

A Phenomenological Study on Leadership Capabilities and Opportunities of Female Tertiary Students in a Male-Dominated Discipline

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Abstract

Women experience challenges in demonstrating their leadership capabilities and opportunities due to societal and stereotype-driven expectations and views. Thus, this study was conducted in support of promoting women's empowerment and gender equality. Descriptive research design using interpretative phenomenological qualitative methodology was employed. The participants were tertiary students from a male-dominated discipline composed of eight (8) females and six (6) males. They were carefully selected using the purposive sampling technique. Focus group discussions were conducted separately between the two groups to gather the data. The results were examined through thematic analysis and validated by literature. Findings revealed that the female tertiary students could handle significant leadership positions in a male-dominated discipline as they considered themselves not just ordinary women leaders. Participants viewed female tertiary students as highly responsible, refined in doing tasks, courageous, and not easily surrendering to their responsibilities. Further, participants believed female tertiary students are equally given leadership opportunities. However, despite these, participants acknowledged that female tertiary students tend to limit and restrict themselves to taking significant leadership positions and that male tertiary students are still more suitable for handling multiple leadership functions. An important factor that led to these findings is the role of Filipino patriarchal values. Finally, this study's overall results and implications may serve as a basis to formulate policies, programs, and guidelines to ensure that women's leadership capabilities are enhanced and provided with leadership opportunities in a male-dominated environment.

Keywords: leadership capabilities, leadership opportunities, female tertiary students, gender and development, male-dominated discipline/field of study

INTRODUCTION

In determining leadership roles and the quality of services in an organization, gender plays a significant and crucial role. People's activities and approaches to handling leadership responsibilities and challenges were influenced by gender structures, relations, and social roles (Yaqoub, 2018). However, Thurtle et al. (1998) explored the female experiences on male-

dominated courses and vice versa and suggested that the students' experiences can be different from the gender majority. The findings recognized issues within the classroom, between the students, and the lack of common group identity. This resulted in the most significant factor in the different educational experiences, which can only be achieved by challenging the barriers between 'us' and 'them,' males and females.

In the Philippines, gender has played a vital role in shaping leadership. Masculine and feminine roles strongly influence career options, and people's choice of their leaders had been a stereotype of what leaders are supposed to be (Sobritchea, 2005, as cited in Labor, 2017). Women's aspirations on leadership and their access to leadership roles were limited by male-centric leadership models and norms (Dunn et al., 2014). Males have continued to dominate most disciplines and occupations globally, putting females into the competition, especially in leadership. Further, in the study of Born et al. (2018), women in the male-dominated environment may experience more challenges to make their voices heard, gain acceptance in leadership roles, and be recognized for their expertise.

There is a great challenge for women, particularly in leadership, that needs to be addressed. Since most disciplines are male-dominated and leaders are mostly men, there are fewer chances for women to be recognized and be chosen as leaders. There is a societal problem anchored on stereotype-driven expectations and views that hinder the innate leadership capabilities of women to prosper and the possibility of venturing them into leadership opportunities.

Leadership and Gender

Subjectively, anyone can be a leader and can lead; however, society has stereotype-driven expectations and views embedded in culture and traditions. Based on the study of Eklund et al. (2017), it is crucial to understand how gender relates to leadership. There is indeed a large gap between male and female genders and how both genders portray leadership roles. Gender differences emerged in how the sense of belonging changed over time, especially women in the field of computing (Sax et al., 2018). Career progression directly affects graduation, tenure, and promotions. Still, there are few women in tenured academic ranks in several engineering among science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines (National Science Foundation, 2017, as cited in Garr-Schultz & Gardner, 2018). Among these are advocating for 'gender blind' approaches, distancing, and ascribing to 'ghettoization' of some engineering fields. In terms of success, women are subjected to gender-based stereotypes (Sarathchandra et al., 2018).

Psychologists reported that women reflect more and gather details differently than men (Leliftu, 2014). Women's approaches in any issue or subject matter are generalized, synthesized, broader, more holistic, and more contextual perspectives (Fisher, 1999, as cited in Leliftu, 2014). Women leaders also have an interactive, people-centered, participative management style and are associated with consensus building and power-sharing (Bratton et al., 2005, as cited in Gender and Leadership: Literature Review, n.d.). On the other hand, men have different leadership styles. Men are said to be cold, competitive, and authoritarian (Eklund et al., 2017). Based on the theory presented in the study of Trivers (1972, as cited in Weisberg et al., 2011) and Buss (2008, as cited in Weisberg et al., 2011), men should be obtaining viable mating opportunities and should exhibit

more assertiveness, risk-taking, and aggression. These traits make sense in how men lead as they are characterized by being logical, straightforward, and challenging - the differences between how their biological traits influence men and women leaders. Through the years, it was observed that men and women have dominant biological traits that both genders possess. These biological traits separate both genders from each other. Leadership indeed has a gender stereotype brought about by society's expectations and views. This is another reason why men and women are limited in the roles they should portray in leadership.

Men who experienced a high gender threat from male-dominated majors exhibited increased behavioral aggression toward their female leader but decreased perceptions in terms of leadership effectiveness. It is a gender threat among men from male-dominated majors once the female leaders are appointed (Dresden et al., 2018). The study conducted by Keohane (2020) stated that leadership had been associated with masculinity. In some countries, including some advanced countries, people still think that men are natural leaders and women are followers. Women are associated with the gender stereotypes of being warm, nurturing, caring, sensitive, and helpful (Eklund et al., 2017). These traits are perceived to be weak and do not fit for a leadership role. What people see that fits their notion of a leader dramatically impacts how female leaders behave and think about themselves. The gender-stereotyped expectations of inferiority can lead to underperformance of women in leadership, demotivate their sense of belongingness in a field, and the desire to pursue leadership success (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017).

A similar study supports Goethals and Hoyt (2017) on how society perceives female leaders. Women are forced to accept and demonstrate the behaviors of men. With this, in Leliftu's (2014) study, traditionally, the characteristics viewed as being female have long been less valued than those associated with males. Characteristics such as nurturing, sensitive, empathetic, intuitive, compromising, caring, cooperative, and accommodating refer to women who are perceived to be weak. This results in disbelief that women cannot lead if they do not keep up with the expectations and behaviors of their male counterparts. Society perceived that women were still inferior to men. However, beliefs, practices, traditional perceptions, and expectations are slowly diminishing as the world advances and progresses. Gender equality nowadays is given more importance and emphasis as people tend to be more open-minded and accept the changes that the world undergoes. Some women proved themselves capable of providing strong, visible leadership despite the linkage between leadership and maleness (Keohane, 2020).

Objectives of the Study

Women are expected to adapt to a male-dominated environment in both academia and the workplace. Evidence supports women who experienced gender barriers have difficulty combating equity in the workplace, which can impede their success (Amon, 2017; Powell et al., 2009; Rhoton, 2011, as cited in Smith & Gayles, 2018). The study's objectives are to describe the leadership capabilities and opportunities of female tertiary students in a male-dominated discipline and their corresponding challenges experienced. This may serve as a basis to formulate policies, programs, and guidelines to ensure women's leadership capabilities will be enhanced and be given equal opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participants

This study used a descriptive research design using interpretative phenomenological qualitative methodology focusing on the lived experiences of the female tertiary students in a male-dominated discipline regarding leadership capabilities and opportunities. The researchers gathered real-life experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of the participants on leadership capabilities and opportunities that will answer the purpose of this study. This design also discovered the meaning that the participants gave to the current phenomenon that they were experiencing. This study used the purposive sampling technique. This sampling was used to gather on-point answers and serve as the basis for the aims of this study. The 14 participants were carefully selected from the population of the tertiary students in a male-dominated discipline.

Participants' Demographic Profile

Table 1: Sex

Male	6
Female	8
Total	14

Table 2: Age

21 years old and below	3
22 years old and above	11
Total	14

Table 3: Highest Educational Attainment

College Graduate	9
College Undergraduate	5
Total	14

Table 4: Year Level

Fourth Year	10
Third Year	4
Total	14

Measures

The research instrument utilized in this study was composed of two parts. The first part described the demographic profile of the participants, such as gender, age, highest educational

attainment, and year level. The second part contained open-ended interview questions to measure female tertiary students' leadership capabilities and opportunities in a male-dominated discipline and their corresponding challenges experienced.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The researchers sought necessary permission to conduct data gathering after validating the research instrument through expert analysis. Participants were carefully selected to ensure the quality of the data gathered. Informed consent was given to every participant, and confidentiality was ensured as well. After which, the participants were assisted in their respective classrooms, where focus group interviews were held. An in-depth focus group interviews were conducted separately, male and female groups of tertiary students. The interviews for both groups were conducted in classrooms suited for the activity. The researchers prepared open-ended interview questions to be answered by the participants and were gathered through audio recording and note-taking. After the collection of data, the data were transcribed, coded, analyzed, and interpreted using thematic analysis. Results were examined through thematic analysis using six steps or processes. These were familiarizing stages, assigning codes, searching for patterns or themes, reviewing the themes, naming and defining the themes, and report writing.

RESULTS

The results shown here were based on the themes from the data gathered. These were presented following the objectives of the study.

Leadership Capabilities of Female Tertiary Students in a Male-dominated Discipline

Five (5) major themes emerged on the leadership capabilities of female students in a male-dominated discipline.

Could Handle Significant Leadership Positions

This was one of the major themes that emerged from the participants' data on the leadership capabilities of female tertiary students in a male-dominated discipline. A stipulated by Participants 2, 3, and 8.

Female students are strong enough to handle significant leadership positions.

They are trained to be a leader so they can handle any significant leadership positions.

They are allowed to handle any significant leadership position as long as they will meet certain requirements.

Not Just Ordinary Women Leaders

Participants 2, 5, 6, and 14 were commented on the following:

I believe female students as leaders are not like just those common females from the outside.

They are professionals and have undergone so much training compared to other female students outside this institution.

The training here is quite different and not easy but considering that they can do it along with the male students, I can say that they are not ordinary women leaders.

They are not ordinary women because their emotions are strengthened by different leadership courses offered and cannot be easily bullied by others.

Highly Responsible

Participants 1, 3, and 7 discussed the following statements:

Female students are highly responsible not only in academics but also in other tasks given to them.

Once you enter this institution, a sense of responsibility will be honed. Everyone is expected to have a high responsibility among other peers and groups.

You will develop a high sense of responsibility once you enter this institution despite your gender.

Refined In Doing Tasks

Participants 2, 9, and 12 stated the following during the focus group interview:

They are much secure in whatever they do, and for whatever they do, they always have reasons for doing those things.

They double-check everything.

They are much sure, ahm, they are always making sure that whatever they decide to do, whatever they aim to achieve, they do it carefully, step by step without ah, not just doing directly.

Courageous

Participants 2, 5, and 13 commented on the following:

Female students are much braver to make decisions.

They are very courageous in doing whatever activities.

Few female students will drop out despite the hard training and activities offered by non-academic courses.

Leadership Opportunities of Female Tertiary Students in a Male-dominated Discipline

Two themes have emerged from the leadership opportunities given to female students.

Equally Given Leadership Opportunities

Participants 2, 7, and 14 answered the following on the leadership opportunities of female students in a male-dominated discipline:

They are given equal leadership opportunities to level up and do other things that male students can do.

Female students can participate and are given an equal leadership opportunity to participate in any leadership position.

Equal opportunities were both given to female and male students as long as they met the criteria set for any position they wanted to apply for.

Not Easily Surrender to any Given Responsibilities

Participants 1, 10, and 14 disclosed the following:

Female students will accept any given responsibilities and will not surrender to all the hardship in doing this task.

Despite the emotional problem, female students will not surrender to any responsibilities assigned to them.

They are responsible enough and will never say no to the assigned chores/duties; even these duties are more suitable for male students.

Challenges Encountered on the Leadership Capabilities and Opportunities of Female Tertiary Students in a Male-dominated Discipline

There were two (2) themes that emerged on the challenges encountered on the leadership capabilities of female students in a male-dominated discipline.

Tendencies to Limit

Participants 6, 8, 11, and 13 conferred the following statements:

The female students tend to limit themselves because they think males are more superior to them.

Female students should be more concerned with emotions that can affect their decision-making.

Female students are underrepresented, creating a more inclusive environment for them.

There is a societal problem anchored on stereotype-driven expectations and views that limit the innate leadership tendencies of female students to prosper and the possibility of venturing into leadership opportunities.

Restrict Themselves

Participants 1, 2, and 7 deliberated the following statements:

Female students have limited themselves because they were underestimated or demeaned most by male peers.

They restrict themselves from proving their personal merit due to gender.

Due to gendered stereotypes and negative assumptions about their abilities, they restricted themselves.

Discussion

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed five (5) themes related to female tertiary students' leadership in a male-dominated discipline. These include the following: could handle significant leadership positions, not just ordinary women leaders, highly responsible, refined in doing tasks, and courageous. The majority of the participants have positive beliefs about female tertiary students in terms of capabilities. They believed that female students are brave, strong, refined in tasks, and not easily surrender. Some participants believed that female students could lead, have a sense of responsibility, are more professional, and jack of all trades. However, some participants stated that female students must still seek approval from male students before implementing something. This was strengthened in the study of Born et al. (2018), wherein women in the male-dominated environment may face more challenges to make their voices heard, gain acceptance in leadership roles, and be recognized for their expertise.

In terms of opportunities, most participants believed that female tertiary students in a male-dominated discipline are not just ordinary females since they are accustomed to the things those male students do, particularly in leadership. Some participants believed that they had equal opportunities as male students. However, some participants stated that female students could achieve leadership positions, but they need to meet the requirements for their application. This was supported by this literature that women's aspirations on leadership and their access to leadership roles were limited by male-centric leadership models and norms (Dunn et al., 2014).

Likewise, on the challenges encountered on the leadership capabilities and opportunities of female tertiary students in a male-dominated discipline, there were two (2) themes emerged. These were tendencies to limit and restrict themselves. These findings demonstrated that despite some acknowledgement and encouragement, female tertiary students still limit and restrict themselves to taking significant leadership positions and still believe that male tertiary students are more suitable for handling multiple leadership functions. Due to stereotypes or patriarchal values by the Filipinos rooted in culture and traditions, female students use various strategies for managing tensions, such as limiting and restricting themselves. They need to accept the masculine cultural norms by either acting like a man or behaving like a man to adapt to the culture. Female students need to work hard to show solidarity to their male counterparts. This was backed up by the study of Goethals and Hoyt (2017) on the effect of how society perceives female leaders' disbelief that women are unable to lead if they do not keep up with the expectations and behaviors of their male counterparts.

Keohane (2020) supported the study's findings that society still perceived women as inferior to men. However, beliefs, practices, traditional perceptions, and expectations are slowly diminishing as the world advances and progresses. Gender equality nowadays is given more importance and emphasis as people tend to be more open-minded and accept the changes that the world undergoes. Some women proved themselves capable of providing robust and visible leadership despite the linkage between leadership and maleness. Lastly, this study's overall results

and implications may serve as a basis to formulate policies, programs, and guidelines to ensure that women's leadership capabilities are enhanced and provided with leadership opportunities in a male-dominated environment.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study's findings, female students in a male-dominated discipline could handle significant leadership positions as the participants considered them not just ordinary women leaders. They could see themselves as highly responsible, refined in doing tasks, courageous, and do not easily surrender to responsibilities given to them and at the same time are given equal opportunities. Nevertheless, despite these, female students tend to believe that male tertiary students are still more suitable for handling multiple leadership functions as female students have tendencies to limit and restrict themselves. One crucial factor to this belief is the gender stereotype on the Filipinos' patriarchal values embedded in culture and traditions. Leadership is a complex phenomenon that relates to other important organizational, social, and personal processes that higher education can contribute. The quality of students, faculty credentials, academic features, and administrative supports are the identified dimensions of quality higher education. It showed how the students' perception of quality education, especially leadership, influences the environment created by higher education institutions. The findings of the study may now serve as the basis for programs, guidelines, policy formulations, and culture-building for leadership opportunities and empowerment among females in a male-dominated environment.

Ethics Statement

Informed consent forms were accomplished first before the research started. Also, debriefing was done right after the discussion/meetings set.

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