestic arrangements, but are also key sites where religious meanings are interpreted, contested, and reworked in everyday life.

The analysis draws on scholarship on gender, piety, and agency, particularly Saba Mahmood's (2005) account of embodied ethical formation, Amina Wadud's (1999) feminist engagement with Qur'anic interpretation, and Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the patriarchal bargain. These works are used as interpretive resources rather than as templates that can be transferred unchanged to Bongao. Mahmood's ethnography concerns a women's piety movement in Cairo, while the present study concerns Filipina converts whose experiences are shaped by interfaith marriage, kinship relations, and a distinct local history. Wadud's work is relevant to questions of women's interpretation of religious teachings, but the present data do not constitute a systematic analysis of Qur'anic exegesis. Kandiyoti helps frame negotiation within unequal structures, yet the narratives do not establish that every act of patience or accommodation is strategic. The participants' own accounts therefore remain the primary basis for interpretation.

A Philippine feminist perspective can also inform this analysis through Mary John Mananzan's (1999) discussion of religion as a socializing force in women's lives. Mananzan identifies the possibility that religion may carry both oppressive and liberative effects, rather than functioning as an unambiguously oppressive or emancipatory force. Her discussion focuses on Christianity; therefore, it is not used here as an authority on Islamic doctrine or as evidence that Christian and Muslim women experience religion in the same way. Instead, it serves as a context-sensitive feminist point of comparison that directs attention to how religious beliefs and institutions may shape gender expectations while also providing women with moral language, spiritual resources, and opportunities for reflection. Applied cautiously to the present narratives, this perspective encourages the analysis to ask how participants themselves understood their religious practices and family obligations, without presuming in advance that patience signifies either submission or liberation. The participants' accounts, rather than the framework alone, remain the basis for interpreting these meanings.

Building on these perspectives, this study argues that conversion in minority-Muslim settings is best understood as a process of relational moral interiorization. Rather than a single moment of transformation, conversion unfolds gradually through lived experience, as women reinterpret marital obligations, religious discipline, and family responsibilities in relation to their developing understanding of faith. By examining the lived experiences of Filipina converts in Tawi-Tawi, this study contributes to broader discussions on gender, piety, and religious agency in Muslim societies, particularly by bringing attention to contexts where Islam is lived as a minority tradition and where belonging must be continually negotiated across religious and cultural boundaries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious conversion among women in Southeast Asia is widely understood as a process shaped not only by personal belief but also by family expectations and broader social norms. Life histories (kuwentong-buhay) demonstrate that conversion is rarely a singular transformative event; rather, it unfolds gradually as individuals internalize faith over time, integrating prior Christian upbringing with Islamic practices to form layered and evolving religious identities. This perspective has been crucial in moving beyond linear and event-centered models of conversion, foregrounding instead its processual and relational character.

Within scholarship on gender and Islam, discussions of pious agency further complicate earlier assumptions that women's religiosity can only be interpreted through resistance. Practices such as obedience, discipline, and ritual participation may function as forms of ethical self-cultivation rather than mere compliance. Empirical accounts resonate with this perspective. In Bongao, for instance, Kalahok #2 initially embraced Islam through marriage but gradually cultivated reflective commitment through prayer, madrasa attendance, and Qur'anic study, while Kalahok #4 described the Saltun ritual as a form of symbolic purification. These narratives illustrate that conversion is not a fixed or instantaneous decision but a relational and deliberate process of becoming.

Historical studies in the Philippine context further reveal that women once exercised significant spiritual authority as ritual leaders and mediators. However, colonial transformations reconfigured these roles, confining much of women's influence to the domestic sphere. Despite these constraints, religion has persisted as an

important domain through which women access education, social participation, and moral authority. Within Islamic family structures, marriage (ʿaqd) is not merely a religious institution but also a contractual arrangement that allows women to negotiate rights related to polygyny, delegated divorce, and household responsibilities. Historical analyses further show that women could secure judicial divorce clauses or retain delegated authority within marriage. These contractual and legal frameworks indicate that even within patriarchal systems, there exist structured—though often limited—spaces for negotiation and agency.

In contemporary Muslim societies such as those in Mindanao, women navigate Islamic doctrine, local custom, and family expectations simultaneously. Bangsamoro women, for example, practice what has been described as "negotiated piety," balancing religious devotion with domestic responsibilities and relational diplomacy. Local customs, including Tausug adat, further shape inheritance patterns and household authority. These layered conditions demonstrate that religious practice is always embedded within specific socio-cultural contexts, where doctrine, custom, and lived experience intersect.

The concept of the patriarchal bargain, as articulated by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), provides a critical framework for understanding these dynamics. Rather than positioning women as either passive subjects or active resistors, Kandiyoti emphasizes how women strategically negotiate their positions within male-dominated structures to maximize security, recognition, and life opportunities. Complementing this, Nilüfer Göle (2015) highlights that the public visibility of religious practice—through dress, ritual participation, and social engagement—can extend women's agency beyond the domestic sphere. Taken together, these perspectives underscore that agency is not fixed but emerges relationally through ethical reflection, strategic adaptation, and embodied devotion.

Empirical studies from Bangsamoro and Indonesia further suggest that submission to religious norms does not necessarily negate autonomy. Women actively engage in moral reasoning, contractual negotiation, and piety movements that involve reflection, scholarship, and even forms of activism. These findings challenge simplistic binaries between submission and resistance, demonstrating instead that religious practice is negotiated, context-dependent, and deeply embedded in social relations.

Comparative scholarship offers useful points of reference without making the settings interchangeable. In Indonesia, Agustina and Ismah (2024) examine how female ulama challenge compulsory-marriage interpretations through arguments grounded in reciprocity and substantive justice. In Malaysia, Samuri and Khan (2020) discuss how conversion can intersect with civil-marriage law and family relationships, while Abu Bakar and Ismail (2018) review the legal administration of conversion and support for converts. Yoshizawa (2024), studying Balik-Islam in the southern Philippines, describes conversion as a continuing and sometimes uneven pathway shaped by religious practice and relationships with Christian family members. These studies share an interest in the social and relational dimensions of religious change, but they address different populations, legal settings, and research questions. The present study does not claim direct equivalence with Indonesia or Malaysia; rather, the comparison situates the Bongao narratives within a wider Southeast Asian discussion of conversion, gender, kinship, and religious belonging.

However, despite these significant contributions, much of the existing literature remains centered on Muslim-majority societies, where conversion is less frequently shaped by interfaith marriage and minority positioning. As a result, the experiences of women who convert to Islam in minority-Muslim contexts—where religious belonging must be negotiated across natal and affinal kinship networks—remain underexamined. In contexts such as the

Bangsamoro, conversion entails not only the adoption of new religious practices but also the navigation of "double marginalization," as women negotiate tensions between family expectations, religious doctrine, and local custom.

This study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of Filipina women in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi who converted to Islam through marriage. Building on existing discussions of pious agency, negotiated piety, and patriarchal bargaining, it extends these frameworks by situating conversion within a minority-Muslim context where belonging is continuously contested and reconfigured. In doing so, the study advances the argument that conversion is best understood not as a singular act of submission or resistance, but as an ongoing process of

relational moral interiorization—one that unfolds through everyday practices, interpersonal negotiations, and evolving interpretations of faith.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry to closely examine the lived experiences of five Filipina women from Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, who converted from Christianity to Islam. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it allows participants to articulate personal meaning, emotional processes, and religious interpretation in their daily lives. This approach captures not only their actions and decisions but also the significance and intention behind their experiences.

The participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that only those who could provide meaningful insights into the experiences of Christian women converting to Islam through marriage were included. All five participants were married to Muslim men and had been actively engaged in their Muslim communities for at least one year, allowing them to reflect on their experiences with sufficient depth. They were also willing to share personal stories related to interfaith marriage, providing rich, first-hand perspectives on the negotiation of faith, identity, and family life. Most of the participants were college-educated, which enabled them to articulate their experiences clearly and thoughtfully. To protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms ranging from Participant #1 to Participant #5 were used. The participants' ages ranged from 35 to 51 years, situating the study within a group of mature adults navigating both familial and community responsibilities.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person or by video call, with each session lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Participants could respond in Tausug, Binisaya, or Filipino. The interview accounts were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Because translation can alter tone, culturally specific meanings, and the force of religious expressions, terms such as tawakkal, sabr, ibadah, salah, and saltun are retained where they carry meanings that are not fully captured by a single English equivalent. The analysis treats translated wording as an interpretive rendering of participants' accounts, not as a claim that every nuance can be reproduced exactly in English.

The researcher kept reflexive notes to consider how prior assumptions and interpretive choices might shape the reading of the narratives. These notes supported reflexive attention to the relationship between the participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations.

The transcripts were examined manually through repeated reading, initial coding of meaningful statements, and comparison of codes across the five cases. Related codes were grouped into broader categories concerning marital expectations, family belonging, embodied religious practices, religious learning, and the negotiation of agency. The themes were developed by moving between individual narratives and patterns shared across cases, while noting differences rather than treating all participants' experiences as identical. The analysis was not based on statistical frequency. Although the original analysis described thematic saturation, the available methodological record does not document a code-by-code audit trail or a clear point at which no new codes emerged. Accordingly, this revised account does not claim that saturation was independently demonstrated; it presents the findings as a bounded, interpretive analysis of five information-rich narratives. The adequacy of the themes rests on their traceability to the accounts and the explicit recognition of variation and limits within this small sample.

This study was conducted with strict adherence to ethical standards to protect the participants' rights and well-being. Prior to participation, all participants were fully informed about the objectives, procedures, and potential implications of the study, providing their informed consent willingly. All data, including recordings and transcripts, were securely stored to ensure confidentiality. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Throughout the research process, the researcher engaged in continuous reflexivity, critically reflecting on personal assumptions and potential biases to minimize their influence on data interpretation. These ethical safeguards ensured that the study was conducted responsibly, while respecting and valuing the participants' experiences, perspectives, and dignity.

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### Limitations And Researcher Reflexivity

Several limitations should guide how the findings are read. First, the study draws on five purposively selected women in one locality who converted to Islam through marriage and had been engaged in Muslim communities for at least one year. Their narratives offer depth but cannot represent all Filipina converts, all women in the Bangsamoro, or the diversity of Muslim women's experiences. Second, life-history interviews rely on retrospective accounts. Memory may be selective, and participants may present experiences in ways that are socially acceptable or consistent with their current religious commitments. These possibilities do not invalidate their accounts, but they require the analysis to treat narratives as meaning-making in context rather than as unmediated factual records. Third, the English translations may not preserve every nuance of the source languages. The retention of selected local and religious terms helps signal this limitation, but it does not eliminate it. Fourth, the current manuscript provides limited documentation of the recruitment pathway, the researcher's specific social position in relation to participants, and a formal audit trail for coding. These matters constrain claims about saturation and reflexivity and should be reported transparently rather than assumed. Finally, the theoretical frameworks used here were developed in different contexts and are applied selectively. The findings should therefore be understood as a context-specific interpretation of these five narratives, not as proof that piety, endurance, or accommodation necessarily indicate agency or consent.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### From Marital Requirement to Spiritual Interiorization

In Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, the boundary between Christian and Muslim identity is often crossed through marriage. For the women in this study, entry into Islam did not begin with a dramatic spiritual awakening or a solitary search for theological truth. Rather, it emerged as a practical decision shaped by the realities of love, family, and communal expectations within a predominantly Muslim setting. This suggests that conversion, in this context, is initially embedded in social relations rather than purely theological conviction.

Yet, as their narratives unfold, it becomes clear that marriage was only the starting point. What began as a requirement did not remain a mere condition. Over time, external compliance gradually developed into personal conviction. This movement from social negotiation to spiritual interiorization reflects a process of ethical self-formation, consistent with the notion of embodied piety articulated by Saba Mahmood, where disciplined practices can cultivate inward transformation rather than simply signify submission.

### Marriage as Condition: Conversion as Entry

In the accounts of Kalahok #1 and Kalahok #4, conversion was not presented as one option among many, but as a prerequisite for marriage. Kalahok #4 recalled that during her college years, she quickly learned that a Christian woman could not marry a Muslim man unless she embraced Islam. In this situation, romantic commitment became inseparable from religious transformation.

Rather than describing this requirement as coercion, she framed it as a clear and accepted rule governing interfaith unions. However, this does not remove the presence of power. The condition of conversion was structured by the expectations of the groom's family, indicating that women's entry into marriage is mediated by existing patriarchal and kinship norms. This dynamic can be understood through Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the patriarchal bargain, where women navigate constraints by making strategic decisions within the limits imposed by their social environment.

A similar tension is evident in the experience of Kalahok #1, whose parents opposed the relationship while her future in-laws required conversion. In this case, her religious identity became a site of negotiation between two competing authorities. Conversion functioned not simply as a spiritual act, but as a social entry point into her husband's kinship network. This suggests that religious transformation is inseparable from the reconfiguration of social belonging.

The embodied dimension of this transition is particularly visible in Kalahok #4's account of the saltun ritual. She described it as a form of physical cleansing that marked a break from her previous religious life. This highlights that conversion is not only doctrinal but also corporeal, involving the body as a site of transformation. Such practices align with Mahmood's argument that religious subjectivity is formed through embodied discipline, where bodily acts play a central role in shaping moral identity.

Viewed superficially, these experiences might be interpreted as submission to patriarchal authority. However, a closer reading reveals a more complex process. Within constrained conditions, these women made deliberate choices to pursue relationships and build families. Their actions were shaped by structure, yet they were not devoid of intention.

This suggests that agency operates not outside constraint, but within it.

**From "For Him" to "For God": The Reorientation of Commitment**

While conversion often began as a requirement for marriage, its meaning shifted over time. Several participants described a gradual movement from converting for the sake of their husbands to sustaining their faith for their own understanding of God.

Kalahok #2, for instance, emphasized that her engagement with Islam became more deliberate as she learned how to pray, read the Qur'an, and attend madrasa classes. Rather than remaining a passive recipient, she positioned herself as an active participant in her own religious formation. This transition reflects what Amina Wadud describes as interpretive engagement, where women actively make meaning of religious teachings rather than simply inheriting them.

A similar shift is evident in Kalahok #1's narrative. Initially, she acknowledged that her conversion was primarily for marriage. However, as she continued to practice Islam—observing daily prayers, wearing the hijab, and participating in religious gatherings—her understanding deepened. Over time, her commitment was no longer anchored in her husband, but in her own belief.

This shift marks a relocation of authority. While the husband initially mediated access to Islam, he did not remain the central reason for faith. Instead, commitment became oriented toward God. Concepts such as tawakkal (trust in God) played a crucial role in this transformation, allowing participants to interpret life experiences within a broader spiritual framework.

This progression complicates the binary distinction between "forced" and "voluntary" conversion often found in dominant discourse. Rather than fitting neatly into either category, these experiences suggest that conversion is better understood as a process—one that evolves through time, practice, and reflection. What began as a negotiated condition gradually became a source of moral grounding, emotional stability, and self-understanding.

**The Crucible of Kinship: Negotiating Belonging**

Conversion also reshaped the women's position within their families. Marriage did not simply unite two individuals; it connected two kinship systems with different religious expectations. As a result, the participants often found themselves navigating tensions between their natal families and their husbands' families.

Many described resistances from their own families. Kalahok #1, who grew up in a Seventh-Day Adventist household, experienced strong opposition rooted in religious doctrine. For her parents, the decision to marry a Muslim man represented both a personal and spiritual rupture. This led to a period of distance and emotional strain.

At the same time, acceptance within their husbands' families was not immediate. Kalahok #3 recalled feeling present but peripheral during family gatherings, often limited by language and unfamiliar customs. It was only through visible participation in religious practices—such as joining communal prayer during Eid—that she began to feel recognized.

Kalahok #5's experience was more difficult. She described prolonged tension with her mother-in-law, who questioned her sincerity as a convert. In her case, conversion alone did not guarantee acceptance; belonging had to be negotiated over time.

These accounts reflect a form of "double marginalization," where the women were seen as outsiders in both their natal and affinal families. Navigating this position required emotional resilience and careful social negotiation.

**Piety as Strategy: Endurance and Social Navigation**

In responding to these tensions, the women did not rely on direct confrontation. Instead, they developed strategies grounded in patience, restraint, and religious practice.

Kalahok #5, for example, chose to limit her interactions with her mother-in-law to avoid escalating conflict. While this might appear as passivity, her account suggests a more deliberate choice. She framed her actions as a sacrifice for the stability of her family, particularly for her husband and children. Over time, she observed that this approach helped ease tensions.

Similarly, Kalahok #2 described how she responded to skepticism from relatives and former friends by focusing on respectful behavior and social harmony. Through pakikisama, she gradually reshaped how others perceived her—not through argument, but through consistent conduct.

In these situations, piety functioned not only as personal devotion but also as a practical means of navigating social relationships. Religious discipline became a way of maintaining dignity while managing conflict.

Embodied Piety and the Formation of Self

For the participants, religious practice was not confined to belief alone but was lived and experienced through the body. The process of becoming Muslim involved not only learning new doctrines but also reshaping everyday habits, gestures, and physical discipline.

In this sense, conversion was as much embodied as it was intellectual.

The wearing of the hijab and the observance of daily prayers became central to how they understood themselves as Muslim women. Rather than describing the hijab as a restriction, the participants framed it as a marker of identity and belonging. It signaled commitment and allowed them to be recognized within the community as legitimate members of the faith. In a context where religious identity carries strong social meaning, visible practices such as veiling functioned as both personal expression and social affirmation.

Similarly, the practice of salah introduced a structured rhythm into their daily lives. One participant described how regular prayer provided moments of pause amid domestic responsibilities, offering a sense of calm and stability. These moments created a space where they were not defined primarily by their roles as wives, daughters-in-law, or mothers, but as individuals in direct relation to God. Through repetition, prayer became not only an obligation but also a source of emotional grounding.

The embodied dimension of conversion is further illustrated in the saltun ritual described by Kalahok #4. As a form of symbolic and physical cleansing, the ritual marked a clear boundary between her past and her new religious identity. For her, it was not merely ceremonial but meaningful, allowing her to begin her life as a Muslim with a sense of renewal. This experience highlights how the body itself becomes a site where religious transformation is enacted and made tangible.

Taken together, these practices suggest that conversion is not a single moment of decision but an ongoing process of self-formation. Through disciplined actions—prayer, modest dress, and ritual cleansing—the women gradually internalized their faith. In doing so, they did not simply adopt a new identity; they actively constructed it in ways that provided both personal meaning and social recognition.

**Education and Expanding Agency**

Over time, several participants moved beyond relying on their husbands or in-laws for religious guidance and began to seek knowledge independently. Attending madrasa classes and learning to read the Qur'an allowed them to engage more actively with their faith, not merely as followers, but as learners capable of reflection and understanding.

This shift marked an important transformation. With greater knowledge, the women became more confident in distinguishing between cultural practices and religious teachings. They were able to ask questions, clarify misconceptions, and explain their beliefs both within and beyond the household. As one participant suggested, learning was not simply about fulfilling religious duties, but about understanding the meaning behind them.

In this sense, education functioned as more than personal enrichment. It became a resource for expanding both confidence and agency. Through knowledge, the participants were able to reposition themselves within the family—not only as wives who follow, but as individuals who understand, interpret, and at times guide religious practice. This gradual movement from dependence to informed participation reflects how learning can reshape both self-perception and social roles within the household.

**Negotiating Patriarchy, Polygyny, and Submission**

The negotiation of agency among Filipina converts in Bongao unfolds within a broader framework of Islamic family relations, where marriage is shaped by both religious teachings and local cultural practices. Islamic teachings recognize the possibility of plural marriage under specific ethical conditions. The Qur'an (4:3) permits a man to marry more than one wife, provided that justice among them can be maintained. Classical Islamic jurisprudence likewise understands marriage (nikāḥ) as a contractual relationship (ʿaqd) that establishes reciprocal rights and responsibilities between spouses. However, the way these principles are lived and interpreted varies across social contexts.

For the women in this study, polygyny was not encountered as an abstract legal provision but as a lived and emotionally complex experience. Kalahok #4, for example, described the moment her husband took a second wife as a deeply difficult period marked by jealousy and uncertainty. Rather than interpreting the situation as a betrayal, she framed it within the moral language of Islam, emphasizing that the marriage was halal and therefore permissible. This framing did not remove the emotional burden, but it provided her with a way to endure and make sense of the situation.

These accounts can be read as examples of situated negotiation, but the interpretation should remain cautious. Patience, restraint, or religiously framed acceptance may provide participants with moral coherence and a way to manage relationships; they may also coexist with emotional difficulty and unequal power. The interviews do not allow the researcher to determine from the outside whether a particular response was wholly voluntary, strategically chosen, or constrained. The concept of the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) helps draw attention to negotiation within unequal structures, while Mahmood's (2005) account of pious agency cautions against assuming that agency must appear as open resistance. Neither framework settles the meaning of an individual participant's actions. The interpretation therefore rests on the meanings participants themselves attached to their practices and acknowledges that these meanings may remain ambivalent.

This pattern resonates with the idea of pious agency discussed by Saba Mahmood (2005), where agency is expressed not only through resistance but also through practices of discipline, endurance, and ethical self-formation. The experiences of these women suggest that engagement with polygyny involves a continuous negotiation between emotional realities, religious understanding, and familial responsibilities.

The findings thus point to situated negotiation rather than a universal pattern of agency. The accounts show that religious meaning, family obligation, and unequal power can coexist; they do not establish that accommodation is always empowering or that participants experienced the same choices in the same way.

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# CONCLUSION

This study explored how five Filipina women in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi made sense of conversion to Islam through marriage. Their narratives suggest that conversion may begin in response to marital expectations but can acquire new meanings through religious practice, learning, family relationships, and reflection. "Relational moral interiorization" is proposed as a context-specific interpretive concept for this process: faith is not only declared at a single moment but is interpreted and lived through everyday relationships and practices.

Participants sometimes described patience, discipline, and care through religious concepts such as tawakkal and ibadah. These meanings could support emotional stability and a sense of accountability to God, but they should not be read as evidence that unequal relationships were harmless or that all accommodation was freely chosen. The narratives show how religious commitment and patriarchal expectations may be negotiated together, with different meanings across cases.

Embodied practices—including hijab, prayer, ritual cleansing, and madrasa participation—were important in how participants described becoming and being recognized as Muslim. Religious learning also offered some participants ways to ask questions and develop their own understanding. These findings are grounded in five narratives and are not intended to represent all converts in the Bangsamoro.

The study contributes a localized account to discussions of gender, piety, and religious agency. Its theoretical contribution is deliberately limited: Mahmood, Wadud, and Kandiyoti help frame questions raised by the narratives, but their concepts cannot be transferred without attention to differences in context. Further research with more participants, a transparent recruitment record, and systematic documentation of translation and coding would help test and refine the concept of relational moral interiorization.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest several practical steps that local institutions could pilot and evaluate in collaboration with converts themselves:

The Bangsamoro local government units, women's desks, community-based organizations, and Muslim religious leaders could jointly pilot a confidential convert-support pathway. This could include an initial needs conversation, optional referrals to trained social workers or counsellors, peer support from experienced converts, and clear procedures for responding to family conflict or safety concerns. Participation should be voluntary, and counselling should not pressure women to remain in or leave a marriage.

Madrasas and Islamic learning centres could offer beginner-friendly classes for adult converts, with opportunities to ask questions privately and to distinguish core religious teachings from local custom. Facilitators should avoid assuming that all converts have the same educational background or learning needs and should provide materials in languages participants understand.

Interfaith dialogue could be organized through voluntary family conversations, community forums, or joint activities facilitated by trained Muslim and Christian representatives. The purpose should be to reduce misinformation and support respectful relationships, not to debate or challenge an individual's religious choice. Confidentiality and the convert's consent should guide any family involvement.

Future research should follow converts over time, include a wider range of ages and family circumstances, and compare experiences across localities. Researchers should document recruitment, language and translation procedures, coding decisions, and reflexive practice more fully. Comparative work with Indonesia and Malaysia should attend to differences in legal systems, community institutions, and the social conditions of conversion rather than assume a single Southeast Asian pattern.

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