

# Lived Experiences of Women Department Heads in Higher Education: Challenges, Opportunities and Constraints

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## **Abstract**

The notion of a woman as a leader has been a controversial issue for many years. Our society, a masculine society, have customarily perceived males to lead and we have been acculturated with this notion that it has been firmly entrenched in our norms. This study emphasizes on the importance of female Deans and Department Heads' lived experiences and the value of listening to their perspectives, so as to offer insights into what has most helped and hindered their successes in their field. In order to better elucidate on the richness of these narratives, a qualitative phenomenological study, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, was conducted to explore women leaders' lived experiences and identify what they went through in their formal preparations prior to the ascending to the position, their role and responsibilities as middle managers and the experienced gender stereotypes and prejudices in carrying out their positions. The in depth analysis of the data showed that the participants' leadership features to be sacrificial, nurturing, competitive and genderless. They regard gender never as an issue and that women, like men, are qualified and have the capacity to excel in the area of leadership. Furthermore, the study revealed that these women leaders have dispelled the myth of the 'Macho culture' and broke the glass ceiling in the middle management of academic institutions as they believe that in terms of academic leadership, what gives rise to elevation is how one performed and not their genders.

**Keywords:** leadership; gender bias; gender roles; gender prejudice; women empowerment

## **Introduction**

Despite our attempt to pursue progress on issues regarding gender parity against men and women, there is no denying that this remains a plight that we need to bring to light for we still have little improvement and/or progress in eradicating the Macho culture in the different facets of our society.

According to a report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) last 2015, the Philippines is ranked 4th among 80 countries with the highest proportion of women managers in the world and has the highest proportion of women managers at 47.6% in Asia; and that there was an increase in the number of women in senior and middle management over the last 20 years. However, the report recognizes that the glass ceiling (walls) in certain types of management functions like human resource (HR), communications and administration is existing still. Even if the country is ranked as the ninth most gender-equal nation in the world giving a practical advantage to have and prop up women in top corporate positions, in a survey conducted by KPMG R.G. Manabat & Co. (Philippine Tatler, 2016), only a few were led by women (among the Top 1000 corporations). The report also stated that there is clearly a need for more and thus asserting the necessity to pursue advocacies for the advancement of women.

While perceptions toward women are significantly changing and more women are assuming leadership roles both in senior and middle management positions, the notion of a woman as a leader to some seems to sound foreign still. Because our conventional standards of leadership are firmly entrenched and stereotypical curbs are present still, changes in perception appears to be difficult to achieve. In our society, we have been accustomed with men occupying the upper echelons, while women on the other hand are confronted with denial of privileges. For instance, although women oftentimes have the same qualification as their male counterparts, executive positions are generally given to men. Several gender stereotypes, like the opinion where women are seen less intellectually competent and sensitive, restricts women being

preferred as leaders since leadership capacities are attached to men than to women. Based on established historical roles, these gender stereotypes, often lead to a substantial bias against women (Moran, 1992). Because women are not men, they are construed not fitted to the “stereotypical leader mold.” Women are also required to be extremely well qualified and/or to have over and above accomplishments to be given any leadership role; and when they are given a leadership position, they are expected to act ‘like men’ in order to maintain their posts.

This persisting occupational segregation stereotype that perpetuates an obvious vicious cycle of marginalization of women reveals the necessity to resolve these gender typecast. To begin working out these problems, there is a need to understand the challenges these women face and to seek ways on how to provide a healthier environment for other women to occupy leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to start appealing in the sphere of the academic setting where women have involvements in occupying leadership echelons, and at the very least empower them through and starting with identifying scopes for better elucidating their situations and how the general public and formal institutions may aid their present setbacks and stumbling blocks.

The following research questions are aimed in the data collection of the study:

1. What are the challenges, opportunities and constraints experienced by women department heads prior and during the assumption of their position?
2. What are the experienced gender prejudices of women department heads in the assumption of their duty?

To gain awareness of the lived experiences of woman heads, the researcher used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), for this enables both participants and the researcher to arrive at a co-constructed understanding of woman leaders’ experiences through open dialogue that allows for the sharing and interpretation of multiple perspectives. This analysis involves a double hermeneutic or a two-staged interpretation: while the participant interprets the encounter of his/her experiences, the researcher is also interpreting his/her encounter and/or experiences. In other words, the researcher is like the participant weaving on mental faculties they share but always appealing in second order—i.e. interpreting the participants’ experiences in an objective manner.

The study was limited to nine participants, as small number is recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and is specifically related to the qualitative method of IPA. Limitations of the study are related to sampling, as participation was voluntary, and snowball sampling was utilized to gather additional participants for the research. This choice of sampling technique limited the number of institutions involved in the study, however, a relatively homogenous sample was included, as is recommended by Smith (2004) for studies of this type. Furthermore, Triangulation method was not employed in gathering data for the methodology is not set out to test hypotheses but gives greater emphasis in the attempt to capture a ‘discovering experience’ of the richness of the participants’ experiential world.

Table 1. Participants’ Profile

Participant	Current Position	Previous leadership position	Number of years in current position	Number of leadership positions held
A	Chairperson	<i>*No Available Data</i>	3	1
B	Dean	Head (Research Dept.) Dean (CAS)	2.5	3
C	Dean	Coordinator	5	6

		Associate Dean(CIT)  Dean (CIT) VP (Finance) Chief (Facilities and Grounds Janitorial Services)		
D	Dean	Dean (Graduate School)  Dean (CBAE)	1	3
E	Chairperson	<i>*No Available Data</i>	8	1
F	Dean	<i>*No Available Data</i>	2	1
G	Dean	Chair (DEFL)	2	2
H	Chairperson	Research Coordinator (CIT)	1	2
I	Chairperson	Director (Research Institute)	1	2

Utilizing the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach detailed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the data analysis conducted used an iterative process: multiple readings of transcripts and three levels of coding—i.e. descriptive coding, linguistic coding and conceptual coding—in order to classify the superordinate themes and sub-themes across cases. Each transcript was analyzed individually, and the researcher worked to bracket findings and initial thoughts from the interviews with the participants. In this methodology, bracketing was done in an attempt to consider each case on an individual basis, and in an attempt to refrain from using the themes identified in earlier cases to shade the analysis of a new case (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Although the researcher recognized the necessity for completely removing one's knowledge and insights about the data from previous cases (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), being cognizant of the process helped the researcher consider each case on an individual basis throughout the different steps of the analysis, and inhibited the researcher from inappropriately ascribing ideas or emergent themes to new cases.

From the data gathered, six main themes were identified from participants' testimonies: a sense of leadership maturity, acquisition of bigger roles and responsibility, personal sacrifices, gender stereotype, dispelled gender prejudice and competency, not gender.

## 1. Presentation of Key Themes

### *Theme 1: A Sense of Leadership Maturity.*

When the participants were asked to describe the formal preparations they had for their current role, they rectified that not all of them have had formal trainings given by their institutions. The participants narrated that the formal trainings they had

from their institutions were given after assuming the position and were not prior to the assumption of their posts. In other words, one challenge that woman heads experience prior to the assumption of their posts is the acquisition of formal preparations and/or trainings necessary for their forthcoming leadership roles and responsibilities.

Surprisingly, even when the participants are vocal about their lack of formal preparations from their institutions, they believe that they were able to obtain trainings and mentoring necessary for the execution of their duties and responsibilities as deans and chairpersons. The repertoire of experiences they had opened a door for the participants to realize a sense of leadership maturity where they see relevant experiences contributing to molding their character in their leadership successes. They described these opportunities, which served as their avenue in realizing their sense of leadership maturity, as the carrying out of their function as faculty and/ or other administrative positions, attending related seminars, mentoring, seniority, their educational background and personal mantras.

It is noteworthy that all of the participants' answers point to a realization that they are not unfamiliar to the roles and responsibilities of the position and that their trainings, both formal and informal, are seen sufficient for the needed execution of their function. The participants may have acquired different trainings from different people and institutions, but these trainings, both conscious and unconscious, are of equal importance and proved to be very helpful as they have contributed to their leadership maturity and decision-making as Deans and Chairpersons.

### ***Theme 2: Acquisition of Bigger Roles and Responsibilities.***

Notwithstanding the participants' trust with regard to their ability to manage the position with their trainings and experiences, they unanimously agree that in comparison to their function as a faculty, the leadership position they received has in fact given them additional roles and responsibilities. The acquisition of bigger roles and responsibilities became one of the greatest challenge that sitting woman heads go through for they are also compelled to do work outside their service. They narrated how they are not only looking after their classes when they are teaching as a faculty but also looking after the department as a whole—i. e. a larger picture.

The participants perceived that the nature of their function ranges from supervising the students, teachers, curriculum, syllabus, organization, budget, extension, and many others. Unanimously, the participants agreed that there were real and actual added work assigned to them when they assumed their position. Whilst they re-count figures, they begin to see how a class of 40-50 students is comparatively little compared to the number of people a department contains. In addition, one of the real concerns of a dean and/or a chairperson, according to the participants, is responding to the students' welfare and needs. Some participants are almost actually speechless and overwhelmed to the great extent of the amount of work they needed to ensure. As the participants recapitulated these roles and responsibilities, they fathomed how great their obligations were in terms of providing bridges for the students, faculty members and employees of the department.

In a nut shell, the participants supposed that their roles are no longer just simply revolved in doing their teaching responsibilities and that their active involvement transcends the department's deliverables. All agree to see the position requiring sacrifices and doing loads of work even outside their duties and responsibilities.

### ***Theme 3: Personal Sacrifices.***

As the participants harmonize to responding to their function as leaders, they begin to understand the need of sacrificing many things for the department's sake. The realization led them to grasp the cost of being called to lead. As these woman leaders welcome changes, unanimously, they agree that the profession requires not only greater amount of work, but also requires a greater allocation of time. Thus, the participants' constraints as they begin to accomplish and execute their work duties and responsibilities are their lack of time for oneself, family and friends.

The participants vocally affirmed that the loads of work piled up in their office consume time formerly allocated for oneself. The 'me' time in which the participants personally do what they want for leisure and/or therapeutic functions are then inevitably sacrificed when concerns and plans needed for the department are not delivered and carried out yet. One of the respondents even articulated the effect of the stress she encountered as more and more work are given and are needed for her post. She narrated how the changes in her work load kept her from getting enough rest she needed where it even took a toll on her health.

Moreover, not only the participants' "me" times were sacrificed, but also their time with their families and friends given that having a position creates more time to consume in the office. The participants described how they unavoidably began saying no friends and family gatherings they usually say yes to and/or they do not usually miss. The downsides of having the leadership position may be a great sacrifice, but none of the services the participants have undertaken for their department made them yield to giving up their posts. In fact, as they get acquainted and familiarized with their new roles and responsibilities, the participants learned to adjust to their new environment as well as their function.

#### ***Theme 4: Gender Stereotype.***

The participants' perceived disadvantages of being a woman leader are viewed in terms of stereotypical gender roles women have been suffering from since time immemorial. These stereotypical concepts agree with how social norms are defined by Coloma et al. (2012). The theory supposed that people are accustomed to the roles males and females assume in society where they are seen as typical and inseparable from their biological uniqueness and thus defining the expectations of how they are assumed to behave. In addition, the participants' notion of a macho culture and perceived biological and physical disadvantages are similar to Sam, Amartei, Osei-Owusu and Antobre's (2013) study establishing the belief where "women are not expected to hold leadership positions" and that "an effective leader is a male."

Whilst the participants have good reasons to believe on these stereotypical disadvantages and view these perceptions relatively as the reasons for substantial bias against women (Moran, 1992) supposing their lesser participation in the leadership echelons and are result of deep-seated prejudices and stereotypes that many are unaware of (Nilsen, 2012), the perceived disadvantages they have are fallouts of mere "perceptions only" of the general impression they were acculturated with vis-à-vis women in leadership.

#### ***Theme 5: Dispelled Gender Prejudice.***

On the contrary, even when the participants acknowledged the deeply embedded perceived disadvantages of being a female leader, all maintained that none of them have experienced any form of gender prejudice. As they narrate their lived experiences as sitting deans and department chairs, they begin to oppose seeing themselves as the "objects" and/or the receiving end of those gender stereotypes in their workplaces.

The participants may have encountered negative attitudes from other people, however, these negative feelings and/or attitudes are emphasized on the perceptions of other people vis-à-vis their individual expectations and beliefs and are, as the participants would affirm, not in any form of a gender prejudice.

Thus, the perceptions of the participants rectified Moran's (1992) assumption in seeing the necessity for everyone to realize that people, with their differing abilities and advantages, should be viewed not simply as members of one gender or the other but first and foremost as 'individuals' and that mentalities on gender stereotypes must be rid of.

#### ***Theme 6: Competence, not Gender.***

The participants identified that in the academe, everyone is given equal opportunity to lead and that in terms of academic leadership, what gives rise to elevation is how one performed. They dispelled the notion that only men should occupy the leadership positions as the participants substantiated that women are in the same way called to hold leadership positions.

As the participants see that leadership requires different styles, they begin to learn and understand the environment they're working in better. They also realized that what is needed is their knowledge, abilities and their integrity to navigate leadership posts successfully; and not their gender as these are in reality trivial in the academic institution middle management.

Nevertheless, the participants recognized what Moran (1992) recognized years back. They realized that both genders have a significant role to play and that the identification of multiplicity in leadership styles will permit potential leaders to head in ways that will unleash their distinctive strengths and abilities. Similar to Moran (1992), the participants viewed that the future challenge to organizations is to acknowledge variegated leadership styles; for

when social institutions include both men and women equally on the basis of their individual merit, our society will be a better place for everyone.

## Conclusions

The obtained results show that prior ascending to the position, the first challenge that women department heads experienced is the acquisition of formal trainings from their institutions for trainings are given only after assuming their position. Majority of the participants agreed that not all of them were given formal trainings before receiving their leadership posts.

On the other hand, upon assuming their positions, the greatest challenge the participants observed is the acquisition of greater amount of work. They see that the workloads are far greater than prior to the leadership position they are now holding. Because they are given more roles and responsibilities, they realized the weight of the title that they have. The participants agreed that aside from the tasks assigned and are elaborated in one's function, they experienced doing work outside their duties knowing that the students, faculty members and others have greater expectations not only to them, but the position per se.

As numerous workloads transpired, the constraints that women department heads went through in their personal adjustment is sacrificing their time for oneself, family and friends. Since the position has greater responsibilities, it will inevitably require greater time to be sacrificed as well. The participants supposed that unless work's done, time for oneself, family and friends may be put aside.

Fortunately, even when the participants have not received formal preparations, majority of the participants agreed to have had repertoire of experiences that served as opportunities for them to have relevant knowledge of the know-how for their current role. These trainings and/or learnings, as the participants described, are their personal and institutional trainings and seminars, the formal education they have acquired and mentoring.

Remarkably, as the participants made sense of their prior experiences, all of them would agree that through these they have acquired essential familiarity, skills and knowledge, both consciously and unconsciously, that qualified them for assuming and accomplishing what is needed for their posts.

Another opportunity the woman leaders identified is the support they get from their friends and family. Some participants, during the interviews, affirmed that even when they have spent much of their time at school and in their work, they are blessed with friends and family members that are very supportive and understanding.

The participants, through the assumption of their posts, realized the felt democracy from the institution that they belonged to. They witnessed how their institutions are welcoming and affable enough to women occupying middle management posts.

Most importantly, whereas majority of the participants perceived gender disadvantages of woman leaders, all of them firmly believe that they have not experienced any gender prejudices in the assumption of their leadership posts and is contrary to the deep-seated gender prejudices (Eagly and Karau, 2002), gender stratification (Coloma et al., 2012) and studies conducted by Maseko (2013), Nilsen (2012), Sam et al. (2013), Burn and McCarthy (2013) and Drexler (2013).

## Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed by the researcher:

To address the challenges and constraints experienced by woman leaders, there is a need to create greater awareness of knowing gender equality competencies and implement gender mainstreaming. Changes must be felt not only by women but also by men as both play vital roles in uprooting damaging socio-cultural stereotypes in workplaces.

Second, removing socio-cultural stereotypes on woman leaders involves not only a transformation in employees' mindsets but also management practices, processes and organizational culture. Institutions must develop strategies like establishing women-based networks and programs that support and promote women in leadership positions. Succession plans can also be encouraged and included in institutional strategies to help better equip and prepare potential woman leaders.

Third, there must be a change in the concept of what good leadership entails so that the idea of what a leader is or does is not rigid since different situations call for different leaders and that trying to 'act like a man', for a woman leader, does not guarantee success.

To maximize more on the opportunities identified in the study, what woman leaders need to understand and appreciate is their authentic personal brand and that they have to begin building their confidence and self-worth.

For sitting woman leaders, the researcher suggests to focus on being open to the lessons needed to learn and make the modifications necessary for the effective performance of their position.

Finally, the researcher suggests that future studies may be conducted centering on woman leaders in the executive level as they may have different occurrence to what is experienced by woman leaders in the middle management of academic institutions.

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