

Philippine Women Leaders' Presence, Practices, and Challenges in Higher Education in the New Normal

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic confronted the educational system by surprise and compelled school leaders to enforce decisive institutional policies and changes to maintain community cohesion and students' learning and well-being without the benefits of physical classrooms and campuses. The new normal calls for greater women leadership participation in educational institutions. This paper then expounds and draws attention on themes such as women's presence in school administration, barriers that limit women leadership advancement and participation, women leaders' qualities and practices, and challenges faced as leaders in the new normal educational milieus. A focused review of ideas and perspectives about women leadership and an integrative presentation of relevant data from literature were utilized.

Keywords: women leaders in the new normal, schools during the pandemic, women leadership participation, women leaders in Philippine higher education

INTRODUCTION

The world is in a time of severe trials and fears brought about by the Corona virus-19 pandemic which was officially declared in early 2020. The United Nations reported that as of July 2021, 188 of the 193 nations of the world including the Philippines are affected by the Corona virus-19 and its variants. According to government reports, over 28 million Filipino learners across academic levels have to stay at home to prevent covid-19 transmissions.

Philippine Budget Management Secretary and Central Bank Governor Benjamin Diokno disclosed that the Philippine economy which started strong at the start of 2020 declined by 10% during the first three quarters of the said year due to lockdowns and other measures to save lives. He, however, noted that the eventual easing up of measures, re-opening of business activities, and availability of vaccines by the 4th quarter of 2020 and first half of 2021 had positive effects and the economy began to show signs of recovery.

Despite the progress in covid-19 transmission control and the positive development in economic recovery, the schools are still in the process of learning to live with the “new normal” — a condition that is far from what academic communities used to know.

Contextualizing the Need for Gendered Responses to the Pandemic

Big and complex challenges confronted the school administrators since the onset of the pandemic. School administrators have to ensure that campuses and offices are protected and do not contribute to virus transmission. They have to grapple with reduction in student enrolment and increasing number of dropouts. Reports said that, more or less, 28 million students in the Philippines were affected by the pandemic (Unesco, 2020 as cited by Joaquin, Biana & Dacela, 2020). Compared to the public schools that get funding from the government, the private schools were more affected by the reduction in enrolment and rising operating costs. At least 400 of them were feared to suspend operations during the pandemic (Bernardo, 2020).

In addition to the problems resulting from reduction in student enrolment, school managers faced enormous responsibilities related to providing responsive support systems for the new modes of delivery of academic and non-academic services. The Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) had declared that flexible learning, i.e., blended digital and non-digital teaching shall be officially applied even when the pandemic is over (Commission on Higher Education, 2020).

The lack of face-to-face and interpersonal interactions among students and teachers due to closures of school campuses is not just affecting the learning processes but also the ability of students to learn and to keep their mental health intact (headfoundation, 2021). Digital technology and internet connectivity offer much needed tools to mitigate the disruptive effects of school closures and lack of actual face-to-face interactions among students, teachers, and school administrators. However, Father Jesus Miranda, OP, (2020) noted in his newspaper columns that although technology can answer the practical exigencies of life, it cannot take the place of teacher-student relationship and interaction, and that despite Peter Drucker's (as cited in Miranda, J.J., OP., 2020) forecast 30 years ago that big universities shall be relics and shall face survival difficulties, campuses shall always have roles in providing physical venues for personal interactions of students, faculty, and administrators. Surveys also revealed that the anxiety and stress among students stem from fear of being sick, losing family income, and the inability to provide for the requirements of online/off-campus mode of learning. Li (2021) fears that even if students would return to their schools as vaccines are continually developed and made more widely available to the populace, they would most likely be returning with some form of “culture shock to their now unfamiliar campuses”.

Social sensitivity, more than ever, is demanded in order to create environments and relationships conducive to both study and work during and after the pandemic. In recognition of the need for gendered actions, UNESCO-Global Coalition for Education has emphasized gender equality, inclusion, and equity as guideposts in seeking solutions to support learners and teachers as well as governments throughout the recovery process (d'Orville, 2020).

Filipino women consistently recorded higher participation and survival rates than men at all levels of education—basic, secondary, tertiary, and postgraduate levels. Advances in women empowerment in the Philippines may be partly attributed to the renewed consciousness among the populace with the adoption of the Magna Carta of Women in 2010. This law was meant to address all forms of discrimination in public and private entities and individuals. It, likewise, mandates that equal women's access to education, scholarships, and training is provided and that all government entities shall have budget allocations for implementing programs, projects, and activities that promote women empowerment and development. There is also the 30-year strategic plan called the Philippine Plan for Gender Development (PPGD) 1995-2025 which includes the promotion of economic, social, and political empowerment and provision of technical assistance in setting up and strengthening mechanisms for gender mainstreaming. The Philippine Commission on Women was mandated to coordinate the implementation and assessment of the national plan. It seems to it that needed updating toward achievement of the short- and long-term goals is done by government instrumentalities including the educational system.

Analysis Framework and Data Sourcing

Known scholars such as Birnbaum & Mintzberg (as cited in Growe & Montgomery, 2000) viewed that leaders are alike and genderless. There are, in fact, competencies and traits like intelligence and conflict resolution skills which know no gender and which are needed in effective administration of organizations. However, realities, and as hypothesized by Luoto and Corea Varella (2021) show that certain leadership qualities and traits may differ due to gender but such differences should not be construed that there is dominance of one over another. Differences in attributes and traits as oftentimes manifested in leadership styles shall have their usefulness as called for by organizational needs and momentary condition. Likewise, factors had been pointed out by literature and empirical studies which may be used to systematize and explain the data regarding underrepresentation of women in school administration. Such factors may be categorized into two: the socio-cultural and structural factors on the part of the institutions which is also referred to as demand side barriers, and the personal or individual obstacles on the part of the women academics and leaders also referred to as supply side barriers.

This paper aimed to draw further attention on the presence and role of women in leading higher educational institutions. A focused review on ideas and perspectives about women leadership and an integrative presentation of data from relevant literature on women leaders' participation were utilized in the discussions of the themes covered by this paper. The themes include women leadership presence, gaps, and barriers related to increasing women presence in school administration, qualities, and practices of women leaders in higher education, and challenges of women leaders in the new normal. It is the intention of this paper to contribute in the discourses on gendered issues and concerns among educational leaders and managers as well as in the overall efforts in pursuing the gains in terms of increased women presence in leadership positions in the Philippine education sector.

DISCUSSIONS

Women Presence in School Administration

Interest in gendered leadership and management participation and decision-making of organizations including education institutions had been gaining momentum. Both the gender gap and the positive contributions of having women in organizations' leadership teams have been subject of not a few fora, studies, and institutional development plans locally and internationally. The social dimensions of these issues, Cheung (2021) noted, are self-evident but there are also educational and financial benefits to increasing proportion of women in leadership positions.

Bothwell (2020) and Cheung (2021) said that the number of the world's top universities led by women increased in the past three years. As of 2020, thirty-nine (39) or nineteen percent (19%) out of the top 200 educational institutions in the world are currently led by women. This is a slight increase from the 34 universities (17%) led by women in 2019 (Cheung, 2021). Such increase is noted in terms of schools' lower and middle management positions. The disparity in male-female participation becomes more pronounced when it comes to the women's share in the senior or top management levels.

The European Commission reported in 2012 that across 27 countries in EU only 15.5% of all higher education institutions and 10% of PhD-granting universities are headed by a woman. Similarly, the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) conducted a Gender Gap survey of 65 participating universities across 23 economies including the Philippines (APRU, 2019). The survey which was done in 2018 showed there was a significantly higher proportion of male executives compared to female executives across participating universities. Males make up 80% of university executive staff, with women making up the remaining 20% of university leaders according to the survey. At eight (8) public universities in Hong Kong, less than 25% of senior administrative positions such as

department heads, deans, and top management were occupied by women but none of those in senior top management positions has been appointed as president (Li & Chui Ping Kam, 2020). Top educational leadership profile of Malaysia shows the same picture with only ten percent (10%) in 20 public universities that had women in Vice and Deputy Vice Chancellor, Board, Chair positions (Azman, 2021).

In China where culture has been deeply influenced by patriarchy, the proportion of women in senior management teams of Chinese universities is still low. A survey of 272 Chinese universities conducted in 2018 revealed that only three hundred forty-nine (349) or 18.63% women occupied senior leadership positions (Xintong, 2020).

The Philippines is the only country in Asia that has improved women presence in education and educational administration. As of 2011, eight hundred fifty (850) or thirty-nine percent (39%) of higher education institutions were led by women. Also women account for almost half of Filipino researches but the country has yet to show significant numbers of women appointed to senior research and administrative positions (Gooch, 2012). Per Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) report (2008), the *“Philippines is the only country in Asia that have closed the gender gap both in education and health and is one of the only six in the world that have done so”*. This observation was confirmed by the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 in the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2020) which noted that *the Philippines remains the top country in Asia in terms of closing the gender gap*. Gooch (2012) in her special report on female presence in Philippine academics published in New York Times quoted former University of the Philippines Chancellor Dr. Emerlinda Roman who said that the general acceptance of women as leaders in the realm of education can be traced back to the long historical struggles of the country. Women leaders emerged in Philippine history since the advent of western colonization in the 16th century when the local people waged series of uprisings to repel the foreign invaders.

Gaps and Barriers in Women Educators' Leadership Participation

Studies, reports, and observations of experts in the field noted the gender gap persistence in educational institutions. The gap persistence is attributed to a host of factors which can be categorized as “demand side” barriers and “supply side” barriers.

Demand Side Barriers

The demand side barriers pertain to structural and institutional standards, policies and requirements that according to Cheung (2021) contribute to the “gender blindness” of educational policies and bias toward males. Xintong (2020) noted that there is a male normative construction of leadership like what persists in China. This results to certain typecasting of gender in senior and middle

management positions—the caring, nurturing, and pastoral duties for women leaders and the masculine roles like finance, curriculum, and other organizational skills associated with masculinity. In the western context particularly the United Kingdom, Shepherd (2017) in her study, **“Why are there so few female leaders in higher education: A case of structure or agency?”** cited that the higher education institutions in the United Kingdom are not exempted in terms of gender imbalance in executive positions particularly in pre-1992 universities and colleges. Culling from the data gathered through her mixed method research, Shepherd expounded on factors leading to institutional barriers in universities and colleges in the UK. The three major demand side barriers for such imbalance, according to Shepherd (2017), are geographical mobility and external career capital, conservatism and risk, and homosociability.

Geographical mobility and external career capital factor as defined by Shepherd, refers to the preference of educational institutions to have external recruits or recruits with experiences gained from other institutions over internal ones. External career candidates are viewed to carry with them fresh talents and perspectives which shall boost the school leadership strength. Such preference poses stiffer competition to equally or better qualified internal candidates especially on women who said that they are less likely to leave their current schools to work elsewhere for new experiences. Other school institutions justify such preference for external recruits over internal ones as a preventive mechanism for the potential harmful effects of the so-called “inbreeding” in social organizations.

Conservatism and aversion to risk are considered contributory to the demand side barriers. They have been manifested in the appointing bodies' fear of making bad appointments that may contribute to the already precarious situations their institutions are already in. Due to such fear, the appointing officers tended to take the surer path of appointing leaders with experience and the experienced choices were more likely from those male leaders who comprised the majority of people “next in line”.

Homosociability factor refers to the tendency of appointing officers to look for ‘the good fit’ to join the executive team. Such standard leads to the appointment of ‘more of the same’ or those ‘made of their own self-image’. Gooch (2012) cited Dr. Sharifah Hapsah of the National University of Malaysia who said that there is persistence of traditional ideas about men and women such that if there are two (2) candidates for senior positions with equal footing, the male candidate shall get the appointment. Grove and Montgomery (2020) attributed this barrier to women’s lack of social networks or not being a member of the “clubs” as men. This “club” mentality tends to lead to promotions and advancements of males more than females.

Supply Side Barriers

Pieces of empirical evidence related to personal, socio-cultural, psychological, and emotional considerations that women face are found by researchers and experts in the field to have prevented them from occupying senior or high leadership positions in their educational institutions. These factors have implications on women leaders' attitudes, gender-expected roles, and other family-related concerns like childbirth, child rearing, and other home-related expectations.

In the case study conducted by Xintong (2020) involving academics in a Chinese University, it was observed that women educators have cultural obstacles made for themselves in addition to the “wrong” characteristics related to the male normative construction of leadership. Such obstacles contribute to their low-level ambition to pursue higher leadership roles and responsibilities. As observed by the researcher and expressed by almost all of the respondents, women tended to give up their chances to take part in leadership activities despite the efforts of the Chinese government to improve the treatment of women in China. The top reason for women's avoidance of becoming senior leaders is their being burdened with family care responsibilities. The pandemic aggravated the stresses related to family care. McLaren (as cited in Dogra & Kaushal, 2021) opines that during the pandemic, it is “she” who carries the heaviest burden of responsibilities across countries encompassing different cultures and traditions. The impact of the burden can actually be long-lasting even beyond the pandemic itself. Lockdowns imposed by governments affected the lives of women to a great extent. It brought children and their parents at home which affected the daily routines of mothers, more so women leaders and academicians. Women leaders were expected to still do all their tasks at home while fulfilling their administrative tasks as well as other social tasks like being a colleague, a friend, and so on. Family responsibilities were likewise cited among the constraints of Filipino higher education women leaders (Perez, 2021).

Similar traditional mindsets were observed by Martinez, et al. (2020) in their study on women presence in Philippine schools. The authors asserted that the women candidates who may possess similar or even better qualifications for high level leadership positions compared to their male counterparts are more likely to be influenced by self-efficacy perceptions that women may have on themselves. This partly explains the trend of having less and less female compared to male in senior and high-level management positions. Furthermore, the authors cited the mindset that many women have yet to overcome—that “*leadership positions are often believed to require agentic qualities (e.g., speaking assertively, competing for attention, influencing others) that are usually associated with men*”.

Women Leadership Qualities and Practices

Despite the differences or even the considered weaknesses of women leaders like lack of competitiveness and confidence, such perceived attributes can be turned into strengths when it comes to leadership and management. Luoto and Corea Varella (2021) cited that women's group and societal leadership can be important elements in life-saving responses during disease outbreaks and pandemics. Being less aggressive in their leadership approaches compared to their male counterparts are facilitative factors for women leadership participation. Tensions and conflicts which are unavoidable in organizations could be dealt with more effectively with women leaders' adaptability and flexibility.

Perez (2021) in her graduate research came up with an assessment of the leadership styles and experiences of middle-level women school administrators. The respondents were 158 women leaders from public universities in the National Capital Region of the Philippines. The study revealed that majority of the respondents generally practiced the dominant leadership style and possessed attributes that fall within the delegative/free reign and the democratic/participative leadership spectrum. This spectrum of leadership practices is considered by experts as belonging to the same transformational leadership paradigm and are oftentimes described with related if not overlapping attributes. More specifically, the majority of the respondents said that they practiced the above-cited styles by *"allowing employees to determine what needs to be done and how to do it"*, *"making individuals responsible for defining his job"*, and *"sharing leadership power with subordinates"*. With regard to the respondents' exercise of the democratic/participative leadership style, they rated themselves highest in their practice of *"getting ideas and inputs on upcoming plans and projects"* and *"creating an environment where employees take ownership of the projects and participate in decision-making"*. The in-depth interviews with women leaders conducted by Perez, likewise, revealed positive aspects of their experiences such as the respect gained from others, ability to achieve better balance between work and family, and practice of confidence, diligence, good listening skills, and attention to details. They said that their consultative practices were generally helpful in making people have a greater sense of ownership of decisions and tasks although such practices tended to make the decision-making process slower.

Radu, Deaconu, and Frasinianu (2017), pointed out that transformational leadership of collaboration and empowerment has continually gained better recognition in terms of efficacy over the traditional leadership paradigm that is centered on "The Great Man's individualist, task oriented, and assertive approaches. The said leadership approach and the exercise of soft skills related to adaptive leadership (Tevis, Pifer, & Baker, 2021) are likewise viewed as desirable paradigm in dealing with the emotional stress and other negative impact of the prolonged pandemic situation on students and

employees. As emphasized earlier, soft skills are of course not exclusive capacities of women because both men and women are capable of acquiring and applying such skills. It should be noted, however, that in a research-based article by Basu (2016) published by *m.economictimes.com*, the author cited that “in a survey of 55,000 professionals across 90 countries collected between 2011 to 2015, using the Social and Emotional Competency Inventory (ESCI) developed and co-owned by Hay Group Division of Korn Ferry, it was found out that women more effectively employed the emotional and social competencies correlated with effective leadership”. On the other hand, Luoto and Corea Varella (2021) in their study regarding sexually dimorphic leadership specialization hypothesis predicted *that women, feminine individuals, or female-biased or feminine coalitions would be more motivated to help save lives during disease outbreaks, leading to more effective societal responses, particularly in less patriarchal, more gender-egalitarian societies where women have unobstructed access to the political sphere*. However, they suggested that future studies should analyze whether there are intrasexual differences on masculinity-femininity continuum and that the better understanding of the differences in leadership attributes may be focused on maleness and femaleness rather than simply presenting a male vs. female dichotomy.

The New Normal’s Challenges on Women Leaders

The Philippines is one of the countries most affected by the Covid-19 virus, hence, Filipinos are expected to live under the new normal for a prolonged period (Jamon, et al., 2021). The threat of the unstable Covid virus makes it difficult to predict what shall happen next, according to WHO authorities. One thing is certain--the crisis and psychosocial impacts of the pandemic shall continue to be felt in the succeeding years and shall demand sustained multi-dimensional responses.

Women capacities as leaders and workers were put to test during this pandemic times. Their readiness and selfless services as medical-health front liners, community workers, and mobilizers were widely lauded. Their roles in schools are no different. Freizer (2020) noted that the pandemic has brought women’s participation and leadership at the forefront of public life and had to shift even further in the realm of policy formulation and implementation. The phenomenological study on Philippine teachers’ lived experiences in the new normal conducted by Jamon, et al., revealed that the respondent educators, including those from colleges who are supposed to have greater exposure to online and remote teaching, admitted they are strangers in the current situation and are finding much difficulties. Strategic policies and action points in the realm of curriculum and teaching strategies are called for to ensure academic continuity in terms of greater flexibility in teaching-learning modalities. These require recalibrating the school curricula, capacitating the faculty and administrative employees, and upgrading of technological and digital support systems.

While ensuring adequate physical and digital technology provisions, school administrators are compelled to recognize the emotional and psychosocial well-being needs of the members of the academic communities that are, likewise, calling for immediate and sustained attention. These are urgent concerns in addition to the tasks of providing venues for upgrading the flexible teaching competencies of the faculty and of the leadership capacities of the leaders themselves to effectively cope with the novel, complex, and fast changing demands of the new normal. The members of the academic communities need responsive support systems for them to overcome their fears of being infected and getting sick. Provisions for safer workplaces and responsive psychological support for addressing anxieties and vulnerabilities are among the new normal leadership challenges.

Females related to higher education including scientists, researchers and academicians were badly affected by lockdowns and quarantine measures. Jung (2020, as cited in Dogra & Kaushal, 2021) noted that even publishing in peer-reviewed journals by women decreased during the pandemic. No matter how overburdened women had become during pandemic times, they are expected to continually improve on the professional sphere and maintain a work-life balance in addition to their leadership roles and academic obligations like researching and teaching. Skerlavaj (2020) asserts that the new normal has a toll to pay. It brought about diminished areas for socializing and some objective stressors to all academicians, men and women alike. But more than that, the idea of resilience resurfaced. It is about the conscious effort to move forward through arduous times. It is about healthy functioning despite unpleasant events such as a pandemic. It is about the ability of the system to bounce back after a humongous threat to our survival and functioning.

CONCLUDING NOTES

There is a trend with regard the observations among countries about the persistence of gap in women presence in higher education administration. A more equitable distribution of gender in senior leadership positions has a long way to go. Despite such trend, the Philippines continues to show improvement in women leadership participation compared to their counterparts in Asia. The country's historical tradition of women leadership and the legal framework and plans to further advance gender equity and women participation in education and other sectors are seen as contributory elements for such record.

Barriers which are considered structural, hence, preventing more women to join senior leadership positions in schools pose big challenges and call for paradigm shifts on the part of decision makers in general. At the same time, there exist the self-imposed barriers on the part of the women who are qualified to occupy higher level positions yet are constrained with domestic concerns, low level of ambition, and lack of confidence.

Existing and potential women leaders themselves have to overcome such self-imposed barriers. Also, provision of more supportive policies and programs by their respective institutions are seen to be the conducive external factors that shall give the proper condition for women in boosting their leadership career ambitions.

In view of the new normal and fast changing and globalizing environment, the communal qualities (e.g., accepting others' direction, supporting and soothing others, contributing to the solution of relational and interpersonal problems) which are associated with women but usually not given due recognition in leadership success are gaining greater recognition. Both male and female scholars and experts have recognized the tendency to lean toward a leadership environment that is more participative and more open with communication.

Challenges in terms of coming up with immediate pandemic responses and in formulating recovery plans and actions confront the school administrators. The leadership competencies and attributes that women leaders can share are seen as important contributions to school leadership teams in ensuring environments that are more respectful, collective, collaborative, flexible, and helpful in dealing with the negative impact of the pandemic. Relentless effort towards reshaping educational administration paradigms like coming up with policies and strategies that are more resilient and sensitive to the momentary and long-term needs of the academic communities are among women school leaders' overarching considerations and priorities.

The new normal, however extraordinary and complex as it seems, has brought before the world and academic communities' great opportunities for people to show their humanity and for school leaders, especially women, to show their immense capability to respond to the challenges that the pandemic created.

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