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Pasaning Di-Pansin: Intersectional Experiences of Indigenous Women Enrolled in Bulacan State University

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ABSTRACT

One's experiences cannot be fully understood through a single lens. This is what Intersectionality Theory emphasizes, orienting this study in understanding how the intersections of indigeneity, gender, and institutional position construct the lived experiences of Indigenous women enrolled at Bulacan State University (BulSU), where these intersecting identities produce both marginalization and empowerment. For the methods, the paper employed a qualitative phenomenological design grounded in constructivist paradigm, while complemented by the *pagtatanong-tanong* method, to understand the intersectional experiences of Indigenous women in BulSU. Snowball sampling was employed and the data were collected from nine (9) Indigenous women students from Indigenous groups, including Dumagat, Bugkalot, Teduray, and Badjao, through individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews were analyzed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Findings reveal that participants experience conditional inclusion, structural and material uncertainty, gendered and communal expectations, gendered vulnerability and cultural tensions while pursuing higher education. The participants also demonstrate conformity to academic climate, reframing pressures into academic persistence, and reliance on relational and spiritual relationship for academic endurance. The analysis further shows the participants' strengthened academic confidence and Indigenous pride, resilience, and reliance on institutional efforts towards inclusion, yet having limited awareness of institutional rights. These underline the need for inclusive and culturally responsive policies, stronger protection against discrimination, and accessible support systems within higher education. The paper contributes to understanding intersectional realities in universities and aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG5 (Gender Equality), SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Keywords: higher education, state university, Indigenous women, intersectionality, qualitative phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

One size, in fact, does not fit all. It is because an individual's experiences cannot be fully understood by isolating a single aspect of their identity, for each person carries intersecting histories, traits, and experiences. This is why intersectionality, a lens highlighting how interacting forms of identities create compounded vulnerabilities, or a combination of privileged and oppressed identities, must be considered in trying to make sense of one's experiences (Anders et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1989).

Indigenous women not only contend with inequities tied to land, culture, and poverty but also face compounded challenges tied to patriarchal expectations and norms when situated in places such as higher education institutions (Onsay & Rabajante, 2025). Still, inside these academic institutions, they may encounter various experiences that both challenge and, at times, support their evolving identities and needs. With this, how are the experiences of Indigenous women enrolled in a state university/college (hereinafter SUC) be formed when their lives are lived at the intersections of gender, indigeneity, and institutional position?

Indigenous People as Marginalized Sector

Oppression, in its broadest sense, is the creation of systemic barriers that reinforce the superiority of some groups over others, specifically due to inequalities that are not isolated but interconnected. It is both a state, wherein certain groups are denied fair access to opportunities, i.e., marginalization, and a process, which maintains inequality through cultural norms, institutional systems, and social practices (David & Derthick, 2017; David et al., 2019; Fox, 2016). Those in dominant positions often sustain their privilege by imposing worldviews and restricting the rights and access of marginalized groups, justifying these practices as natural or legitimate (Pease, 2021). This results not only in material deprivation but also in psychological harm, as individuals and groups internalize labels of inferiority imposed by society (Banks & Stephens, 2018). On top of that, despite global advancements in rights and representation, it continues to manifest across the world in diverse and evolving forms.

Throughout history, oppression has appeared in many forms through systemic practices that control marginalized populations. This is evident in biblical references (e.g., slavery of Israelites), colonization, the subjugation of women, and the marginalization of people with disabilities (Abay & Soldatić, 2024; David et al., 2019). Aside from these, one enduring form of oppression is the marginalization of IPs. International reports indicate that many Indigenous communities face disproportionate poverty, limited access to social services, and ongoing threats to their ancestral lands (e.g., Abay & Soldatić, 2024; United Nations, 2018). They are also frequently excluded from decision-making structures, reinforcing their systemic vulnerability (Kuokkanen, 2019; Murphy, 2019). These global patterns show the depth and persistence of Indigenous marginalization, but their implications become even more pronounced when examined within contexts of colonized countries such as the Philippines.

The Philippines is home to a diverse population of IPs with unique cultural heritage. In IPRA, the term "Indigenous people" referred to groups who have continuously lived as organized communities on communally bounded and defined territories, with distinct cultural traits, and a history of differentiation from the majority (The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, 1997). They are estimated to comprise about 10-20% of the Philippine population, with over 110 ethno-linguistic groups spread across Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, each with their own systems of knowledge, governance, and worldview (Calde, 2017; Paredes, 2019). Their ancestral domains are often rich in natural resources and biodiversity, which play a vital role in both cultural identity and ecological sustainability (Simbulan, 2016). Hence, these communities carry invaluable cultural traditions, including oral literature, indigenous healing practices, rituals, and systems of communal solidarity (Cruz, 2017). Despite this richness, however, their continued existence has been marked by struggles for recognition and survival.

"We live near our ancestral land, but most of us do not remember what it's like to live in our old home," is what was lamented by Datu Anglao from Manobo-Pulangiyon in an article from Amnesty Philippines (2022). One of the most pressing challenges faced by IPs is the issue of land rights and dispossession, which has been shaped by centuries of colonial and state policies (Simbulan, 2016). When Spanish colonizers came to the Philippines in 1521, the Regalian Doctrine, which asserts that all lands and natural resources belong to the state, was invoked and was justified by the Vatican's Doctrine of Discovery (Calde, 2017). This in turn allowed the Spanish Crown to claim ownership of all lands, displacing the native populations. Moreover, modern legislation such as the Philippine Mining Act of 1995 has further liberalized extractive industries, prioritizing corporate interests over indigenous land rights, and resulting in displacement, militarization, and the destruction of ancestral lands (Doyle, 2019; Simbulan, 2016). These historical and contemporary land challenges have not only dispossessed IPs of their territories but also entrenched their marginalization in broader society.

The struggles of IPs in the Philippines extend beyond land issues and manifest in persistent socioeconomic disparities, systemic neglect, and discrimination (e.g., Onsay & Rabajante, 2025; Susim, 2024). They consistently experience extreme poverty rates, limited access to education, poor health services, and a lack of infrastructure compared to the mainstream population (Onsay & Rabajante, 2025). In many areas, IPs face stereotyping and cultural prejudice, which perpetuate exclusion and social inequality (Susim, 2024; Paredes, 2019). For example, Lumad schools in Mindanao have been repeatedly attacked or vilified, reflecting how structural violence intersects with cultural marginalization (Simbulan, 2016). Studies also reveal that indigenous youth experience discrimination that impacts their well-being and limits opportunities for growth (e.g., Susim,

2024; David, 2021). These intersecting forms of disadvantage may deepen indigenous communities' vulnerability and highlight the need to consider their psychological resilience and cultural identity.

Alongside socioeconomic issues, studies have also begun to explore the psychological aspects of IPs in the Philippines, which sheds light on their adaptive strategies, mental health struggles, and resilience (e.g., Cervantes, 2025; Chua et al., 2019; Gonzáles et al., 2022). In the Philippines, a study on the Mag-Indi Aetas of Pampanga demonstrates how adolescents face discrimination and acculturation pressures while relying on adaptive practices such as *pangangamuhan* (resource sharing) and *pamakyabe* (solidarity) to maintain psychological well-being (Susim, 2024). Moreover, Sikolohiyang Pilipino, rooted in indigenous worldviews, also frames well-being in transpersonal terms, emphasizing *kapwa* (shared identity), *pakikiramdam* (social empathy), and *kaginhawaan* (holistic wellness) (Cervantes, 2025). These culturally embedded approaches highlight how resilience among IPs are deeply tied to cultural traditions and community values rather than merely individual psychological processes.

The cultural values, beliefs, and traditions of IPs serve as both sources of identity and frameworks for survival. Practices such as community decision-making, oral storytelling, rituals, and folk healing reflect indigenous perspectives on interconnectedness, spirituality, and collective well-being (Cervantes, 2025; Cruz, 2017). For instance, indigenous knowledge systems governing natural resource management sustain both livelihoods and ecosystems, embodying a worldview that sees humans as part of nature rather than separate from it (Chua et al., 2019; Simbulan, 2016). Yet, as Paredes (2019) notes, state recognition processes often force Indigenous groups to conform to rigid stereotypes of "authentic" indigeneity, which risks commodifying their traditions and distorting their cultural practices. In line with this, researchers must approach IPs with sensitivity, ensuring that studies do not replicate colonial patterns of knowledge extraction but instead affirm indigenous agency.

Lived Realities of Filipino Indigenous Women

The marginalization of women is a universal reality, and it is this reality that has cast women in the Philippines as the victim, the exploited, the dominated, and the "other". A victim, as women in the Philippines have suffered from both historical and structural inequalities, such as how colonialism institutionalized patriarchal norms that marginalized them in both family and society (Baynes et al., 2019; Zimmermann et al., 2025). Exploited, as they have to bear the burden of unpaid domestic labor at home while also being funneled into low-paying, insecure jobs in the labor market and overseas (Ang, 2019). Dominated, as their autonomy is curtailed by cultural and religious expectations that promote obedience and submissiveness, reinforced by institutions that privilege male authority (Tiamzon-Abiera, 2024; Ungab et al., 2022). Lastly, the "other", for being constructed as secondary to the male norm, reduced to stereotypes that either idealize or objectify her, particularly in media and commodified spaces (Casil-Batang, 2021; Enaya, 2025). These realities affirm that women's subordination is not incidental but the result of intersecting historical, cultural, and economic structures that systematically maintain patriarchal structures.

Historically, women in the Philippines were highly regarded during pre-colonial times. Early Filipino society has been known for its openness to gender diversity and inclusivity, embracing harmony among different gender roles, which led many scholars to describe it as "matriarchal" (Alegre, 2022; Almeda, 2023; Ildefonso, 2022). This notion was most evident in the performed role of babaylan—women who worked alongside the datus, or clan leaders, in important social and spiritual affairs (Hega et al., 2017). Further, they were not merely cultural and social figures but were also deeply respected as they performed the role of doctors or community healers (Diva, 2022; Salazar, 1994, as cited in Hega et al., 2017). During this period, women in general were also revered for their life-giving power and nurturing role in sustaining the community (Piscos, 2023). It illustrates that the role of women in pre-colonial Philippines manifests a society that valued their wisdom, purity, and vital contributions to the well-being of the community.

When colonization came to the scene, it disrupted the existing social harmony and shifted the Philippines toward a patriarchal layout. Circa 1500s, when the Spanish landed in the Philippines and began their occupation, women in the Philippines were increasingly despised under the influence of Christianity, which promoted misogynistic beliefs (Aguja, 2024). The Church reinforced the notion of patriarchy by embedding it into societal structures,

integrating it into values, worldviews, and socialization, and perpetuating it through the family, media, laws, and even education (Camaya & Tamayo, 2018; Tran et al., 2021). Piscos (2023) termed this process as "demonization" of women, in which babaylan's feminine roles were discredited as evil actions and detrimental. He further explained that devaluing these traditional roles disrupted the balance and unity they had once maintained in society. As patriarchal ideas became embedded in education and gender systems, women gradually lost authority in leadership positions and other social functions (Camaya & Tamayo, 2018; Rodriguez, 2022).

As the patriarchal system is still extremely instilled in the present times, Indigenous women in the Philippines, despite being considered as cultural keepers and environmental stewards, still face marginalization within their own communities. Indigenous women serve as primary food cultivators while preserving cultural heritage through the transmission of songs, stories, and weaving traditions that shape their identity (Gabriel et al., 2020; Hernandez-Willsheer et al., 2025; Macusi et al., 2023). This role as cultural custodians extends to their crucial role in environmental conservation. In the Kalanguya community, for instance, women play a significant role in sustainable agriculture by managing slash-and-burn practices (Gabriel et al., 2020). Yet, despite performing these critical roles, Indigenous women have their leadership diminished by modern, patriarchal value systems that push them out of decision-making spaces and confine them in domestic roles (Camaya & Tamayo, 2018). These systemic dynamics subtly exclude Indigenous women by devaluing their work and their authority, unless addressed through inclusive policies and recognition of their roles.

The roles of Indigenous women become even more precarious beyond their ancestral domains. As they pursue greater empowerment, they often face strong resistance from patriarchal and traditional structures, where their advancement is perceived as a threat to established gender norms (Apas et al., 2025). This resistance is further compounded by intersectional forms of violence, such as marital rape, trafficking, forced sterilization, and harmful cultural practices that disproportionately target Indigenous women and are often intensified by displacement, migration, and conflict (Gabriel, 2017; Human Rights Council, 2022). In educational settings, Indigenous women encounter significant barriers to access, leadership, and skills training, driven by both societal discrimination and financial hardship—placing them at greater disadvantage than Indigenous men (Apas et al., 2025). Despite facing elevated levels of gender-based challenges, many Indigenous women continue to be denied access to justice due to persistent discrimination and systemic institutional barriers.

Being an Indigenous woman often means enduring persistent oppression, where colonial legacies, gendered power structures, and systemic neglect converge to produce deep psychological distress (Hagen & Minter, 2020; Moreno-Lacalle et al., 2023). The loss of ancestral lands and environmental degradation disrupts their sense of identity, belonging, and continuity (Hagen & Minter, 2020). These struggles are even intensified by gendered expectations, as they carry the burden of caregiving and cultural preservation while being constrained by social and institutional inequalities (Apas et al., 2025; Gabriel, 2017). They also face high rates of depression, anxiety, and trauma linked to land loss, cultural disruption, and gender-based violence (Baluyot, 2025; Owais et al., 2019). Yet, despite these mounting mental well-being risks, their psychological experiences remain underrepresented in research, leaving critical gaps in understanding how intersecting oppressions affect their resilience— an issue that, as Ninomiya et al. (2023) emphasize, requires confronting the colonial and patriarchal systems that continue to harm their well-being.

In response to the long history of marginalization experienced by women, especially those Filipino Indigenous communities, the government has enacted a number of laws to uphold women's rights and promote gender equality. Landmark policies such as the Magna Carta of Women (RA 9710), the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act (RA 9262), and IPRA (RA 8371) highlight the state's recognition of Indigenous women's roles, their protection from violence, and their rights to ancestral domains and cultural identity (Casil-Batang, 2021; Gabriel, 2017; Manapsal, 2022). However, while these legal measures establish a foundation for protecting women, particularly those from marginalized groups, their implementation often falls short due to limited resources, bureaucratic restrictions, and the lack of culturally sensitive approaches (Gabriel, 2017). Many Indigenous women remain unaware of their rights, face difficulties in accessing justice, and continue to experience systemic barriers in education, livelihood, and political participation (Casil-Batang, 2021; Gabriel, 2017). Thus, although laws exist to address women's oppression, much remains to be done in ensuring that these

legal protections are fully realized in practice by bridging the gap between legal provisions and the lived realities of Indigenous women.

Indigenous People in State Universities/Colleges

Education is often hailed as the great equalizer; opening doors to opportunity and growth, yet Indigenous students find it hard to access equitable and culturally responsive education. The right to education is universally recognized as an inherent right of all individuals, irrespective of linguistic background, religious affiliation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or political beliefs (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). Formal education systems continue to marginalize them by prioritizing dominant cultural perspectives over Indigenous knowledge (Gaite, 2025). This is exceptionally pressing in the Philippines, given its diverse Indigenous population (Gaite, 2025). Although legal frameworks exist, socioeconomic inequalities and cultural exclusion still shape the educational path of Indigenous students (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). These often lead to academic adjustment difficulties, financial constraints, discrimination, and cultural identity conflicts (Regaspi, 2023).

Beyond systemic exclusion, Indigenous students face day-to-day struggles that compound their academic experiences. Studies have pinpointed usual challenges in SUCs, including discrimination and marginalization, which contribute to acculturative stress among them (e.g., Bongco, 2024; Regaspi, 2023). Many of them struggle to balance their traditions with contemporary culture, facing difficulties related to language barriers and a lack of culturally relevant curricula (Bayod et al., 2021). Likewise, Bongco (2024) found that the need to participate in religious ceremonies or the belief that starting a family is more important than education can take away from their studies. Also, limited financial resources further worsen these challenges, affecting their transportation, lodging, and other essential expenses (Regaspi, 2023). These interconnected cultural, emotional, and financial struggles can be additionally worsened by the very structure of the educational system itself.

The existing educational system usually reflects a neo-colonial orientation, alienating Indigenous students from their culture and traditions (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). The lack of instructors proficient in Indigenous languages and the limited integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) in the curriculum further perpetuate this disconnection (Binayao, 2017). This cultural takeover can lead to the devaluing of Indigenous teachings and a sense of alienation, which hinders Indigenous students' academic success and cultural preservation (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). Hence, to promote equity and social justice, higher education institutions are urged to prioritize Indigenous voices and perspectives (Gaite, 2025). This includes establishing dedicated support organizations, expanding financial assistance, and promoting cultural awareness to create more inclusive environments (Gaite, 2025; Regaspi, 2023). While these reforms highlight the need for cultural inclusivity, their impact remains limited in many SUCs.

Currently, SUCs face major challenges, including budget cuts, insufficient infrastructure, corruption, and limited mental health services, which further burden Indigenous students. The government’s proposed ₱14.48-billion reduction for 2025 threatens operations and capital outlay, restricting resources for student programs (Department of Budget and Management, 2024). Notably, Bulacan State University (hereinafter BulSU) is among the most affected, facing a ₱114-million budget cut that places it 10th nationwide among the hardest-hit institutions (Mauricio & Mabanglo, 2024). Such financial limitations may impede BulSU’s ability to provide assistance to economically and culturally marginalized students. Moreover, issues of corruption within some SUCs have been reported to weaken institutional trust and restrict the equitable distribution of resources (Sulasula & Moreno, 2023). The shortage of mental health professionals and the persistence of stigma have also been identified as barriers to student well-being and adjustment (Yuduang et al., 2022; Pinggolio & Mateo, 2018). Collectively, these conditions reflect how institutional and cultural constraints may intersect to reinforce the “multiple jeopardy” faced by Indigenous students in SUCs.

The Lens of Intersectionality in Understanding Marginalization

Over the past decade, women have collectively risen to challenge the deeply ingrained and normalized violence that shapes their daily lives. Through solidarity built on shared experiences, they have recognized that collective political action carries far greater power to demand change than isolated voices alone. As Crenshaw (1991)

argues, this politicization has fundamentally transformed how violence against women is understood. Yet, a continued lack of nuanced, context-specific understanding fuels ongoing marginalization and gives rise to new, often subtler forms of violence. While many women demonstrate remarkable resilience, the psychological toll of persistent oppression is deep and enduring.

Although feminist movements have made significant strides, they have frequently overlooked the unique realities of Indigenous women, whose experiences are shaped by intersecting forces of gender, race, culture, colonial histories, and socio-economic conditions. To fully grasp the compounded marginalization these women face, especially within state institutions, an intersectional framework is essential. Rooted in Black feminist thought and formalized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality highlights how social identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality are interconnected and mutually reinforce one another. This approach challenges traditional single-axis frameworks that isolate identities, often missing the complex and intersecting nature of social experiences. Instead, intersectionality recognizes that these categories intersect, creating unique and layered experiences of privilege and oppression shaped by an individual's social position (Anders et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1989).

These intersections are influenced by broader social structures such as institutions, policies, and cultural norms (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Smith, 2016). These dynamics unfold within interconnected systems of power, including legal frameworks, government institutions, religion, and media often resulting in systemic oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Severs et al., 2016). In state institutions, this manifests as racism, ethnocentrism, classism, heterosexism, monosexism, systemic bias, and exclusionary policies, which compound educational challenges. The exclusion of Indigenous women from power structures, through underrepresentation or misrepresentation, both reflects and perpetuates their prolonged marginalization.

Intersectionality Theory serves as a multidimensional framework for exploring how intersecting social identities shape individual experiences and inform broader knowledge production. One dimension lies in empirical analysis, examining real-world data and lived experiences to understand how identities like gender, ethnicity, and class interact within power systems such as workforce structures (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, as cited in Gupta et al., 2024). Another dimension of intersectionality lies in its deep connection to activism and social movements, extending its significance beyond academia. It has shaped advocacy efforts and contributed to broader struggles against systemic injustice. These movements reflect how intersectionality operates through fluid, interconnected forms of knowledge that work in collaboration rather than in isolation (Cho et al., 2013, as cited in Riola, 2025).

Several studies demonstrate how intersectionality deepens our understanding of complex social realities. For instance, Genon (2022) examines how gender and ethnicity intersect to shape the leadership experiences of Meranao women in the Philippines. These women face barriers such as cultural expectations, patriarchal norms, and ethnic stereotypes that limit their access to and expression of leadership. Using an intersectional lens, Genon (2022) shows how they navigate both marginalization and agency, with their leadership shaped by social and cultural contexts. The study also highlights the emotional impact of their conflicting roles and the strategies they use to resist and adapt. Similarly, Apas et al. (2025) apply an intersectional lens to Indigenous women leaders in the Philippines, showing how gender, culture, and socio-economic status create compounded barriers to leadership. Economic constraints, patriarchal norms, and limited educational access hinder their participation. The studies emphasize the need for tailored support through mentorship, education, and social networks to challenge structural inequalities.

Smith (2016) and the Human Rights Council (2022) highlight that despite growing recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights, systemic barriers to justice and equality persist both within their communities and in broader state institutions. These barriers include discrimination, stigma, language challenges, and the risk of re-victimization. Indigenous women, in particular, often receive no redress for violence and injustice within systems that overlook their unique vulnerabilities and histories of exclusion. They also bear the burden of intergenerational trauma, which, if left unaddressed, passes down to future generations. Yet, there remains a significant lack of localized research on the lived experiences of Indigenous women, especially in higher education, where their distinct forms of marginalization often remain invisible (Gaite, 2025).

Intersectionality offers a crucial lens for understanding the complex realities Indigenous women face within power structures, revealing how oppression and resistance often coexist. Indigenous women resist by challenging dominant norms, affirming cultural identity, pursuing academic success, and advancing gender empowerment within institutions that frequently sustain marginalization (Hooks, 1989, as cited in Severs et al., 2016). It also shows how institutions not only reinforce but compound social inequalities. By mapping these intersecting systems of domination, intersectionality provides a culturally grounded framework for analyzing the conditions that shape both struggle and resistance.

The empirical studies of intersectionality discussed align closely with Feminist Standpoint Theory, which argues that intersecting social experiences shape a unique worldview, providing Indigenous women with a distinct standpoint. The theory gained recognition in the mid-1980s through feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding's The Science Question in Feminism and subsequent works, was further developed by Nancy Hartsock's influential Feminist Historical Materialism (1987) and later expanded through contributions from other Feminist Standpoint theorists (Gurung, 2020). It posits that knowledge is shaped by social position and lived experience, particularly those of marginalized groups such as Indigenous women, and by their engagement in collective political struggle, wherein a standpoint, unlike a mere perspective, integrates political awareness with critical reflection on knowledge production and social realities (Kokushkin, 2014). The theory challenges traditional scientific assumptions by showing how social power affects whose knowledge is recognized and emphasizes understanding social relations from both dominant and oppressed viewpoints (Harding, 2004, as cited in Gurung, 2020).

Applying an intersectional lens in the Philippine context, particularly within SUCs, allows for a nuanced understanding of how intersecting social identities shape the experiences of Indigenous women. This approach examines whether their positions within these institutions maintain, deepen, or transform the marginalization they experience outside of them, and how institutional power systems, such as academic structures, policies, and cultural norms, either reinforce or challenge these dynamics. Guided by Crenshaw's (1991) dimensions of structural, political, and representational intersectionality, it highlights the importance of interrogating not only how systems of power operate, but also whether these spaces can serve as sites of both exclusion and empowerment.

Research Gap

Studies on IPs in the Philippines have long documented their marginalization in relation to land dispossession, cultural invisibility, and socio-economic inequality (e.g., Simbulan, 2016; Susim, 2024; Paredes, 2019). In higher education, research has shown that Indigenous students face barriers of access, discrimination, and adjustment in non-Indigenous constitutions (e.g., Bongco, 2024; Gaite, 2025; Regaspi, 2023). Similarly, there is a substantial amount of literature that has explored the marginalization of women across many countries. In the Philippines, studies on women's oppression in the academe, the workplace, and other social institutions have drawn attention to issues such as gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and women's limited access to opportunities (Ang, 2019; Baynes et al., 2019; Casil-Batang, 2021; Enaya, 2025).

Yet as many existing works assume that all women encounter similar challenges, institutional policies and programs may appear inclusive yet fail to capture the specific realities of Indigenous women (Miole, 2024; Nesterova, 2020). This lack of research surfaces a critical knowledge gap in understanding how intersecting identities operate within academic institutions. Specifically, it is still unclear whether SUCs perpetuate, mitigate, or transform the intersecting inequities shaped by these power relations and experienced by Indigenous women. Besides, little is known about how Indigenous women in these institutions interpret, respond to, resist, or internalize such dynamics in their everyday academic and social lives (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021; UNDP, 2011, as cited in Gaite, 2025).

Addressing these gaps, therefore, is essential to expand intersectionality as both an analytical lens and a potential framework for equity and empowerment. As Crenshaw (1991, as cited in Smith, 2016) argued, while identities such as race and gender are often viewed as tools of oppression used to divide and exclude, intersectionality also highlights how these very categories can become sources of empowerment and catalysts for solidarity, agency,

and transformation, rather than barriers to true freedom. In line with this, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of undergraduate Indigenous women enrolled in BulSU in terms of their:
   a. intersectional conditions shaping their university experiences?
   b. management of academic demands?
   c. meaning-making of intersectional experiences?
   d. perceptions of institutional support?
2. What culturally responsive framework with recommendations should be formulated based on the lived intersectional experiences of Indigenous women in higher education?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design, focused on exploring and understanding human experience in naturalistic contexts (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). A phenomenological approach is applied to capture the essence of the intersectional lived experiences of undergraduate Indigenous women students in BulSU. This is complemented by the *pagtatanong-tanong* method, employed alongside semi-structured interviews to ensure cultural sensitivity and contextual relevance (Pe Pua, 2006, as cited in Silan, 2024). Moreover, this is grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is subjective, multiple, and constructed through social and cultural experiences (Honebein, 1996, as cited in Adom et al., 2016).

Participants

The participants of this study solely included women from Indigenous backgrounds who are currently enrolled in both main and external campuses of BulSU. While BulSU served as the primary research locale, participants' experiences beyond the university were included insofar as these intersected with and shaped their positionality as women, IPs, and students in a state university. Participant selection was therefore bounded by institutional enrollment while allowing for contextual variation across social spaces. The sample consists of nine (9) participants, which falls within the suggested range of 5 to 25 participants for phenomenological studies, (Creswell, 2013, as cited in Thompson, 2018). This sample size supported data saturation, which ensured the depth and richness required in qualitative inquiry.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Indigenous Group	Age	Current Year Level	Degree Program	Campus
P01	Dumagat	18	First Year	Business Administration	Sarmiento
P02	Dumagat	18	First Year	Business Administration	Sarmiento
P03	Dumagat	19	First Year	Tourism Management	Sarmiento
P04	Dumagat	18	First Year	Hospitality Management	Sarmiento
P05	Teduray	18	First Year	Business Administration	Main
P06	Badjao	21	Second Year	Environmental Science	Main
P07	Badjao	21	Second Year	Tourism Management	Main
P08	Badjao	21	Fourth Year	Marketing Management	Main
P09	Bugkalot	20	Second Year	Financial Management	Meneses

The study employed snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique efficient in building rapport and tapping into existing social networks within Indigenous communities. This facilitated access to participants who may be difficult to reach through traditional recruitment methods and ensures ethical sensitivity in engaging with vulnerable populations. Initial participants were ecruited through contact with BulSU Inclusivity Hub, the office

responsible for catering to Indigenous students within the university. To qualify, a participant must be: (1) a woman that is both self-identified as a member of Indigenous Cultural Community (ICC) or IP groups and certified by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), (2) be of legal age, (3) able to converse in either English or Filipino, and (4) presently enrolled in any degree program at BulSU who have completed at least one academic semester.

Instruments

The primary data collection instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers to elicit in-depth qualitative data on the lived experiences of Indigenous women students in BulSU. This method involved an interactive dialogue between the researcher and the participant, guided by a flexible interview protocol supplemented with follow-up questions, probes, and clarifications. It enabled the collection of open-ended responses that capture participants' thoughts, emotions, and perspectives on a given topic, allowing for a deeper exploration of personal and, at times, sensitive experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). At the same time, the semi-structured format ensured methodological consistency across participants while allowing the researcher to remain responsive to emerging themes and insights during the interview process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Consistent with Kallio et al. (2016), the interview questions were developed based on gaps identified in the existing literature and aligned with the specific objectives of the study, thereby translating the research questions into guided inquiry that directly addresses the study's aims. The interview guide was validated by a professional in research and was pilot tested with an Indigenous woman enrolled in BulSU. Based on the input of the participant, the researchers applied minor adjustments to the wording of certain questions and the overall sequence to enhance participant comfort and data quality.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researchers had already begun with the preparation of a semi-structured interview guide, which underwent a consultation with an expert on research involving IPs to ensure relevance and cultural appropriateness. Afterwards, to ensure rigor, the interview guide was evaluated and validated by the researchers' professor in Research Methods in Psychology. The researchers then sought permission from the BulSU Inclusivity Hub and obtained the official list of enrolled Indigenous students who may serve as potential participants.

Upon approval, a pilot test was conducted through a face-to-face interview with one (1) participant—an Ivatan student in her fourth year at BulSU. The data were gathered through an in-depth, semi-structured interview held in November 2025 at Malolos, Bulacan. The decision to pilot test with a single participant was intentional, as the aim of the pilot was not to achieve thematic saturation but to evaluate the appropriateness of the interview guide, check the clarity of questions, and assess the relevance of the thematic framework to intersectional experiences of Indigenous women students. The pilot test confirmed that questions effectively elicited reflective, experience-based responses and informed minor refinements to encourage deeper discussion on university-level inclusivity programs and their personal coping strategies.

For the final implementation, the researchers have coordinated with the Local Research Ethics Committee of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy to seek ethical clearance prior to the full-blown data collection. Afterwards, the researchers implemented a further series of systematic procedures to ensure that the study was conducted ethically and rigorously. Additionally, the interviewers, who are psychology students, have familiarized themselves with the participants' backgrounds and relevant policies affecting them, and approach the interviews with sensitivity, care, and professionalism.

To ensure cultural sensitivity and relevance in research with Indigenous and ethnic minority groups, data were gathered through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews complemented by the Indigenous research method of *pagtatanong-tanong.* As Pe-Pua (2006) explains, *pagtatanong-tanong* is a culturally grounded, conversational approach that values mutual respect, trust, and natural interaction between the researcher and participants

(Roulston, 2023). The repetition of *tanong* (question) in *tanong-tanong* reflects the inquirer's genuine determination to seek understanding through extended and reciprocal dialogue. This makes *pagtatanong-tanong* particularly suitable for exploring sensitive topics such as lived experiences of oppression and marginalization.

Pe-Pua (1989) also emphasizes that *pagtatanong-tanong* can be integrated with other Indigenous research methods. Building on this, the present study positioned *pagtatanong-tanong* as compatible with both phenomenological and intersectional frameworks, as it honors participant agency while acknowledging the multiple and intersecting contexts that shape their experiences (Drawson et al., 2017). To create a more relational atmosphere, the researchers began each interview with light, casual conversation before proceeding to the main discussion. Each interview lasted for about 30–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission.

Acknowledging that the researchers occupy an outsider position in relation to the Indigenous participants, they engaged in continuous reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis, as emphasized by Berger (2015) as cited in Braun and Clarke (2023). At the end of each interview, a debriefing process was conducted to provide participants with the opportunity to clarify or expand their responses, ask questions, and express any concerns. This stage also serves to ensure that participants leave the session with reassurance regarding how their data will be used. To safeguard confidentiality, audio recordings were securely stored in a private Google Drive accessible only to the researchers, and transcripts were anonymized. The transcripts were then analyzed by employing Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis to identify patterns, themes, and meanings relevant to the lived experiences of undergraduate Indigenous women enrolled in BulSU.

Finally, to further strengthen the credibility and accuracy of findings, a participant consultation was conducted after the initial analysis. Participants were invited to review the researchers' interpretations of their statements to confirm whether the themes and insights accurately reflected their intersectional lived experiences. In addition, the researchers presented the proposed framework output of the study to solicit participants' feedback, personal insights, and suggestions. Engaging participants in this stage helped ensure that the research output meaningfully represented their realities and addressed their expressed needs.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from face-to-face interviews were evaluated by employing Braun and Clarke's (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a widely recognized method for systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning across qualitative data. In RTA, themes are understood as interpretive outputs which are actively developed by the researcher through sustained engagement with the data, rather than as objective entities that simply emerge. This emphasizes the researcher's reflexivity, judgment, and theoretical sensitivity as integral to meaning-making in the analytic process. In RTA, Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase reflective analytic process is still applied. Hence, in addition to reflexivity, the analysis in this study will proceed as follows: (1) Familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report. The data presented in the results section provided a rich narrative description and is backed by appropriate quotations from the participants.

Following the thematic analysis, post-analysis validation procedures were conducted to ensure rigor and credibility. Although RTA recognizes the interpretive role of the researcher, participant validation was conducted to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the participants' experiences and did not misinterpret the stories they shared. Moreover, the analysis underwent validation sessions with the researchers' professor in Research Methods in Psychology and their thesis adviser to ensure methodological rigor and alignment with the study's objectives.

Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to ethical standards in conducting research with Indigenous participants through having sought approval from the BulSU Inclusivity Hub and coordinator for Indigenous students in each college. Aside from this, the researchers have coordinated with the Local Research Ethics Committee of their college to seek

ethical clearance prior to the data collection. These steps ensured cultural sensitivity and compliance with the Republic Act No. 8371 or IPRA, which guaranteed the right of Indigenous communities to free, prior, and informed consent (The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act, 1997). Further, this coordination affirms respect for both institutional protocols and community rights.

To ensure that participation remains voluntary and grounded in respect for participants' autonomy, the researchers also secured informed consent from the participants prior to their involvement. Each participant is clearly informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Alongside informed consent, an information sheet was also given to the participants. This sheet contains the main information about the study, why they were invited to participate, and how they will take part. Then, to minimize potential distress from recalling sensitive experiences and ensure that participants leave the interview with a clear understanding of how their stories will be used, a debriefing process also took place after the interviews.

Finally, in observance of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded at all stages of the study. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms, and data was stored in a secure file accessible only to the researchers. These measures ensure that participants' identities and dignity are protected while maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the personal stories shared by the participants, there are thirteen (13) themes that arise in line with the objectives of this study, tracing (1) the intersectional conditions shaping their university experiences, (2) their management of academic demands, (3) their meaning-making of their intersectional experiences, (4) their experience of institutional support in the university, and (5) their recommendation for inclusive educational experiences.

Intersectional Conditions Shaping University Experiences

The experiences of Indigenous women enrolled in BulSU are shaped by the overlapping influences of gender, indigeneity, and institutional positioning. The findings of this study outline these conditions through negotiated acceptance, subtle defiance, lived vulnerability, partial inclusion, and enduring structural uncertainty. The first theme, "*Limitadong Pagtanggap: Conditional Inclusion of Indigenous Woman Identity*," reveals how participants described being treated equally and supported. These interactions suggest that the university can provide supportive spaces that promote a sense of belonging. This aligns with calls for higher education institutions to prioritize Indigenous voices and promote cultural awareness (e.g., Gaite, 2025; Regaspi, 2023). Such affirmations reflect what intersectionality describes as moments where institutional spaces may mitigate, though not erase, layered inequalities (Anders et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1989).

Participants described equal treatment and help from peers, just as what P03 shared:

> The way they treat me is the same as how they treat the other students. They always say that inside the classroom, we are like siblings. ('*Yung pagtrato po nila sa akin ay pareho lang din po sa kung paano nila itrato 'yung ibang estudyante. Lagi nilang sinasabi na sa loob daw po ng classroom, magkakapatid po kami.*)

P02 also resonated with this statement, describing her classmates patiently guiding them during lessons, indicating forms of inclusion grounded in everyday interactions. This contrasts with earlier studies documenting experiences of unfair treatment and overt discrimination among Indigenous peoples (e.g., David, 2019; Susim, 2024).

There are also participants who expressed receiving fair treatment largely due to their physical features, as shared by P08:

> They treat me as an equal, I don't experience bullying, probably because I don't look like an IP. (*Equal naman po 'yung trato nila, 'di naman ako na-bu-bully kasi 'di ata ako mukhang IP*.)

With this account, their experiences of equal treatment may be attributed to the fact that the participants in the current study did not have Indigenous identity markers (e.g., skin color, facial features, language used) that visibly differentiate them from the dominant student population, as discussed in prior literature involving MagIndi-Aetas (e.g., David, 2019; Susim, 2024), which may reduce instances of immediate prejudice in everyday interactions. This shows that the invisibility of the identity markers may influence the manifestation of discrimination in the university context, suggesting that the experiences of marginalization may also vary depending on the visibility of Indigenous identity.

These positive experiences, however, coexist with subtle boundaries in inclusion. For instance, peers expressing curiosity about Indigenous identity highlighted the participants' distinctiveness within the classroom context. As P02 shared:

> My classmates, when they found out I'm IP, were just surprised and seemed glad, as if they couldn't believe I'm IP. *('Yung mga classmates ko po, nu'ng nalaman na IP ako, nagulat lang po sila at parang natuwa lang po sila na hindi po makapaniwala na IP po ako.)*

Such curiosity, though well-intentioned, suggests that recognition of Indigenous identity is often framed as exceptional rather than fully normalized. This is similar to the findings of Park and Bahia (2022), who found that Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) graduate students frequently experience hypervisibility, where fascination or recognition highlight their marginalized identities, highlighting subtle boundaries of inclusion in the classroom. Within the university, participants also encountered subtle discrimination such as commentaries that their admission was due to special privileges and mockery tied to stereotypes. These experiences align with studies showing that Indigenous students in SUCs often experience acculturative stress, stereotyping, and cultural alienation within institutions that privilege dominant norms (e.g., Bongco, 2024; Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021; Regaspi, 2023). From an intersectional perspective, the convergence of indigeneity and womanhood influences how students are perceived—often through lenses of cultural intrigue or approachability that enable recognition while reinforcing distinction (Apas et al., 2025; Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, inclusion remains partial and conditional, even when students feel affirmed.

Building from the previous discussion, Indigenous women also face structural barriers beyond campus that shape their educational experiences. The second theme, *"Paghihirap: Living under Structural and Material Uncertainty,"* indicates that financial hardship is a defining condition influencing their academic trajectories, reflecting the intersection of indigeneity, gender, and socio-economic marginalization. The inability to constantly afford examination sheets, school contributions, transportation costs, and even meals demonstrated material deprivation that extends beyond budgeting difficulties. As P06 explained:

> Because of financial problems, what we do when we don't have money is that my mom doesn't want me to go to school because I don't have an allowance. Then we go to school even if we haven't eaten. (*Dahil sa mga financial problem, 'yung ginagawa po namin kapag walang pera, ayaw po papasukin ni mama kasi wala pong baon. Tapos pumapasok po kami kahit wala po kaming kain*.)

This statement suggests how material deprivation is not only an economic issue but also culturally embedded, where endurance and sacrifice are normalized as part of fulfilling both academic and familial responsibilities. Studies in SUCs indicate that the lack of financial resources significantly influences attendance, performance, and perseverance, particularly among students from historically marginalized communities (e.g., Onsay & Rabajante, 2025; Regaspi, 2023). Crucially, participants' financial constraints are embedded within broader patterns of land insecurity and displacement affecting their communities. P05 described land-related pressures:

> BSP is kind of circulating our area now… they say we don't have any title because they claim it belongs to them. (*Kasi po parang iniikot po kami ng BSP ngayon. Kung saan po, kabilang po 'yung lupa namin*

> *doon sa mga sinasabi nila na babayaran na lang daw po kahit ano, wala naman daw po kaming titulo kasi daw po sa kanila.*)

With the reports from participants that parts of their land are included in claims made by Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) and that compensation has been discussed as parts of these disputes, it surfaces longstanding histories of dispossession rooted in colonial doctrines and state development policies that weaken ancestral domain rights (Calde, 2017; Simbulan, 2016). Studies further show that land loss disrupts not only livelihood but also identity, belonging, and intergenerational stability (e.g., Hagen & Minter, 2020; Ninomiya et al., 2023), thereby solidifying cyclical structural uncertainty. Their experiences illustrate that struggles are sustained not simply by poverty, but by enduring historical, political, and institutional arrangements that continue to shape Indigenous women's access to higher education.

Extending from the previous discussion, the third theme, *"Pag-alpas: Defiance in Gendered and Communal Expectations,"* examines how Indigenous women experience communal judgment and discrimination in response to their decision to pursue education. This study found that acceptance received by the participants was limited, facing subtle mockery and pushbacks within their communities. Although existing studies assert that communities became the source of strength of IP students while adapting in a university setting (e.g., Cervantes, 2025; Susim, 2024), the participants of this study experienced the contrary. They faced discouragement anchored in normalized early marriage and limited expectations for Indigenous women. As P07 shared:

> It even comes from among our own Indigenous people… they say that we're studying, that our dreams are too high, but we won't be able to reach them. ('*Yung mismo po naming katutubo pa po… ano daw po, nag-aaral po kami, ang taas daw po ng pangarap namin, pero 'di naman po namin kaya abutin*.)

Being told that their dreams were "too high" or that studying would not change their life trajectory reflects the claims of previous studies that patriarchal norms and internalized marginalization shape collective beliefs about women (e.g., Apas et al., 2025; Gabriel, 2017). Such pressure illustrates how gender and indigeneity intersect to set the level of one's ambition, which is described by Intersectionality Theory as layered systems of disadvantage that manifest simultaneously (Anders et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1989). This is similar to studies where families in Indigenous contexts may discourage education due to fears of community disconnect, early marriage norms, or obligations to kin and land (Rivas, et al., 2024; Santos, 2020). Such tensions demonstrate political intersectionality, wherein women's aspirations are negotiated within cultural and communal power structures that may unintentionally reproduce patriarchal constraints (Abraham, 2019; Dursun, 2022).

Despite these experiences, stories of resistance from traditional communal norms surrounding early marriage and gendered roles surfaced in this study. These acts of resistance reflect intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hooks, 1989, as cited in Severs et al., 2016), as women challenge dominant norms while negotiating cultural identity, pursuing academic success, and advancing gender equity within institutions. This may be seen in what P03 shared:

> Some in our community tell us that we will become "old maids," because we will not get married, still, we chose to study. ('*Yung iba po sa community namin, sinasabihan po kami na tatandang dalaga, kasi ganiyan, 'di na po mag-aasawa, pero kasi pinili nga po naming mag-aral*.)

There were also other accounts of decisions to pursue education despite prevailing norms, as shared by P03:

> Most people here no longer want to go to college because they want to get married, but I went to college because my parents also wanted me to reach a higher level. (*Karamihan po rito hindi na po gustong mag-college kasi gusto na po nilang mag-asawa, pero nag-college ako kasi gusto ng magulang ko na tumuntong po ako sa mas mataas na level.*)

With this statement, parental support is a critical enabler, granting autonomy and encouraging higher education rather than enforcing conventional paths, allowing daughters to navigate intersecting social and cultural expectations, shape alternative trajectories, and buffer against communal and institutional pressures. This finding supports literature emphasizing the importance of family-level mediation in shaping Indigenous women's

educational mobility (e.g., Apas et al., 2025), suggesting that resistance is often relational rather than purely individual. These findings also highlight that resistance is not simply personal defiance but a strategic negotiation within layered systems of oppression, demonstrating both the possibilities and limits of empowerment for Indigenous women students (Riola, 2025; Anders et al., 2024; Apas et al., 2025; Crenshaw, 1989). Looking at the Feminist Standpoint perspective, the everyday experiences of Indigenous women demonstrate their unique disposition, which makes them more vulnerable to subtle forms of exclusion.

Beyond financial and structural challenges, Indigenous women navigate gendered vulnerabilities, where social norms and biological factors intersect to shape participation and well-being. The fourth theme, "*Paglaban: Contending with Gendered Vulnerability*," describes how uncomfortable transportation scenarios linked to school uniforms, particularly skirts, exposed participants to unwanted attention and harassment during commutes, while menstruation disrupted attendance and limited full participation. This is reflected in what was shared by P07:

> When I was on the bus, sitting down… there was a man, and I was wearing a skirt uniform. He kept staring. That's when I got scared and uncomfortable. (*Kapag sa bus po, kapag nakaupo… may isang lalaki po, kasi po naka-skirt po akong uniform. Then po, tingin po siya nang tingin. Doon po ako natakot at naging uncomfy*.)

This account of uncomfortable transportation experience, particularly the unwanted attention and harassment linked to wearing skirts as school uniforms, points to how women's bodies are routinely objectified and rendered publicly accessible. This resonates with analyses that describe women as constructed as secondary to the male norm and reduced to stereotypes that either idealize or commodify them, especially within media and public spaces (Casil-Batang, 2021; Enaya, 2025). The school uniform, while institutional intent, becomes a site where patriarchal gazes operate, transforming an educational requirement into a source of risk.

Similarly, P03 describes another challenge she experienced as a woman:

> As a girl, we have monthly menstruation. So, sometimes, I really have to go home because I can't bear the pain, especially on the first day. That's why I don't continue and just end up being absent. (*Kasi po bilang babae po, may monthly menstruation. So, minsan po, umuuwi ako talaga kasi 'di ko kaya kasi tiisin 'yung sakit like lalo na po kapag first day. Kaya po 'di ko po tinutuloy, uma-absent na lang po 'ko*.)

Menstruation-related disruptions to attendance highlight how biological processes are socially managed within institutions that remain inadequately responsive to women's reproductive health needs. Rather than being neutral academic spaces, universities often operate on implicit male-centered norms that assume uninterrupted participation. When institutional support is insufficient, menstruation becomes a structural barrier to full engagement (Bongco, 2024; Regaspi, 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2025). Structural intersectionality further shapes these vulnerabilities, as gender, cultural expectations, and studenthood converge to simultaneously constrain and create opportunities, revealing how layered social, cultural, and institutional forces govern both risk and resilience in academic spaces (Anders et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1989).

Following earlier themes on conditional inclusion, the theme, "*Pagbabago: Navigating Cultural Tension and Dissipating Identity,*" reveals that cultural assimilation among Indigenous women students occurs gradually through everyday social interaction rather than through explicit coercion. Participants described how the increasing presence of non-Indigenous groups in their communities led to reduced use of their mother tongue and greater reliance on dominant languages. As P01 shared:

> We don't really speak our own language much anymore because there are mostly outsiders around us, like Tagalog and Bisaya. So, we've kind of adapted as well. (*Hindi na rin po kami gaano nakakapagsalita ng sarili naming wika dahil puro dayo na rin po sa amin katulad ng mga Tagalog at Bisaya. So parang na-a-adapt na rin po.*)

This linguistic shift was framed not as intentional abandonment of culture but as practical adaptation to surrounding social realities. However, what appears as simple adjustment reflects deeper structural imbalance.

As the literature explains, oppression runs not only through overt discrimination but through the normalization of dominant cultural standards (David & Derthick, 2017; Pease, 2021). When majority languages become the primary medium of communication in schools and public spaces, Indigenous languages gradually lose functional value. Over time, this diminishes opportunities for cultural transmission.

The same participant also shared:

> I guess it is really gone, because I never got to meet the elders who truly spoke Dumagat. (*Wala na ata talaga kasi 'di ko na rin naabutan 'yung mga matatanda na nagsasalita talaga ng Dumagat*.)

This acknowledgment illustrates a tangible intergenerational rupture. Heritage loss, therefore, is not merely symbolic— it is experienced through the weakening of linguistic continuity and ancestral connection. Intersectionality further clarifies the depth of this tension (Anders et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1989). As Indigenous, these students navigate cultural marginalization; as women, they encounter gendered expectations; and as students, they operate within academic institutions structured around dominant epistemologies. The convergence of these identities produces a sense of in-betweenness, adapting to mainstream norms for academic and social survival while simultaneously recognizing the gradual erosion of cultural grounding. Cultural change, therefore, must be understood not as inevitable modernization but as structurally conditioned adaptation within unequal systems.

Managing the Demands of Academic Life

Extending the earlier discussions on conditional inclusion and cultural tension, the theme "*Nakikibagay: Conforming to Strategic Academic Climate*" shows that participants engaged in intentional self-adjustment strategies to navigate the academic and social demands of the academic environment. Presenting oneself as "neat" and "presentable," as shared by PO3, illustrates a form of impression management intended to gain respectful treatment and lessen discrimination. This is consistent with the study by Eduardo & Gabriel (2021), which revealed that marginalized students often regulate their self-presentation to challenge stereotypes and reduce vulnerabilities within the dominant institutional environment. Similarly, learning to "keep up" with social media trends after experiencing bullying shows a deliberate effort to fit in the prevailing youth culture as a means of social protection. As P04 described:

> I was bullied back then, but now I go along. Since social media has become popular, I've learned how to adjust to keep up. (*Na-bully nga po ako no'n, pero ngayon nakikisabay po ako. Dahil sikat na po 'yung social media, marunong na po akong mag-adjust, para makasabay po ako.*)

Studies on IP students in higher education note that culturally dominant norms within universities frequently pressure students to conform to gain acceptance, which contributes to acculturative stress and identity negotiation (Bayod et al., 2021; Bongco, 2024). While these strategies are adaptive, for Indigenous women students, it simultaneously underlines how institutional climates subtly reward conformity to mainstream standards. This academic adjustment further functioned as a survival strategy within a high-pressure learning environment in which participants reported difficulty adapting to a zero-based grading system, where minor mistakes significantly impacted grades. This is reflected in what was shared by P07:

> With the zero-based, I'm also having a hard time adjusting. The expectations are high, and you really have to keep up, that's why I force myself to. ('*Yung sa zero-based din po kasi nahihirapan ako mag-adjust. Ang taas po ng expectation, kailangan mo pong habulin, kaya pinipilit ko po talaga 'yung sarili ko*.)

Besides, feelings of overwhelm surfaced during participants' first days in the university, driven by large class sizes, unfamiliar professors, and fast-paced instruction. This transition shock conforms with the findings of Regaspi (2023), which found that IP students often encounter structural academic barriers upon entering SUCs, including increased performance expectations. The assumption that all students enter university equally prepared may inadvertently disadvantage those from marginalized educational backgrounds, particularly IP women students. Their realities of academic pressures are heavily associated with the intersecting social and cultural

dimensions of their identities, through which indigeneity, womanhood, and SUC studenthood form their experiences and expectations.

Several participants described feeling overwhelmed by the university environment and the abrupt shift in academic demands. One of them, P02, shared:

> On my first day at BulSU, I felt overwhelmed and found it hard to adjust because there were so many people, it was big, and I only knew a few. (*Noong unang araw ko po sa BulSU, na-overwhelm po ako at nahirapan mag-adjust kasi ang daming mga tao, ang laki po, at konti lang po kakilala ko.*)

While conforming to the academic climate, reports also revealed that participants actively engaged in motivational reframing as a key strategy to endure social, economic, and cultural pressures while pursuing higher education. Under the theme "*Nagpapatuloy: Reframing Intersectional Pressures into Academic Persistence*," participants demonstrated strong determination to challenge stereotypes associated with their Indigenous identity, which they interpreted as a source of purpose and empowerment. This corresponds with studies showing that IP students often derive meaning and motivation from adversity, positioning education as a tool to contest societal devaluation and strengthen cultural background (Apas et al., 2025; Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). By regarding academic efforts as personal achievement and cultural affirmation, participants consciously repositioned themselves against narratives that frame Indigenous women as incapable, weak, or destined for poverty.

This resistance is reflected in the experience of P01, who stated:

> I want to prove to everyone that not because someone is Dumagat means they are weak. (*Gusto kong patunayan sa lahat na hindi porket Dumagat is mahihina*.)

This determination is further supported by P04, who emphasized educational persistence as a means of uplifting their family and escaping poverty:

> I continued studying so I could help my parents and not experience this poverty anymore. (*Nagpatuloy po ako sa pag-aaral para makatulong po sa magulang ko and hindi na danasin 'tong poverty*.)

The "prove them wrong" orientation expressed by participants reflects a deliberate rejection of imposed deficit identities. This is further evident in the experience of P06, who shared:

> There are many people who look down on our culture. That's why I really want to prove something. Not just because we're Badjao, that's all we can be. It doesn't mean we won't achieve anything. (*Ang dami pong nangmamaliit about sa culture po namin. Kaya gustong-gusto ko din pong may mapatunayan. Hindi naman dahil Badjao kami ay hanggang doon na lang. Kumbaga, wala na po kaming mararating.*)

Rather than internalizing discriminatory views, they transformed these into motivational fuel, asserting competence and dignity through academic performance. This process resonates with Nancy Hartsock's articulation of Feminist Standpoint Theory, which argues that marginalized individuals generate critical knowledge precisely from their lived experiences of oppression (Hartsock, 1987, as cited in Gurung, 2020). The participants' motivation does not emerge despite adversity but because of it; their standpoint as Indigenous women enables them to interpret education not simply as credential acquisition, but as resistance, cultural reclamation, and socio-economic mobility.

Motivational reframing also stretches to aspirations for supporting family and improving economic circumstances, which underscore that individual ambitions are closely linked to communal responsibility. This strategy demonstrates how IP women navigate pressures ingrained from gender, ethnicity, and financial constraints, using education as both empowerment and survival (Gabriel, 2017; Onsay & Rabajante, 2025). Viewing academic achievement as a path to better opportunities led participants to be instilled with resilience through goal-oriented optimism, supporting their persistence despite cultural and structural barriers (Susim, 2024). In this way, IP women students simultaneously endure hardship and actively construct pathways to transform their realities through education.

These aspirations are further reflected in the participants' accounts of family-centered motivation, as expressed by P01:

> I want to help my parents, and I want them to be proud of me when I finish my studies. (*Gusto ko pong matulungan 'yung mga magulang ko at gusto ko po silang maging proud sa akin kapag nakapagtapos na ako.*)

The same participant highlighted education as a pathway to economic mobility and opportunity:

> I want to finish my studies because, firstly, when you're educated, you have a bigger advantage like jobs, you can earn more. (*Gusto ko po makapagtapos ng pag-aaral kasi unang-una kapag nakapag-aral ka is mas malaki 'yung advantage mo, tulad sa trabaho, mas malaki 'yung kita*.)

Emerging from the theme "*Nagtitiis: Relational and Spiritual Anchoring for Academic Endurance*," participants actively relied on emotional release, family support, and faith-based practices as coping strategies. Crying as a form of emotional catharsis reflects a self-regulatory process that allows individuals to release psychological tension before re-engaging with problem-solving, a pattern supported by a study showing that emotional expression can facilitate stress recovery and resilience (Molina et al., 2025). Congruent with recent studies, female students report higher perceived stress yet are more likely to use emotion-focused coping strategies, including emotional expression and support seeking (Graves et al., 2021; Prowse et al., 2021). This suggests that crying serves as a healthy emotional regulation strategy. This coping process is reflected in the experience of P06, who shared:

> I just cry alone. I don't tell my family because I don't want to worry. Then, when I feel better, I get up and come up with a solution. (*Umiiyak lang po ako mag-isa. Hindi ko po sinasabi sa pamilya ko kasi ayoko po na mag-alala po sila. Then kapag okay na po ako, babangon po ako, gagawa po ako ng solusyon.*)

Drawing motivation from parents' sacrifices, on the other hand, underscores the vital role of familial obligation and relational encouragement in sustaining educational commitment among students from collectivist and marginalized backgrounds. Similar findings were reported in studies on Indigenous and college students, where family support served as a primary source of strength amid academic adversity (Putri, 2024). In addition, Zarei and Fooladvand (2022) reported that family support eases women's stress and promotes academic pursuit. Spiritual anchoring further functioned as an emotional stabilizer, enabling participants to interpret hardship through hope, meaning, and perseverance.

Spiritual anchoring further functioned as an emotional stabilizer, enabling participants to interpret hardship through hope, meaning, and perseverance. This is reflected in the experience of P02, who expressed:

> Whenever I face a challenge, I go to a high place and talk to God. I think that the closer I am to Him, the more He can hear me. (*Kapag po may pagsubok, umaakyat po ako sa matataas na lugar at kinakausap ko po si God. May thinking po kasi ako na kapag mas malapit po ako sa Kanya, mas maririnig Niya po ako*.)

Research consistently shows that faith-based coping is associated with greater emotional regulation, optimism, and persistence in stressful academic environments (Campo, 2021), with findings indicating that these spiritual beliefs exert stronger support towards women (Lehihi et al., 2025; Öztürk & Akar, 2024). For many marginalized students, spirituality offers both comfort and a framework for understanding struggle as temporary and purposeful, thereby strengthening motivation to continue pursuing education. Through an intersectional lens, their motivation is inseparable from their identities as Indigenous daughters and women whose educational pursuits carry communal aspirations. In this sense, their coping strategies simultaneously expose institutional gaps while demonstrating how marginalized students actively construct pathways to remain and succeed in higher education.

Meaning-making of IP Women on their Intersectional Experiences

Indigenous women students actively constructed meaning from their intersectional experiences by reframing academic spaces such as BulSU as a potential avenue of empowerment when cultural identity was affirmed.

Under the theme "*Taas-Noo: Strengthening Academic Confidence and Indigenous Pride*," participants' growing confidence did not arise solely from individual resilience but was nurtured through experiences of acceptance, peer support, and recognition of Indigenous identity within the university environment. This supports Bongco's (2024) assertion that belongingness and social support enhance persistence and self-esteem among Indigenous students in state universities. Female students, particularly, are motivated to achieve academic goals through their support systems (Zarei & Fooladvand, 2022). As P06 noted that:

> I've grown stronger and more confident in continuing my studies because I have many people supporting me. (*Mas tumatag at tumaas po 'yung confidence ko na magpatuloy sa pag-aaral kasi madami rin naman po na sumusuporta*.)

Viewed intersectionally, validation of their cultural identity simultaneously reconstructed how participants experienced their gendered and academic roles. This enabled pride in indigeneity to push back against outdated, harmful views within educational systems. Although this challenges earlier claims that Philippine universities often alienate Indigenous students from their culture and traditions (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021), it aligns with evidence that culturally affirming learning environments foster empowerment and safety for marginalized learners (Kagi et al., 2025; Keddie, 2019). Through this process, participants interpreted affirmation not merely as inclusion but as a source of strength that buffered stereotype threat and reinforced their self-perception as capable scholars.

This is clear in accounts of heightened indigenous pride, P01 emphasized a deepened sense of identity, stating:

> I've come to realize that, as a Dumagat, I should be proud. I was proud before, but now I feel even prouder of myself and my ethnicity. (*Na-realize ko na bilang isang Dumagat, dapat maging proud ako. Proud na po ako dati, pero ngayon mas naging proud ako sa sarili ko and sa ethnicity ko po*.)

P08 similarly expressed a shift away from internalized stigma, noting:

> I've also realized that not everyone shames your identity just because you're Indigenous. (*Nalinawan na rin ako na parang hindi naman lahat ng tao ay is-shame 'yung identity mo kapag Indigenous person ka*.)

This empowerment coexisted with persistent exposure to discrimination, which shaped a parallel meaning-making process through endurance and emotional self-protection. Under the theme "*Tibay ng Loob: Maintaining Inner Strength amid Criticism and Emotional Pain,*" participants uphold being internally strong through intentionally choosing silence, emotional distancing, and non-engagement in response to ridicule and cultural mockery, which displays a strategic coping mechanism that enabled continued academic participation within hostile social contexts. Intersectionally, this silence was not passive, but a response shaped by compounded vulnerabilities tied to being Indigenous, a woman, and a student in a dominant institutional culture. Consistent with Sarino et al. (2025), disengagement served to preserve focus and reduce immediate stress; yet participants' fear, anxiety, and hurt revealed the hidden psychological toll of repeated identity-based microaggressions. As shared by P03:

> I don't pay attention to their opinions since they're their own. It wouldn't help me anyway, so I went on with my studies. (*Wala naman po akong pakialam sa opinyon nila kasi pangsarili naman po nila 'yon. Wala naman pong matutulong sa akin, kaya po nagtuloy pa rin po ako sa pag-aaral.*)

Existing literature similarly shows how persistent cultural and racial insults contribute to emotional distress and diminished well-being (e.g., Regaspi, 2023). Experiences of stereotyping, mockery, and dehumanizing labels such as being "endangered" underscored how discrimination remained embedded in everyday interactions. Thus, while participants made the meaning of affirmation as empowerment, they simultaneously understood endurance as necessary for survival. This surfaces that their lived intersectional experiences involved both reclaiming identity as strength and managing pain as a cost of persistence for education. As reflected in what P06 expressed:

> When they talk in front of me, they tease, like they imitate people who are begging. I don't say anything, I just let them be. But it hurts me because I'm part of that Indigenous group. (*Kapag nag-usap po sila sa*

> *harap ko, then nag-aasaran, like, 'yung ginagaya po nila 'yung namamalimos po. 'Yung trending po sa TikTok, hindi po ako nagsasalita, hinahayaan ko nalang po sila. Pero, masakit po kasi part po ako ng Indigenous group na 'yon.*)

Experience of Institutional Support in the University

The findings reveal how institutional support was both genuinely felt and yet unevenly internalized in terms of formal empowerment. To begin with, the theme "*Ramdam na Suporta: Enjoying Institutional Efforts toward Overall Inclusion*" signifies how participants experience BulSU as a space where inclusion was perceived both practically and personally. Unlike previous studies stressing that SUCs often reproduce cultural marginalization, financial strain, and academic stress for Indigenous students (Bayod et al., 2021; Regaspi, 2023), women in this study described being welcomed, prioritized in admissions, and supported through scholarships, dorm arrangements, and guidance from administrators. As P02 shared:

> They are very welcoming and very willing to help the IPs. We talked about how they could support us further, such as finding a dorm for us so we wouldn't have a tough time with transportation. (*Very welcoming at very willing po sila na tulungan 'yung mga IP. Nag-usap po kami kung papaano pa po kami tutulungan, gaya po ng kuhanan pa kami ng dorm para hindi na mahirapan sa transportation.*)

These forms of support appear to ease structural barriers such as transportation costs and financial uncertainty, which are frequently cited as obstacles for Indigenous students (e.g., Bongco, 2024; Regaspi, 2023), while also signaling recognition and value for Indigenous women students and providing emotional reassurance. Aside from this, financial assistance also emerged as a notable form of support, as stated by P07:

> I received a scholarship from GADC. I used it to buy school supplies. (*Nakakuha po ako ng scholar po sa GADC. Ngayon po nagamit naman po 'yung para pambili po ng school supplies*.)

However, while institutional efforts were visible and accessible, inclusion remained largely institution-directed rather than co-constructed. In this context, participation in activities organized for Indigenous students did not automatically foster meaningful connections when these were not culturally grounded or co-shaped by them. Likewise, financial assistance, though present, depended on facilitation rather than automatic institutional provision, reflecting systemic mediation in SUCs (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021; Gaite, 2025), and the access to urgent support sometimes relied on administrator mediation. Together, while support is well-intentioned, it remains relational and negotiable, potentially limiting the development of agency, ownership, and culturally rooted belonging.

From an intersectional perspective, such responsiveness is especially meaningful, as participants navigate educational paths shaped by ethnicity, gendered expectations, and economic constraints (Apas et al., 2025). Their accounts show that institutional efforts can operate symbolically and materially, creating a sense of legitimacy and belonging in a space where Indigenous identities have historically been overlooked, consistent with intersectionality and standpoint frameworks that highlight empowerment as experienced through social relationships and positionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Genon, 2022). Reflexively, it is important to acknowledge that this theme represents participants' interpretations and the researchers' analytic construction; in their shared stories, BulSU emerges as a supportive and enabling environment, even as broader structural challenges in state universities continue to exist.

Building on these relational limits, support, although strongly felt, did not automatically translate into full institutional empowerment. In this regard, the theme, "*Limitadong Kamalayan: Having Limited Awareness of Institutional Rights*," reveals a critical gap between assistance and awareness as participants remained unaware of university policies despite facing bullying. This is reflected in the statement by P01:

> Before, I experienced some bullying, but I wasn't very aware legally of the policies here in BulSU. (*Dati po, medyo nakaranas ako ng bullying, pero hindi po akong masyadong aware sa legal policies ng IP dito sa BulSU.*)

Importantly, this lack of awareness should not be interpreted as a personal shortcoming; through an intersectional lens, this in fact reflects how Indigenous women navigate overlapping identities within a mainstream institutional structure (Apas et al., 2025; Crenshaw, 1989; Genon, 2022). Eduardo and Gabriel (2021) argue that while legal frameworks exist, structural inequalities often block meaningful access to them. Supplementing this, Bayod et al. (2021) and Regaspi (2023) note that Indigenous students in SUCs often find institutional processes that are distant, bureaucratic, or culturally inaccessible. This reflects systemic mediation in SUCs (Gaite, 2025), where support, though formally present, is filtered through administrative procedures and intermediaries, requiring students to negotiate access actively.

These collective insights suggest that university policies may not be shared in ways that resonate with or fully consider Indigenous lived experiences. As Gaite (2025) emphasizes, true equity requires transforming students from “passive” recipients of support into “active,” informed rights-holders. By recognizing that systems appearing accessible to "insider" researchers may be experienced as barriers by Indigenous women, this theme shows that inclusivity without intersectional empowerment leaves students supported yet structurally under-informed.

Recommendation for Inclusive Educational Experiences

The findings under the core theme “*Para sa Pasaning Di Pa Pansin: Calling for Culturally Inclusive Protective Policies*” highlight participants’ call for protection that is both consistently enforced and culturally grounded. Although anti-bullying policies formally exist, participants stressed the need for stronger implementation and active monitoring, revealing a gap between policy presence and lived safety. P01 put an emphasis to this by saying:

> Hopefully, they also inform others that even if your classmate is IP, they shouldn’t do that. It’s in the policy that bullying is not allowed, but they still do it. It just needs to be reminded again. (*Sana, pagbigay-alam din nila sa iba na dapat kahit IP 'yung classmate mo is huwag nilang gawin yon. Kasi, nasa policy po yun, na bawal mambully pero nagagawa pa rin nila. Dapat sabihin lang ulit.*)

Participants also advocated for greater cultural representation in academic spaces, as evident in the answer of P07:

> That’s what I want—they should put a dictionary in the library. That way, the languages of other people can be learned, and anyone can study about our language. (‘*Yun nga po 'yung gusto ko po, sana 'yung sa dictionary po, maglagay po sila sa library. Kumbaga 'yung nandu’n po 'yung mga wika din po 'yung mga ibang tao na malalaman po, maaaral po nila ‘yung about sa lenggwahe po ganu’n po*.)

This statement surfaces a demand for visibility, validation, and recognition rather than mere accommodation. This resonates with Dela Cruz (2025), whose study on culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in Philippine Higher Education Institutions emphasized the importance of contextualized learning materials and culturally grounded resources in academic environments. Culturally validating materials are not supplementary additions but foundational to inclusive education, ensuring that Indigenous students see their identities reflected and valued in the curriculum.

In addition, some participants also appeal for culturally responsive mental health services just like P09:

> IPs, when they go to the city, often feel out of place and have a hard time adjusting emotionally. It would be good to have psychological services or therapy specifically for IPs.” (‘*Yung mga IP po kasi kapag napunta po sila sa city parang naninibago at mahihirapan din po sila mag-adjust emotionally. Maganda rin po sana na ng psychological service or therapy po na para po talaga sa mga IP*.)

This illustrates how emotional strain intersects with broader structural constraints, cultural adjustment challenges, and limited accessibility in SUCs (Yuduang et al., 2022). For Indigenous women navigating discrimination and cultural adjustment, generic services fail to address the complex interaction of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic position, signaling a need for support systems that recognize layered identities

rather than treating students as a "homogeneous" population. Dela Cruz and Dagohoy (2024) similarly note that anxiety among IP students underscores the need for context-sensitive, community-based psychosocial support, enforceable protections, and culturally visible systems embedded in university structures.

From this point, the study emphasizes that significant inclusion of Indigenous women students necessitates structural, cultural, and relational change across multiple levels of the university system and environment in addition to symbolic acknowledgement. This highlights the importance of prudence and empathy in shaping inclusive educational environments, reminding institutions that meaningful inclusion requires thoughtful attention to the lived realities of marginalized students. Recognizing Indigenous women as sources of knowledge encourages universities to respond not only with policy, but with sustained care, respect, and cultural understanding. To make safety and equity non-conditional, institutional reforms must be combined with proactive enforcement of protective policies, culturally grounded curricula, accessible psychosocial services, and sustained accountability mechanisms. Crucially, Indigenous women must not only be recipients of institutional reform but also active participants in policy formation and program design, ensuring that institutional transformation is informed by their lived experiences. By elevating their voices and addressing intersecting systems of gendered, cultural, and socioeconomic marginalization, universities can move beyond passive inclusion toward transformative justice that reconfigures power relations in higher education.

IMPLICATIONS

The patterns that surfaced from undergraduate Indigenous women's accounts explain how their university experiences are produced within the layered systems of identity, power, and institutional structure. The coexistence of affirmation, conditional inclusion, and material uncertainty underlines the central principle of Intersectionality Theory. The findings support the view that disadvantage and opportunity are not experienced along a single axis but through the intersection of gender, indigeneity, and studenthood. Simultaneously, participants' meaning-making process, particularly the reframing of adversity into motivation and strategic emotional self-management, strengthens Feminist Standpoint Theory's notion by showing how agency and constraint operate together in everyday academic life. By revolving around Indigenous women enrolled in SUCs, the study furthers existing frameworks through demonstrating that institutional spaces can both soften and subtly generate inequality. Thus, it positions the students as sources of knowledge whose lived experiences expose the often-overlooked forces of cultural normalization and gender expectation in higher education.

Given these insights, higher education institutions are challenged to re-establish inclusion from expressions of interpersonal goodwill to feasible, long-term systems. Universities, particularly SUCs, should strengthen proactive anti-discrimination efforts (e.g., establishing formal and confidential grievance reporting mechanisms), provide financial and material support based on actual necessity (e.g., having fixed budget allocations and simplified aid processes), and craft gender-sensitive programs. It is also crucial for institutions to foster culturally responsive strategies, such as incorporating Indigenous language and knowledge in instruction, working with Indigenous students and communities in developing programs.

For the field of psychology, the findings show how intersecting identities shape students' psychological experiences in higher education. The accounts of Indigenous women reveal that resilience, motivation, and coping are influenced not only by individual factors but also by social structures, cultural expectations, and institutional contexts. These insights highlight the importance of providing culturally grounded psychological services and adopting intersectional, culturally responsive approaches to support Indigenous students' well-being.

At the national level, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) may strengthen monitoring frameworks to ensure that equity policies in SUCs result in measurable outcomes rather than procedural compliance. Beyond government institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in education, gender-advocacy, and Indigenous rights may help bridge institutional gaps by offering scholarship assistance, mentorship and leadership programs, culturally grounded psychosocial support, and community-based initiatives that center Indigenous voices. NGOs may also contribute to policy advocacy and institutional monitoring to ensure that Indigenous women's lived experiences inform educational reform.

Ultimately, addressing the structural barriers faced by Indigenous women in higher education advances gender equity, cultural recognition, and inclusive nation-building. Moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural equity supports the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), by promoting equitable access, institutional accountability, and inclusive educational systems.

CONCLUSION

This study advances that the experiences of undergraduate Indigenous women in state universities like BulSU cannot be understood through singular categories of identity. This is because their lived experiences are shaped not by isolated categories of identity, but by the convergence of indigeneity, gender, and socioeconomic positioning within institutional structures. Consistent with the study's framework, the findings demonstrate that these structures of power do not produce uniform or predetermined effects. While subtle forms of othering persist within the academic environment, inclusion is not solely defined by constraint. Instead, the university also appears as a space that can mitigate, and at times buffer, the challenges participants encounter outside and within institutional contexts.

The answers shared by the participants reveal that although acceptance within the university remains conditional, as evident in moments of surprise or implicit differentiation toward their identities, these experiences are not totally exclusionary. The relative openness of the academic environment, alongside accessible forms of support, enables participants to sustain their educational trajectories. In this sense, the university operates not only as a site where dominant norms are reproduced, but also as a context that can lessen their impact. This reflects how institutional spaces may simultaneously carry traces of structural inequality while offering resources that enable participation and persistence.

The findings further complicate assumptions regarding sources of support. While some participants encountered discouragement within their communities, familial support, particularly from parents, emerged as a crucial foundation for their continued engagement in higher education. Within the university, this support is complemented by institutional affordances that provide a degree of stability and encouragement. Together, these combined forms of support illustrate how enabling conditions can coexist with structural limitations, shaping experiences that are neither entirely oppressive nor fully emancipatory.

The strategies employed by participants—such as adaptation, selective disclosure, and the mobilization of culturally grounded resilience—reflect active negotiations as they pursue education. These practices do not merely indicate adjustment to constraint but also demonstrate how the participants make use of available institutional resources to manage and, at times, reframe their positions. Inclusion, therefore, operates both symbolically and tangibly. While institutional norms may not fully accommodate intersectional realities, they nonetheless create openings through which students can assert agency and sustain belonging.

From the standpoint of meaning-making, intersectionality is lived as an ongoing process through which participants interpret both constraint and possibility. Their accounts show that structures of power may be perceived as limiting in certain contexts yet enabling or even protective in others. The university, in particular, functions as a mediating space where tensions between marginalization and opportunity are negotiated. This reinforces the study's proposition that the effects of structural forces must be understood as contingent, context-dependent, and shaped by how individuals encounter and interpret them in their daily lives. By situating these experiences within the Philippine higher education context, the study contributes a localized understanding of intersectionality that foregrounds both vulnerability and agency. It highlights that inequality does not manifest in fixed or uniform ways but is configured through intersecting conditions that may simultaneously constrain and enable.

What is now clear, based on the stories shared by the nine participants of this study, is that one size, indeed, does not fit all— and all inequality is not created equal. This study reaffirms why intersectionality must be considered in understanding the experiences of Indigenous women in higher education. Their realities cannot be reduced to gender alone, nor to indigeneity, nor to socioeconomic status in isolation. To treat them as such would replicate

the very "one-size-fits-all" logic this study set out to challenge. Meaningful inclusion, therefore, requires not only the presence of supportive structures, but also their visibility, accessibility, and responsiveness to the intersecting realities of those they are meant to serve.

LIMITATIONS

Although the employment of in-depth interviews together with *pagtatanong-tanong* allowed for a detailed and contextualized understanding of the lived intersectional experiences of Indigenous women undergraduate students in BulSU, this study has clear methodological limitations related to its qualitative and intersectional design. Because the study is situated in a single institutional context, the experiences described are shaped by the specific policies, culture, and structural conditions of BulSU, which may differ from those in other universities. Thus, while qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization, the small and purposive sample constrains the transferability of the findings to other Indigenous groups or contexts.

From an intersectionality perspective, multiple and overlapping social locations shape the lives of Indigenous women students (Anders et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1989). However, it is not feasible to account for all possible intersecting identities and systems of power within one study. This research primarily foregrounded indigeneity and gender within the academic setting, which means that other markers of difference (e.g., sexual orientation, religion), may not have been explored in equal depth. Thus, some dimensions of participants' experiences and structural influences may remain underexplored. Furthermore, as with all qualitative research, the interpretation of findings is influenced by the researchers' analytic lens and positionality and thus represents one reading of the participants' lived experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Grounded in the lived intersectional experiences of undergraduate Indigenous women enrolled in BulSU, this study advances practical outputs and forward-looking directions that aim to translate research into meaningful institutional and societal impact.

Practical Recommendation

The study primarily recommends the active strengthening of Indigenous women's agency within higher education spaces, recognizing that Indigenous women themselves must also initiate meaningful change. This includes voicing their needs, concerns, and aspirations through campus dialogues, student organizations, and community-based initiatives. By building peer support networks and engaging in collective action, Indigenous women can surface often-overlooked gaps in institutional support systems while fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. However, as they are frequently excluded from decision-making structures (Kuokkanen, 2019; Murphy, 2019), these efforts cannot be sustained through individual action alone; they require consistent institutional recognition and support, particularly through the creation and sustained provision of platforms that enable meaningful participation. In this sense, Indigenous women are not merely participants but key initiators and partners in shaping more inclusive and responsive educational environments.

In partnership with Indigenous women's active participation and leadership, the study strongly proposes the submission of a formal framework recommendation to SUCs and to relevant organizations advocating for the welfare of Indigenous students and women. This may include proposals for: Stronger enforcement and monitoring of anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies; culturally responsive psychosocial and mental health services that recognize gendered and ethnic identities; increased visibility of Indigenous knowledge systems in curricula and library resources; sustainable scholarship expansion, and active participation of Indigenous women in policy planning and program design. By integrating these recommendations, institutions can move beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural, cultural, and relational transformation. For the field of psychology, this reinforces the importance of intersectionality-informed institutional reform, which highlights how empowerment is not only intrapersonal but structurally mediated.

Future Directions

Given that the study was conducted within a single institutional context and relied on a small, purposive

qualitative sample, future researchers are encouraged to broaden the scope by evaluating Indigenous students' experiences across multiple SUCs. This would allow for comparative analysis of how differing institutional policies, cultures, and structural conditions shape intersectional realities. Future researchers are also encouraged to undertake quantitative or mixed-methods research to examine the effectiveness, accessibility, and satisfaction levels of current inclusion programs and psychosocial services for Indigenous students across various SUCs. Such studies can provide measurable indicators of institutional responsiveness and inform evidence-based reforms. Lastly, future studies may also enrich analysis by expanding the intersectional lens to examine additional social positions, including religion, disability, sexual orientation, or scholarship status.

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