



# Advancing Women in Leadership

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*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Leading in a Room Full of Boys: A Retrospective Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Leadership Experiences of Adolescent Women as a Minority in a Coed Senior High School in the Philippines**

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**This study explored the lived experiences of seven student leaders who belonged to the first three cohorts (2018, 2019, and 2020) of female transfer students in a private Catholic senior high school in Metro Manila after years of exclusive basic education. Using retrospective IPA, participants were individually interviewed to analyze the meanings they ascribed to their leadership experiences three to six years ago. Participants recalled their challenges, coping strategies, as well positive experiences as student leaders. Following Willig's steps in IPA, data analysis yielded the following key themes: Leadership as (a) unsafe space (for women), (b) a response to systematized injustice, (c) adaptive resilience-building, (d) building social support systems, (e) character-forming, and (f) purpose-driven. These themes were framed by the participants' experience of gender conflict and discrimination as a minority in their new school environment. Implications for research and practice are discussed.**

**Keywords:** gender, women minority, adolescent women leaders, leadership, leader emergence, leadership development, coeducation, retrospective IPA, Philippines

The debate whether leaders are born or made has been a topic of discussion for a long time. However, one cannot overemphasize the importance of supportive social structures that enable the development of leaders especially from a young age. Past research has suggested that leadership is 30% innate and 70% learned through significant life experiences (Picklesimer, 2014). In their "Ready, Willing and Able" conceptual framing of leadership development, Keating et al. (2014) identified three key components from among multiple factors that are involved in forming effective leaders: Leadership Self-efficacy, Motivation to Lead, and Leadership Skills. Besides these factors, an individual's unique context is also a crucial component of leadership learning and development. Apart from families, schools undoubtedly provide students opportunities for secondary socialization processes that are crucial in navigating later experiences in life as leaders in organizations. The growing emphasis on the impact of student leadership on workplace leadership later in life demands a deeper understanding of youth leadership and the design of evidence-based leadership development programs in schools. I have contributed to the literature on young women's leader emergence, the role of gender in their leadership experiences and the optimal conditions that provide support for the development of leadership among adolescents.

## **Coeducation and Gender Integration**

Coeducation in schools has been considered beneficial to the cause of gender integration and equality not only in terms of basic access to education but also in terms of leadership

opportunities both for young men and women in schools. In the Philippines, an early ethnographic study by Clark (2001) of two high schools with an even distribution of sexes in an urban and a rural setting revealed that Filipino boys and girls enjoy equal opportunity in ascending to leadership roles in schools. However, in examining their narratives of student leadership, both boys and girls were found to consider girls to be more of the political leaders in their schools. Apart from excelling in academics and having lower dropout rates compared to boys, girls were thought to be more dependable, responsible and diligent in carrying out individual as well as group tasks. They are almost always voted as class leaders because of these traits. Talon et al. (2020) in their phenomenological study on gender integration in a Filipino public high school describes teachers' efforts at gender mainstreaming in their highly contextualized curriculum by using and promoting localized and inclusive language and practices, thereby strengthening the school's gender responsiveness in addressing discrimination in the classroom. This has helped minimize the gender gap in their school with such practices that promote gender equity and equal opportunity.

The case is not always the same in foreign and local schools that have transitioned from single sex to coeducational classrooms. In 1993, Russell wrote about her experiences as a female administrator brought into the transition management team of an all-male academic institution in Boston, United States when the school opened its doors to female students in high school after 75 years. She conceded that it cannot be

*business as usual* in navigating this kind of transition no matter how prestigious an institution may be. For true coeducation to exist, both genders must be together, heard equally and valued equally. Russell identified a healthy school culture as the optimal context for successful gender integration in the classroom and provides several specific elements that characterize a healthy school culture such as core values, mandated shared leadership and a very clear discipline system. Fabes et al. (2018) noted that decades of gender segregation in schools has only enabled young men and women to learn more about same-gender interactions, skills and expectations than about the other, thereby allowing them to grow up in quite distinct social environments which ultimately inform their affect, behavior, and attitudes toward each other. They argued that attitudes toward an unfamiliar group can improve through increased social contact provided that groups enjoy equal status, share common goals, and cooperate in the attainment of shared goals within supportive social institutions. As peers, they become agents of social influence to each other in many ways.

Within the local setting, in his 2016 study, Villarin explored the opportunities and challenges presented by coeducation in his religious order's school within the context of providing quality Catholic education. He noted that the transition to coeducation places greater demands on teaching faculty to navigate gender dynamics and combat gender stereotypes and biases that may arise. Racelis (2013), in her qualitative study on the impact of coeducation on female students' experiences in the same Catholic school revealed that the school created a challenging environment for female students because of its perceived traditional gender role expectations. Female students reported experiencing objectification from their male peers and expectations to be subservient and nurturing. The harassment they experienced from male students also made them feel fearful and powerless. Her study further underscores the need for schools to provide psychological safety and supportive environments for women and to combat gender biases and stereotypes.

Despite Russell's American context, her experiences may help provide insight into understanding the present study's unique setting where young Filipino women are a minority in a former exclusive basic education institution for boys. Both the Boston school and the study's setting share similar characteristics – that of having a long history in exclusive education, and a strong tradition as an elite school. Alumni (and college alumnae) of the local school setting supply a strong leadership bench for private organizations as well as in Philippine politics. There is value in examining leadership emergence at a young age in this school setting, especially now that the institution has begun the shift to coeducation in senior high school.

### **Gender and Leadership Issues in Coeducation**

Leadership education is a relatively new discipline, particularly in understanding the various conditions in which leadership learning happens (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Castillo et al. (2019) asserted that schools are mandated to develop authentic and responsible student leaders not only in view of gainful employment in their futures but also with the

objective of deepening the bench for future leaders of society. Their research with junior high school students in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Pakistan suggests that school climate is the strongest predictor of leadership development. However, Madsen and Andrade (2018) addressed the issue of implicit gender bias which has been generally excluded in many leadership development programs for women. Implicit bias or unconscious or second-generation bias has implications on the formation of women in leadership. In particular, there is a need to have leadership development program designers who are experts and appropriately educated in gender studies. They asserted that designers of such programs must be highly knowledgeable of the conditions that provide contextualized coaching anchored on the latest research in order to create a safe space for leadership learning, especially for women. In the Philippines where this study is situated, both the Philippine Commission on Human Rights and the Department of Education emphasize the strict implementation of DepEd's Gender Responsive Basic Education Policy (de Guia, 2022) by clarifying that gender equity goes beyond equal access to education but involves addressing gender-related issues in school that impede learners' personal growth due to a lack of psychological safe space. While the Philippine Commission on Women (2022) reported that the Philippines remains the best performing Asian country at 19th place with an overall score of 0.783 among 146 countries on the World Economic Forum's global gender equality index, this trend does not seem to parallel the growth intended in the local research relevant to young women's leadership development; and more alarmingly, this trend does not always translate to the experiences of young women who find themselves a minority in unique social contexts.

The case for context and climate as critical to female students' leadership development has led to several qualitative inquiries into their experiences mostly from a phenomenological lens or other inductive methodologies. However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, there seems to be a dearth in knowledge about how adolescent female students who are a minority in a male-dominated environment experience leadership in such a highly contextualized setting. Hoyt and Kennedy (2008) used grounded theory approach to explore changes experienced by ten adolescent girls in a comprehensive feminist-based leadership program. Consistent with studies on leader identity among young women, the participants were initially found to be traditional in their views of leadership, i.e. anchored on the cis-male prototype's qualities, and were therefore hesitant to consider themselves leaders. Their views became more inclusive after the program and they were observed to be more confident and inspired to be leaders. They noted that being in a program environment of mutual trust and respect helped foster their confidence in themselves, along with experiencing female leaders as role models and a better understanding of multiple forms of leadership other than the traditional.

Most other studies, however, on female students' leadership experiences were conducted with older females as participants. Haber-Curran (2013) via a phenomenological case study in the United Kingdom explored the challenges and successes of four undergraduate female college students in top

leadership positions. Gathering data from one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions and participant journals, Haber-Curran suggested that success as a leader was perceived by the women as externally focused, with greater importance placed on the organizations they lead and on efforts at nurturing members' development and that striking a balance between being a leader and being a friend was considered as a primary challenge.

In a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews of eight female Chinese student leaders in a male-dominated university over an 11-month period of fieldwork, Zheng (2017) revealed challenges experienced by the women on account of gender role expectations in their Asian culture. While these women's personal achievements place them in an elite category of students in the university, traditional role expectations related to subservience and their sexuality hinder them from embracing their self-identity as empowered leaders. As Chinese society undergoes a gendered process of interaction, these high-achieving women leaders in university experience stress from their elite status and have sometimes been called feminazis for seeking equity with men in a highly traditional society.

Swai and Moses (2021) utilized a phenomenological interpretative approach to explore the lived experiences of six undergraduate female student leaders using the hexagonal and motivation to lead theories as framework. The hexagon theory in student leadership development underscores factors that relate to the six elements of the (a) self, (b) family, (c) school, (d) friends, (e) university, and (f) society as crucial to the development of leadership in a young person through a change in attitude, knowledge, skills and behavior. Results indicate that female students take on leadership roles if they receive approval and support from significant others. Leadership is oriented by the family by allowing daughters the freedom and power to make decisions. Teachers who demonstrate trust in them and help build responsibility are also instrumental in their leadership experiences. Religion was also found to help in the development of their leader identity. Female student leaders also manifested important leader attributes such as the ability to lead, resolve conflict and make decisions.

In a comprehensive literature review on adolescent girls' leadership formation, Eva et al.(2021) found five overarching themes: (a) leader emergence, motivation, and identity, (b) relationships with peers and adults, (c) varieties of leadership development opportunities, (d) exercising agency in leadership development programs, and (e) integration of leader development into the school curriculum. Of these five themes, it is worth noting that leader identity among young females is strongly aligned with more collaborative and relational forms of leadership, which ultimately becomes problematic, because most adolescent leadership research tends to be focused on the cis-male leadership prototype, highlighting more masculine perceptions of leadership which become a barrier for girls in perceiving themselves as leader material (Archard, 2012 as cited in Eva et al., 2021). Hurtes (2002 as cited in Eva et al., 2021) likewise observed that the social requirement to fit in possibly contributes to the lack of leader identity development

among girls, given the standards set by the cis-male leader prototype.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as Theoretical Lens**

Smith and Osborn (2007) described interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a detailed examination of personal experience and as an attempt to explain how a person makes sense of one's experiences in her personal and social world. IPA is a dynamic process in research that allows the researcher to walk in the participant's shoes in order to understand what life is like from the latter's perspective. Through a process of double hermeneutic, two stages of interpretation take place, first from the participant's making sense of the experience and then from the researcher's analysis of the participant's sense-making.

IPA is a qualitative research approach that is idiographic in nature – it seeks to understand the unique subjective experiences of individuals within a specific context, instead of developing generalizable knowledge or theories. This approach examines the lived experiences of individuals in a nuanced and in-depth way, by focusing on the individual experience and interpreting such data as opposed to starting from a pre-existing theory or framework (Allan, 2008). As a research tool, the idiographic nature of IPA is a powerful means in understanding subjective experiences of individuals and exploring the complexities and diversity of human experience. Attention is likewise drawn to the social, cultural and historical contexts that shape these experiences. Shinebourne (2011) argued that “with its theoretical underpinnings in phenomenology and hermeneutics and its idiographic perspective, IPA offers a method that is congruent with the existential-phenomenological paradigm and at the same time can link existential-phenomenological research with the wider research literature in psychology” (p. 16). Although phenomenology is regarded as a philosophical system of thought, its focus on the content of conscious thought and the individual's experience of the world lend itself well to qualitative research methods in psychology and in the social sciences in general (Willig, 2008). IPA is a phenomenological method that recognizes the impossibility of direct access into what Husserl (1931) regarded as individuals' life worlds. As IPA explores individuals' experiences from their perspective and describes the meaning they ascribe to their experiences, to a certain extent, it also represents the researcher's interpretation of such meaning-making owing to his own world view. This is why reflexivity is paramount in the researcher's conduct of IPA. The use of IPA in the study sought to gain an understanding of how the pioneering batches of female student leaders in a predominantly male senior high school view and experience their leadership experiences. The aim was to gain insight into their thoughts and beliefs as female student leaders in a unique context so that their experiences may inform school policy in the future.

While the study is retrospective in approach, the methodology used (IPA) differs from a narrative analysis in that the study focused on how they made sense of their leadership experiences by remembering. In a retrospective IPA, the focus is not on how the story is told but how participants

retrospectively (and reflectively) make meaning of past experiences (Van Parys, et al., 2014). IPA research works best with a fairly homogenous sample, in this case, a group of participants who were all elected student leaders from among the female minority in a newly coeducational Catholic senior high school.

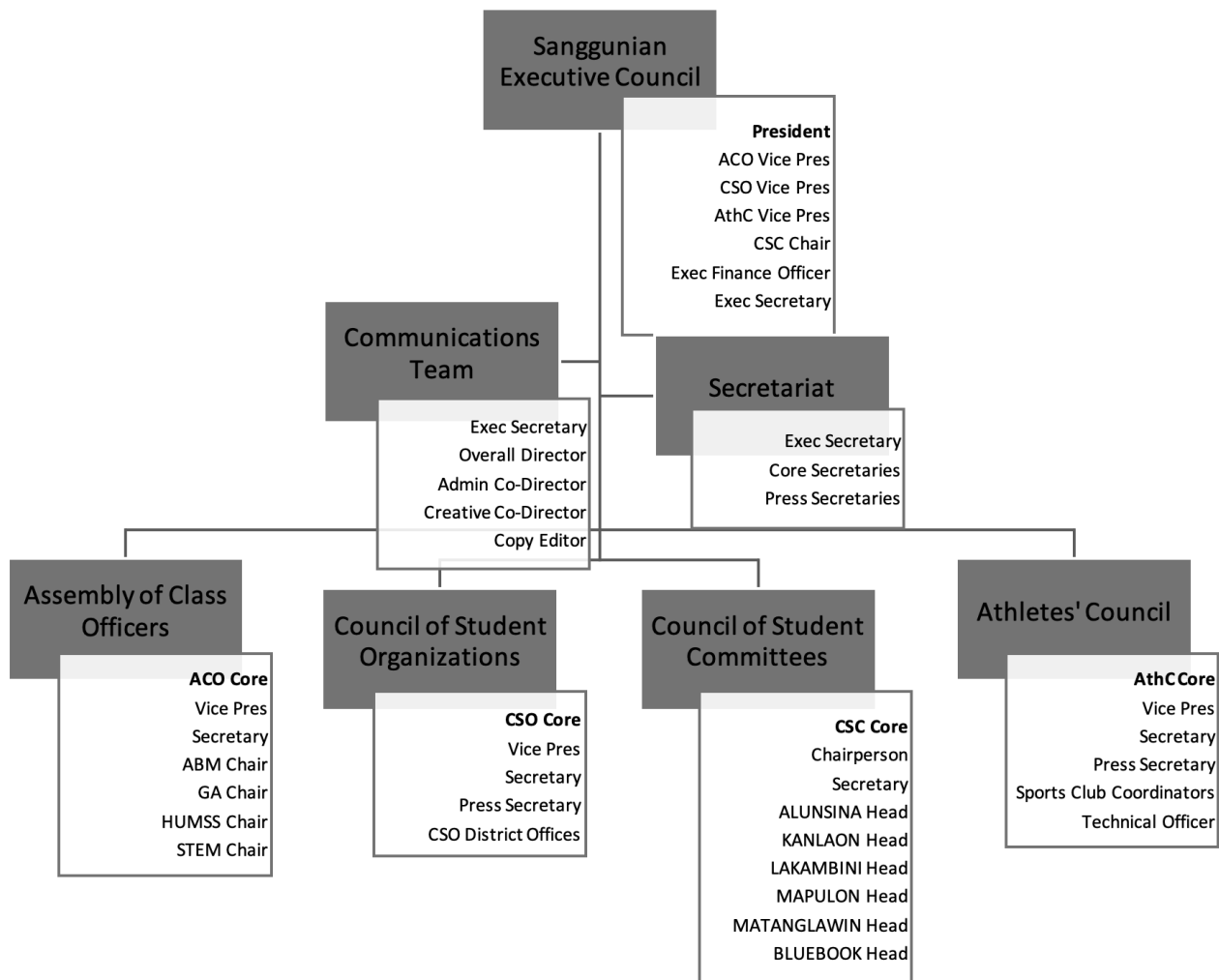
### Research Questions

Through participants' retrospective meaning-making, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of the first three cohorts of female student leaders of a newly coeducational senior high school?
  - a. What were their experiences like running for elective positions?
  - b. What were their experiences like after being elected student leaders?
2. How do the female student leaders make sense of their experiences?

**Figure 1**

*Representation of the Sanggunian organizational chart based on their official Facebook page (2020)*



## Methods

### Design

In this study, I employed a qualitative research approach through retrospective interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the seven participants following an introductory script and interview schedule.

### Research Setting

Participants in this study were alumnae of a newly coeducational senior high school in a Catholic university in Metro Manila with a long history and tradition of exclusive basic education for boys. Its founding religious organization also runs several basic education and tertiary institutions in different parts of the country, most of which are coeducational. In the senior high school of their university in Metro Manila, a formal student government exists as noted in Figure 1.

My primary interest was in leadership experiences of young women in a former exclusive private school for boys in the first three years of transitioning to coeducation in senior high school. Given enrollment constraints, the school was only able to offer slots to female transfer students comprising one-third of its new population, making the new female students a sexual minority in their own environment. Republic Act No. 10533 which created the K-12 reform was seen by the Catholic academic institution as an opportunity to make their brand of quality education more accessible. Scholarship grants were offered to the best female students transferring from public schools. It is crucial to know that the school has had nearly 160 years of history and tradition as an exclusive basic education institution for boys from middle- to upper-class families (with the exception of a few scholars) as this background contextualizes the female students' leadership experiences.

### Participants

Seven alumnae, aged 21 to 23 years old, volunteered to participate in this study by responding to the researcher's recruitment advertisement on Facebook and Messenger. They fit the two criteria set for participants: (a) they belonged to the first three cohorts (2018, 2019 and 2020) of female transfer students, and (b) they were in elective positions in the official student government during their stay in senior high school. All seven participants had both minor and major (elective) leadership positions in the school in grades 11 and 12 as depicted in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Batch, Strand and Leadership Positions*

Participant Code	Batch	Strand	Minor Elective Position	Major Elective Position
Kay	2020	HUMSS <sup>1</sup>	✓	✓
Kim	2020	STEM <sup>2</sup>	✓	✓
Faye	2018	STEM	✓	✓
Dawn	2019	HUMSS	✓	✓
Ginny	2019	HUMSS	✓	✓
Kelly	2018	HUMSS	✓	✓
Greta	2018	HUMSS	✓	✓

<sup>1</sup> Humanities and Social Sciences strand

<sup>2</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics strand

Most of them started as elected class officers, usually as class vice president or class president, or as elected officers of important student councils or committees and recognized organizations that had an impact on student life. Their elective positions in grade 11 became the pipeline for higher offices in

the student government once they reached grade 12. However, in terms of student organizations, a number of them who expressed a feeling of a lack of control or voice in pre-existing organizations (i.e., those that carried over from the university's exclusive junior high school) would create new organizations and committees that better served their interests and advocacies such as a student committee on gender equality. Because of the length of time it took to process a proposal for a new organization, these participants became more active as founding leaders of new organizations in their 12th grade. Nonetheless, all of them served under the Sanggunian or Sanggu, the official student government of the school, as elected student leaders in different capacities.

### Data Collection

I took measures to ensure that ethical considerations in the conduct of the present study were addressed, such as issues of confidentiality, transparency, and minimizing risk to the volunteer participants. While results of this study may become available in the public domain, confidentiality of participants' personal identities and circumstances were guaranteed, along with the identities of persons and institutions that were consequently mentioned by the participants in their interviews.

After research ethics clearance was secured for this study, participants were recruited using purposive snowball sampling via Facebook and Messenger invitations. Since I, as the principal investigator, was a former guidance counselor in the same institution when the prospective participants were still in senior high school, the invitations were either sent directly or through common acquaintances on the social media applications. A copy of the recruitment invitation was likewise uploaded on the private Facebook Group page "Sanggu Females" (created in 2017) of which the target participants and the researcher are members. Alumnae who reached out were screened on two criteria: (a) members of batches 2018, 2019 or 2020, and (b) elected student leaders in either grade 11 or 12 (or both) in the school's student government (Sanggunian) or in any of the Sanggu councils.

Informed consent forms were sent to the interested volunteers who returned (electronically) signed copies to the researcher after ensuring that they understood the terms of their participation in the study. The process of securing informed consent ensured that participants understood what they were agreeing to do and that they could withdraw at any time during the period of the study should they decide not to participate anymore, without fear of consequence. The informed consent form detailed the instructions for the data gathering process so that participants knew what to expect in the ensuing interview sessions. The form also provided the link to the privacy policy of Zoom for those who would choose an online interview.

Semi-structured interviews were individually conducted with the seven participants on their leadership experiences in senior high school following an introductory script and interview schedule. The interview schedule was constructed with the purpose of letting participants freely share and elaborate on their own leadership stories as elected student leaders of their batches. Questions enclosed in parentheses were intended as follow-up questions in case the participant did not include the

information needed in her initial reply. Participants' consent to record the interview sessions was obtained before the audio recording began. Examples of these questions are the following:

What was it like running for your leadership position? What were your challenges? (How did you handle these challenges?) What were the positive aspects of it?

After you won the election, what were your leadership experiences like? What were your challenges? (How did you handle these challenges?) What were the positive aspects of it?

None of the participants reported experiencing emotional distress during the interviews. In terms of benefit to participants, the study provided them an opportunity to let their stories be heard, an experience that some of them considered cathartic, agentic and liberating. Audio-recorded interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour.

## Data Analysis

### *Identifying Themes*

Participants' recorded interviews were transcribed by two volunteer university scholars after signing a Non-Disclosure Agreement. The transcripts were sent back to the researcher who reviewed the transcriptions alongside the audio recordings for approval. I asked both scholars if they would be willing to work on the initial codes and emailed them a list of steps orienting the transcribers on the coding process according to Willig's (2008) basic methodological procedures of conducting (retrospective) interpretative phenomenological analysis. Initially, both transcribers agreed to do initial coding dividing the seven transcripts between the two of them while the researcher began the initial coding for all seven. Working separately, the researcher and the two scholars identified initial themes and subthemes after iterative reading of each transcript. However, after further clarifications were made via email exchange, only one decided to complete this next step. The remaining transcriber took upon the coding task of the other transcriber.

The transcriber and I completed around three to four re-readings of each transcript, adding initial themes or subthemes previously left out and removing those that did not directly answer the research questions. The whole process involved taking initial notes and creating tentative themes (and subthemes) for each transcript – the idiographic nature of IPA requires that this initial process be descriptive and empathic. I then compared my coding with those of the transcriber and made decisions on the terms to use. Before finalizing the themes and subthemes, transcripts, notes and initial themes were then shown to an internal auditor – a fellow PhD Leadership Studies student who has completed his own IPA

study and who was familiar with the context of the participants' leadership experiences for review and feedback. I, having been a former counselor in the school setting, sought the internal auditor's expertise in order to ensure my reflexivity in the identification of initial themes and subthemes. Each of the seven participants also received a copy of their own transcript with the notes and initial themes for their feedback and additional clarifications where needed (Disclaimer: Not all participants responded in a timely manner, thereby losing the opportunity to amend or add to their transcript's themes). Involving the participants in the review of distilled themes and subthemes was meant to ensure transparency as well.

### *Clustering Themes and Integrating Cases*

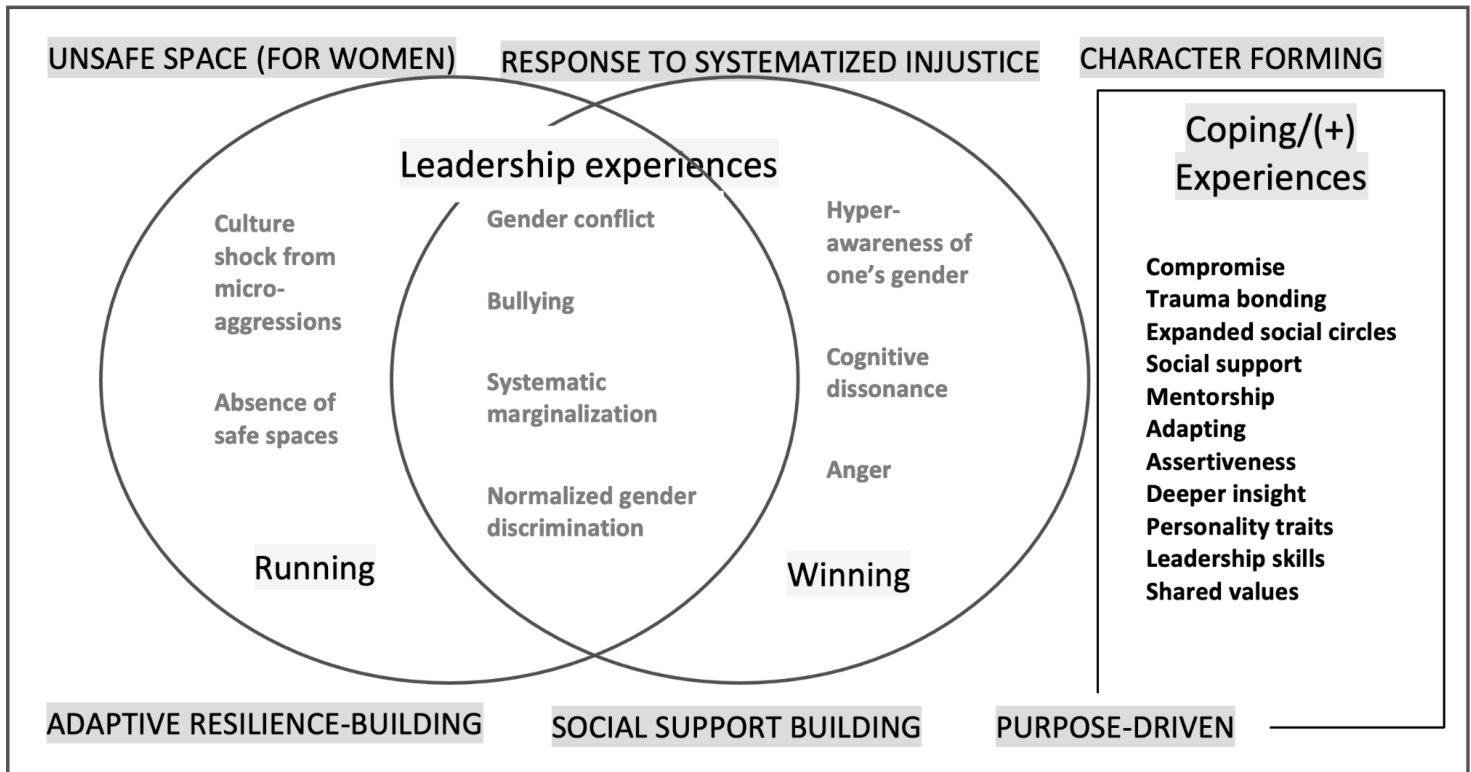
In the next stage, I structured the tentative themes into clusters. The clustered themes were shown to the internal auditor who then approved the clustering. The auditor also reminded me to ensure that the organized themes reflect only what was actually said by the participants; hence, a summary table of the clustered themes was produced with a few quotations that illustrate or elaborate on certain themes that needed context. The homogeneity of the sample allowed for the integration of cases for specific interview questions while ensuring that the idiographic nature of the inquiry into the lived leadership experiences of each participant was respected and kept intact. Following the double hermeneutic process of IPA, themes were assigned to how participants interpreted their experiences then the researcher provided interpretations of the meanings participants ascribed to such experiences. Themes were further explored and their relationships examined within each transcript and then across transcripts. In constructing the resulting narratives of the participants, presented quotes were translated into English (actual interview data may be provided upon request).

## Results

I sought to examine the subjective experiences of seven student leaders from the first three cohorts of female students in a newly coeducational senior high school and the meanings they ascribed to their unique and collective experiences as a minority in their new school environment.

Figure 2 summarizes the key themes and subthemes in the participants' lived experiences of leadership grounded by their unique context and motivations. From participants' description of their challenges, coping strategies, and positive experiences, their lived leadership experiences may be summarized through six main themes: Leadership as (a) unsafe space (for women), (b) a response to systematized injustice, (c) building social support systems, (d) adaptive resilience-building, (e) character-forming, and (f) purpose-driven. Subthemes are further discussed under each of these key themes.

**Figure 2**  
*Participants' Lived Leadership Experiences*



**Leadership as an Unsafe Space (for Women)**

This theme included 10 subthemes. Participants' leadership experiences from the period prior to elections until after they won their leadership positions were marked by a lot of difficulties and challenges. While some of these challenges abated after they won in the elections, there were continuing difficulties that the women have had to deal with and overcome – making them feel that being a leader in their new school environment was an unsafe space for women.

**Culture Shock from Microaggressions**

Participants expressed that they experienced culture shock even before they made their intent to run public in grade 11. One participant described the experience as “jarring” – coming from high expectations of their new school environment and then encountering problems with male students within just a few months of being together. Incidents of microaggressions such as being deliberately ignored during meetings and being excluded from group activities on account of gender were reported by participants. Microaggressions are subtle everyday forms of discriminatory behavior or language directed towards the women leaders such as a lack of sensitivity to their experiences. Although these can be unconscious on the part of the person exhibiting microaggressions, such as implicit assumptions based on gender stereotypes, these are harmful to the women – creating

a sense of inferiority and feelings of exclusion. They were confused and disappointed. One participant narrated that she did not believe gender discrimination to happen in real life until she experienced it first hand in senior high school. In her coeducational junior high school in Cebu which was run by the same religious order, her gender had never been an issue. As Kay narrated,

Oh my God this happens in real life like all this discrimination happens in real life (and not only in) movies or things that we read. So (there) I was culture shocked by how much the men felt threatened and how much not just threatened but how much they would act out to women running (because) coming (from) how our school went co-ed we were (previously) all girls and then they started accepting admissions for boys starting kinder/grade 1 so the first batch of boys was grade 1 so we grew up together.

While this was a sentiment shared by all participants, the STEM students thought that the situation was not so bad in their strand, because they had the highest number of female transfer students – nearly half of the students in the STEM strand were female. Kay belonged to the HUMSS strand and the other HUMSS students among the sample indicated sharing a collective feeling of frustration over how they were perceived and treated by their male classmates, in particular,

those who referred to themselves as “homegrown”, i.e. those who have been in the same school from preparatory level up to junior high school.

### **Gender Conflict**

The culture shock and its attendant negative emotions generally resulted from the gender conflict that permeated the school atmosphere after the opening of the newly coeducational senior high school. Participants experienced prejudice on account of their sex and their decision to aspire for leadership positions in the new school appears to have negatively impacted initial male-female friendships formed within classes and strands. A participant (Greta) from HUMSS narrated that her running mate for class president when she ran for vice president in grade 11 would later lead the campaign against her when she decided to run for strand representative in grade 12. Her running mate lost to another male classmate while she won for class vice president. When she decided to run as strand representative unopposed in HUMSS, her former running mate and his male friends actively campaigned for students to abstain from voting instead. The curious thing about this experience for the said participant was that she could not imagine what the male students had in mind for their strand governance should a failure of elections be declared. Fortunately, she won by a relatively good margin over all the abstain votes.

Participants also shared experiencing being stereotyped on account of their gender, with certain gender roles expected of them in carrying out classroom tasks especially during group work. This has led to women in class work stepping up for their male groupmates because they were expected to do the work. Even within the official student government, female officers and leaders had to take on more tasks. Dawn narrated,

So I was there to pick up the work... the strand chairperson left behind and sometimes ignored on so many levels, (stepping up on their behalf to do the work), and sometimes other elected officers would reach out to me when they had concerns because sometimes the strand chairperson was (nowhere) so they would go to me for other decision-making choices, and then (what else...).

One participant (Kim) from the STEM strand noted a tendency towards tokenism among her male STEM schoolmates despite their show of support for her candidacy in the Sanggu. While they were respectful and helpful, during the campaign, some of them would reportedly tell schoolmates that they were voting for the main male candidate for chair “and the girls”. Tokenism in this context is a form of gender discrimination that involves the practice of including women in activities but merely for the sake of appearances, instead of sincere and meaningful efforts towards gender equality. As Kim shared,

So majority of the positions had a female candidate so for CSO it was me and then for ACO it was [redacted] and for AthC it was [redacted]. And there was a thing going on that people would say they were going to vote for the leading male candidate ‘and the girls’. That was like how they would phrase and there was a freedom wall post saying that ‘Oh I keep

hearing people saying they’ll vote for this (male) candidate and the girls’ and it was basically saying that just because they’re girls doesn’t mean that they can do the job or like they’re better which I think is weird because I feel like the common sentiment or like stereotypically people would think that guys are better than girls but during this time there was this campaign to be like ‘hey don’t just vote for the girls because they’re girls’.

### **Bullying**

Participants described the campaign period as “intense”, engaging majority, if not all, of the student body in a historic election of their new leaders. As the intensity progressed, varying levels and forms of **bullying** were reportedly experienced by the participants. These ranged from acts of microaggressions such as being ignored during meetings or being patronized in discussions, to becoming the topic of Messenger chat groups created for the purpose of smear campaign, to getting booed onstage during Miting de Avance, to more overt acts of physical aggression or harassment. Dawn recalled,

And then I would see (that) they would angry-react my posts and then there was an incident (where) one of the guys, (using a) paperball, ma’am, (sprayed with) alcohol (then he would light it up and throw it up in the air and I was always afraid he would throw it in my direction so I reported it to my formator, ‘Sir, I think [redacted] might burn me.’ I wasn’t sure if he wanted to burn my hair) or what.

According to her, only then did her class moderator act on her complaints.

### **Absence of Safe Spaces**

When the participants were considering moving to the newly coeducational senior high school, one of the drivers of their decision was to experience inclusion. However, their initial experience would be the opposite. The presence of a pre-existing in-group comprised of males from the majority of the student body became more pronounced when incidents of gender conflict occurred in the first few months of school. Participants felt excluded and alienated from this in-group and they feared that as aspiring women leaders, they would not be listened to. Along with these feelings of alienation, and owing to their minority status as well, they did not feel they had **safe spaces**. The microaggressions and bullying affected their self-esteem, aggravated by a perceived lack of support from some school authorities. Dawn illustrated this with her experience:

And then when the guy went back to his friends, they were all laughing, and then I knew it (like) a mocking sort of laugh and then I was crying about it to my friends. And then my formator was like ‘If you’re uncomfortable with it, then why didn’t you just tell them to stop?’ and then I was like ‘Sir, I did tell them to stop but then that’s the way they reacted.’ So those were just kind of the experiences (that were like)... that sort of misogyny was normalized, I didn’t know

if my safe space is being protected. I just knew that I wasn't being respected as a leader. I don't know if I was respected as a person (but) at the end of the day, (I was able to 'graduate') from them.

### *Hyper-awareness of One's Gender*

Even after they had won in the elections, participants continued to experience exclusion and alienation from the pre-existing in-groups of male "homegrown" students of the senior high school. As elected student leaders, while more severe forms of bullying and harassment abated, the microaggressions and bullying in the digital space continued. These continuing incidents of gender conflict led participants to feel **hyper-aware of their being female**, a fact that had previously not been an issue for them in their previous schools. Kay shared,

It's so weird (that) for the first time in my life (it was like) being a woman – I was so conscious of being a woman and being a woman leader (also) – so (like) from that election, (where) I think I was the only one who won the position.

### *Leadership as a Response to Systematized Injustice*

Systematized injustice is a pattern of injustices that are deeply rooted in societal structures and are reinforced over time, particularly in highly traditional institutions. Greta's interpersonal conflict with her former running mate which spiraled into the "abstain movement" is one such example of how years of tradition can solidify cultural norms among a well-bonded group such as the "homegrown" male students. While her conflict with her running mate quietly persisted albeit as undercurrents in day-to-day school interactions, Greta lamented the rise of groupthink among the male and female students who were close to her running mate, and who judged her on the basis of what was told to them about her. She was disturbed that none of these students actually confronted her about the issues being raised against her. In this experience, she realized that some people would find **gender discrimination** more acceptable publicly than admitting to a personal grudge.

### *Normalized Gender Discrimination*

It also did not help that a few school authorities were perceived as complicit because of the seeming lack of transparency in how complaints were handled in general. Participants' personal experiences of bringing their complaints to school authorities were further marred by incidents of trivializing, victim-blaming, and in cases where the culprits were given disciplinary sanctions, they believed them to be mere slaps-on-the-wrist. Greta was also disappointed by the way her class moderator handled the situation with her former running mate – instead of correcting his behavior and that of his friends who were behind the "abstain movement", it was Greta whom he pulled aside to talk with.

Maybe the admin or the faculty could have done something about it because they were aware of it eh and I knew my class adviser was aware of it and (there it was) he pulled me aside and talked to me about it (sort of) telling me to not mind the naysayers

(because) he believes also in my capabilities. Although I really felt like... especially since it also... the opposers also came from our own class eh. I felt like maybe it would have been better if directly (it was addressed), rather than addressing me. Rather than addressing me, I felt like he needed to address them and call it out.

These personal experiences with school authorities seem to have **normalized gender discrimination** in the eyes of participants along with the perceived **systematic marginalization** of their group as a minority.

### *Anger and Cognitive Dissonance*

As student leaders of the school, the participants experienced a build-up of feelings of **anger** from the continuing lack of safe spaces for women, the **cognitive dissonance** they noted between the senior high school's progressive teachings and the prevailing culture, and the feeling that they were unsupported despite trying to do the right thing as leaders and as women. Kay shared,

A lot of that anger from that time and from the sentiments of... the first three batches was really a lot... how we... a lot of the feelings that we shared – we were the collateral damage of that system and (there)... (was like) a lot of the pain, and even for many it was trauma at that point, very traumatic. And (there)... with that experience – and I think that's why a lot of the women still hold that part of anger for the senior high even with the good experiences and the good (stuff) - in a way it really failed them - (especially) the first few batches.

### *Systematic Marginalization*

They also believed that their marginalization as female leaders were mirroring the **systematic marginalization** of the female transfer students in the school in general because of the transferee quota set for women and their perceived hasty preparations for the school's transition to coeducation, given its long history and tradition in exclusive education for men. One participant shared how, to help "foster better relationships" between the male and female students in class, her class moderator paired them up in the classroom seat plan. This forced socialization had the opposite effect instead, as some females in the class (who comprised only one-third of the section) felt uncomfortable with this arrangement.

### *Uneasy Compromise*

Participants generally coped with their challenges by, at first, arriving at a fragile compromise with the male students (through their class moderators) of basic respect for boundaries; but even this understanding felt like a sort of forced accommodation of the undesirable situation at hand. As Dawn said, by studying communication patterns with the male students, she tried to pander to their interests.

For the guys, it was more of catering (or) appeal(ing) to their interests because, (I'm the one who needed to adjust), actually, (I don't know anymore) if I'm running ahead of myself but there were times when a

lot of the guys won't hesitate to point out to me (that I'm an outsider), (that) I'm alienated from them, (that I was just a hanger-on), here in [redacted], because I do not belong. Because of that, and (because they were the majority) and I needed their votes, I had to pander to their interests, meet them at their level, (like) use their humor with them, for them, against them.

### **Leadership as Building Social Support Systems**

The second theme includes four subthemes. Participants who experienced the same negative treatment forged a strong bond with each other within and across strands.

#### **Trauma Bonding**

Dawn called the phenomenon “**trauma bonding**”. Dawn's understanding of trauma bonding refers to the solidarity she forged with other fellow women leaders who underwent negative experiences in their leadership journey. In the context of marginalized women, trauma bonding occurs when they are forced to endure oppression, creating a sense of helplessness in their situation. However, it should be noted that trauma bonding is characterized by attachment to the oppressor which is clearly not what Dawn was describing in her experience. The women leaders' collective experience of discrimination was what brought them closer together, providing a much needed support system in the midst of their challenges.

#### **Expanded Social Circles**

Running for leadership positions also helped **expand their social circles** not only during the campaign period. Their collective frustrations somehow also allied them with student groups who also felt marginalized in a previously all-male exclusive school. There was an uptick in community awareness of LGBT issues and teachers began looking inward to check for subconscious biases they may have been harboring. Widening their social circles also enhanced participants' interpersonal and social skills not only with the opposite sex but also with people in general who were “outside their comfort zone”. As Faye explained,

(What I loved most) out of the experiences is I got to really connect with different people – (there were) instances (when we would meet) with our junior high counterparts so we have activities together and well (it was just so cool) to experience (because) it's really nice to think that you're a part of a bigger thing.

Kim shared,

I think the life-giving parts were being able to – I guess – getting to know the people outside my classroom and outside the strand since a lot of the homegrowns in my section – they were super willing to help me and they were super kind enough to introduce me to their friends who were from the junior high school and who were from different strands... When they announced that we had won during the time, we all ran outside to the lobby and looked for each other and we just hugged each other and ‘Oh my gosh we finally did it!’. Yeah we really

ran and especially because me and the AthC candidate, we were together, so we ran and we were looking for the ACO candidate and then we found her, it was like ‘Wow, finally!’ like all the... everything was... that was like one of the most memorable experiences.

#### **Mentorship**

Notable among the participants' coping handles in their leadership journey was the presence of faculty **mentors** who were highly sympathetic, empathic and supportive of them. They made time to listen to their concerns and dispensed valuable advice in navigating their problems. They were not formal mentors in the sense that they were mandated to do this task for the women but they were subject teachers, class moderators, counselors and even office staff who cared enough to listen. They also lauded their school mentors for speaking up on their behalf. One of the core values of the school is *cura personalis* alumnorum, roughly translated as “care for the entire person”. **High empathy faculty mentors**, both formal and informal, who placed high levels of trust in their capabilities as female student leaders were deemed to have shown them *cura personalis* in action. They also mentioned long hours spent hanging out at the Sanggu office or Office of Student Activities where they experienced hands-on mentorship from the faculty formators and learned the ropes vicariously from grade 12 student leaders. However, one participant expressed that this kind of mentorship did not happen to everyone – one had to have been working closely with the faculty formators to benefit from their mentoring. As Ginny explained,

The thing with the mentoring (was that) it didn't happen to everyone. (Sometimes you get mentored, other times you have no one) – (so you're just there and) you just learn by looking. But there are others that are more hands-on towards other people and there were others who actually approached people (to ask), Hi, how do you do this?

#### **Heightened Social Support**

Participants also expressed experiencing heightened levels of **social support** not only from fellow females but also from male schoolmates as well. They take pride in belonging to what is considered the most inclusive school in the basic education unit, where females are pioneering student leaders. In the case of Greta, she felt heartened by the collective pushback she witnessed from among fellow female (and some male) students not only from HUMSS but from other strands as well. She claims that the movement was a grassroots initiative, something she noticed when her attention was called when a hashtag with her name #IStandWith[Redacted] began trending in their social media circles. Greta shared,

I was really touched when one of my close friends in that class, she really went in front of the class like – (remember the) homeroom period? – she stood up in front of the class and told the class her plan (like) ‘Oh this is what's happening to [redacted] and this is my idea, let's support her through this and that’ and (people stepped up to support me too) and then it was

so nice... that also warmed my heart (because) it was the first time someone stood up for me. Someone else stood up for me.

### **Leadership as Adaptive Resilience-Building**

The following two subthemes were found under the theme of Leadership as Adaptive Resilience-Building: (a) adapting by shifting focus and (b) assertiveness as a leader.

#### ***Adapting by Shifting Focus***

Greta's experience of social support in the wake of the abstain movement against her bolstered her spirit and motivated her to **shift her focus** and energies on the schoolmates who appeared neutral and quiet by reaching out to them and presenting her leadership platform to them. She explained,

So what I really (just) did, I really just focused on the people who were supporting me or neutral against me. (I no longer...) – I didn't exert effort anymore in trying to please those people who... (my) mindset (was) I'm just going to do the work, I'm going to do my best for people who need, who need the leadership... for the people who need their issues to be addressed for.

#### ***Assertiveness as a Leader***

Some participants coped by cultivating and projecting a strong (leader) image. Ginny shared,

I guess it was when – sorry for the trigger warning – it was when there were already news of sexual harassments and we just know how those rumors, also not even the rumors, (when I already knew of cases being filed, I said, shucks, it's not enough to be tough) – (I needed to be tougher, show them you can't be messed with). Because that was one of the things that I think was the reason why I'd like to think I got out of [redacted] unscathed was because I had to build up more walls (so I could be more assertive and not easily intimidated). And I think that was also one of the lesser reasons why I joined Sanggu was because when they know that you're like established as a leader here like in the [redacted], (they know they can't touch you).

In coping with their continuing challenges as elected leaders of the school, the participants maintained the peace through a fragile compromise with the male students who opposed them. They also continued to focus on reaching out to the student body to rally support for their programs. The small collective pushback they started during the campaign and election season snowballed into a more intentional and concerted effort to create new mechanisms in school to create safe spaces, educate the community on gender issues, and officially call out undesirable behavior whenever situations warranted it. One of the new student committees formed by batch 2018 advocated for safe spaces and gender equity. Succeeding batches of female leaders began organizing talks on women empowerment and gender issues, inviting speakers like Senator Risa Hontiveros, networking with the gender hubs of the college within the university and in a neighboring

academic institution known for their feminist orientation. In the two school years that followed, student-led committees would also embark on their own #MeToo movement, LGBT Pride activities, and put up physical freedom walls for expression for women and men alike.

Participants' leadership journey in their senior high school was also marked by positive experiences that they considered helpful to their experiences of leadership later on in college and, for batch 2018, in navigating the world of work after graduation. Foremost of these experiences is the value of assertiveness and standing up for oneself. Participants look at their senior high school leadership experiences as their socio-political awakening, first, as they struggled with acceptance, inclusion and recognition in a new school environment, and later on as their leadership opportunities exposed them to social realities outside of school and beyond their immediate communities. From recognizing the need to act on complaints within the school in order to correct undesirable behavior, they realized the need as well to speak out on social injustices they witnessed in the larger context of society. As Kay shared,

I have such a deep love for the senior high (because) of the opportunities to lead especially how it shaped me as a leader – I mean it gave me a lot of opportunity to serve not just the community but like the community outside of [redacted] so (it was like) in senior high it was my sociopolitical awakening (as well) - being able to be part of campaigns bigger than the senior high school.

As student leaders they also saw the value of sustaining grassroots movements that push back against unjust attitudes and practices by highlighting empowering practices and mechanisms. They were also successful in setting clear boundaries in school to engender mutual respect and improved communication.

### **Leadership as Character-Forming**

#### ***Gaining Deeper Insight on Gender Bias***

As they attempted to make light of the disappointing experiences they were having as new students aspiring to be leaders, they took a hard look at gender differences that accounted for problems in communication and interaction with the male "homegrown" students. Along with this came the realization and acceptance that it was impossible to be liked and accepted by everyone, no matter how widely they tried to reach out. These moments of introspection allowed them **to gain a deeper insight** not only into gender differences but also helped them make meaning out of their personal and collective experiences. As Kay shared,

(I needed to)... the language that I am communicating with had to be different when I'm talking to guys. Talking to girls – because with girls, it's just easy to just flow in the conversation because we come from same context.

Participants expressed gaining a **deeper understanding of gender bias** as primarily a function of ego formation influenced by family upbringing, and other environmental

factors such as the impact of peers' attitudes, sociopolitical actors in the larger milieu, social media, and global trends of intolerance and hate. With this understanding comes the realization that antagonizing males in their senior high school was not a solution. From batch 2018 to 2020, it is worth noting that the younger cohorts have significantly noted an improvement in gender relations in the senior high school, with institutionalized mechanisms that address gender conflict and discrimination such as gender sensitivity workshops in school. Kelly explained,

Ah okay, (so this should be the) consideration, (your) understanding and of course, (and) self-expression – your communication with others just to achieve (a) certain level of inclusivity where no one would ideally be left behind. And also you wanted to – I wanted to consider (too) the personal experiences (because) I couldn't really fault the homegrown boys for being like that 100%; (because) their environment has been tolerating them to be like that (and so it became quite) internalized. (Another thing), I think another factor (was) a language barrier in a way.

### ***Enhanced Personality Traits and Leadership Skills***

Participants likewise shared that their **personality traits and skills** were greatly enhanced by their leadership experiences in senior high school. Working with highly diverse and talented individuals including those they met outside of their comfort zones greatly benefitted their **leadership skills**. Ginny explained,

It was like something you could try to establish – it was a very blank slate. So the leadership that was being defined here - something you could explore and something that you could also trailblaze with. And so that was something that I was really interested to look into - like how does the [redacted] actually form leaders and how do we actually inculcate that and how do we encourage our students. And I was like very encouraged, and I think it was also the environment, especially when I was in Grade 12 wherein I really wanted to continue on with the Sanggunian and why I wanted to take up on leadership roles.

They enjoyed making connections with different people and the experience taught them to be more open and flexible. They also found that as leaders, they gravitated towards the more collaborative, relational style given the initial experiences of challenges they had and the need to reach out to more people beyond one's comfort zone. Nonetheless, it remained clear to them that their proper performance of their leadership roles and responsibilities to all their constituents took precedence over mere popularity.

### **Leadership as Purpose-Driven**

#### ***Shared Values***

Their leadership experiences in senior high school also brought them closer to what the school stood for – **a stronger service orientation**. The varied opportunities they had to exercise leadership to serve their school and community gave

them greater creative freedom to conceptualize and execute programs that supported the school's advocacies. The school's vision and mission have always been clear in their minds and despite the challenges they encountered being a minority in the new senior high school, they believed that the school's character formation thrust aligned with their personal values. Participants described it as a **deep love for their school**, flaws and all, or a strong school spirit that was defining of their experiences and identities as women leaders. As Ginny explained,

I love how [redacted] teaches its students like how to become student leaders? Like I always tell this to my former moderators here whenever I come back here, it was here that I learned the hard skills, the soft skills, how to really be better at project management, how to deal with people, but more so how to empower also. But also I think at the very core, was how to embody empathy like towards your constituents, towards the people that you're working with. It was here when I actually learned how it means to become a better leader. Like I've always had a concept of what a leader was but it became more tangible, it became more realistic, it became more structured here in [redacted] and I'd like to think that even if I entered in a blank slate of [redacted], it was– despite it, I learned so many things that up to this day, I still carry (them) over to where I am already right now.

## **Discussion**

### **Gender and Leadership Development**

The arrival of the first batches of female students in senior high school was instrumental in the school community's unraveling of deeply held, albeit subconscious, biases about gender and people who do not belong to in-groups or dominant groups. Both students and teaching staff have had to take a pause and ask where all this prejudice was coming from, in a 21st century coeducational senior high school in a university known for its liberal education and progressive teachings in its curricula. As participants recalled their leadership challenges and retrospectively ascribed meanings to their experiences, they came to the conclusion that the prejudice was not entirely the male students' fault (although it is extremely important that the male students still acknowledge and be made answerable for their own undesirable behaviors, i.e. bullying and harassment, gender discrimination, and similar gender-based acts of aggression).

It is now important to ask how does this form of gender bias develop? In an early study by Liwag et al. (1998) on child-rearing practices and gender socialization in the Philippines, their review of 131 related studies confirm the role of family as the primary venue for gender socialization of Filipino children from early childhood to young adulthood. Parental attitudes are influenced first by an expressed preference for either a son or a daughter for different reasons. Fathers preferred sons for their firstborn children and daughters were preferred for their perceived value in household chores. Daughters are raised to be responsible

because they shared in their mothers' role of nurturance and household management. Parental expectations of their children's traits have also been found to be gendered in that daughters are expected to be modest and obedient while sons are expected to be intelligent and sociable. Parents' career aspirations for their children are also differentiated by the latter's gender. While Filipino parents in general aspire for all their children to finish higher education, when confronted with limited finances and opportunities, the tendency was to prioritize their male children over the females because of the expected role of men to become breadwinners in the future.

In a comparative study done by Kreitz-Sandberg (2007) on gender and schooling between Japanese and Filipino schools, she cited a local study conducted by Miriam College's WAGI (Women and Gender Institute) in 2004 where a sample of sixth-graders from Filipino households were asked to identify if certain activities were for "boys only", for "girls only", or for "both girls and boys". While eighty (80) percent of the Filipino sixth-graders assigned parenting, decision making and leadership roles to both sexes, half of them assigned household management tasks to females, such as cooking, washing and marketing. In the classroom, the WAGI study noted that teachers also tended to give gender-specific instructions to students. Teaching materials also tended to depict male students in more active roles while female students are associated with domestic tasks. Nonetheless, Kreitz-Sandberg notes that subjective choices for gender expression and identity were less conservative among Filipino children compared to their Japanese counterparts. Language is seen as facilitative of this because compared to Japanese, the Filipino language, such as its pronouns, is not gender-specific. While the participants in the WAGI study belong to a different demographic than the male and female students of the senior high school research setting, their study provides an insight into how Filipino children assimilate gender stereotypes at home and in school, and come to perform gendered roles in both environments.

In contrast, a study on British households by Borrell-Porta et al. (2018) examined what they termed as the "Mighty Girl Effect" which basically argues that parents who have daughters tend to become more accepting of less traditional gender roles even if they held gender stereotypes prior to the birth of a daughter. Nonetheless, parenting styles across cultures have still yielded evidence on gendered expectations of male and female children. In Ulferts' (2020) working paper for the OECD entitled *Why parenting matters for children in the 21st century: An evidence-based framework for understanding parenting and its impact on child development*, maternal and paternal roles remain gendered despite the shift

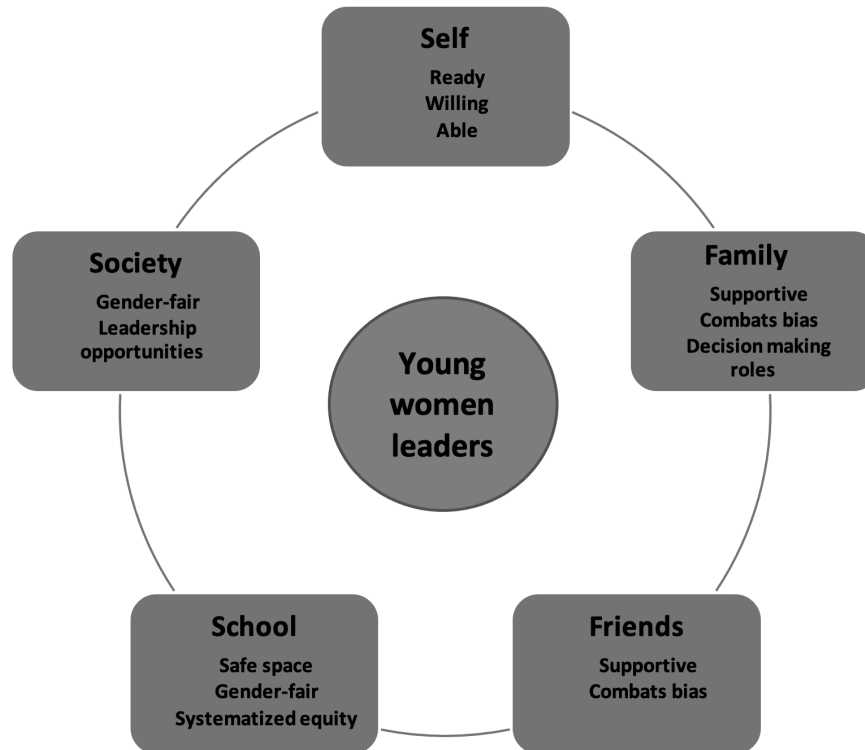
in recent years on how gender is construed. Parents' gender roles thereby impact the way they raise boys and girls across different cultures. Children's gender also affected the way they are parented, with parents tending to be more authoritarian with boys, and more authoritative with girls. Zheng's (2017) qualitative study on young Chinese women's leadership experiences in an elite university also revealed cultural factors that caused the women stress and impeded their identity as empowered leaders on account of being female. These studies underscore the crucial influence of perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of an individual's significant adults (such as parents and teachers) within a particular societal context on engendering implicit or second-generation biases which ultimately inform individuals' behavior towards the opposite sex.

Data from participants' interviews also highlight the important role their families played in their decision to seek leadership roles in school. Most of them credit their family upbringing and their role models for having the character and personality to lead. As Ginny explained, her parents raised her to be strong in the sense that her leadership personality was structured that way. One other participant shared that her parents were student activists during Martial Law and are still involved in social development work. She believes she was raised by her parents to be socially aware, involved and to aspire for social justice. Kay's leadership experiences are framed by her experience of a strongly matriarchal family, where women are naturally considered leaders and decision makers. She quoted a cousin who described them as "firecracker women". For Kelly, being the eldest somehow preordained her to take the lead in many things, owing to parental expectations as well as to her own expectations of the self as a responsible eldest child. Kelly also shared that her family is a family of extroverts, and she owes her facility in making friends and connecting with people to the social skills she was exposed to in her family.

Themes that emerged from the individual interview data and case integration support Keating et al.'s (2014) conceptual framing of how leaders (and leadership) are formed as well as Swai and Moses' (2021) hexagonal model of leadership emergence. However, for this particular study, "school" and "university" have been combined as representing one and the same academic institution characterized by deeply held traditions and a pre-existing culture. The researcher has added crucial elements under each factor based on the study's resulting data. Figure 3 combines the theoretical conceptions of Keating and her colleagues with that of Swai and Moses on the factors involved in young women's leader emergence.

**Figure 3**

*Young Women's Leader Emergence (Adapted from Keating, et al., 2014 and Swai & Moses, 2021)*



Participants in the study all began their leadership journeys in the senior high school with high levels of self-efficacy and a strong perception of the self as a leader. As pioneering batches of female students in senior high school, they saw themselves as trailblazers, and assuming a leadership role in this new school environment was almost predestined for them. It also helped that they possessed a very positive self-image and were fairly confident in their abilities and leadership skills. Participants also sought validation and empowerment in their pursuit of leadership. As a minority comprising only one-third of the school population, they needed to be seen, and heard, and their value and contribution acknowledged by the community.

It is worth recalling that Keating and her colleagues explored student leaders' perception of their abilities while undergoing an elective leadership course in college and noted that a pathway to leadership effectiveness starts with building confidence and seeing oneself as a leader. Leadership readiness is further bolstered by a genuine desire to serve as a primary motivator. While other drivers of the pursuit of leadership may have contributed to the participants' decision to seek leadership roles such as the support of their friends and

families, the perception that they possess the personality and character of a leader and that they are willing to fulfill their leadership roles seem to be the main drivers in their pursuit of leadership. Their leadership skills which were fruits of prior leadership experiences in junior high school prepared them for the more challenging demands of leadership in senior high school.

Eva et al.'s (2021) comprehensive review of literature on young women's leadership development likewise points to adolescent girls' leader emergence, motivation and identity as a prevailing theme in related studies. The participants' desire to solve problems in the new school environment and to represent women as a minority were likewise drivers of their decision to lead. The challenges encountered by the participants in their leadership journey likewise provide a context that can potentially provide conditions in which transformational leadership could emerge. The female students' collective leadership experiences rocked the senior high school boat, thrived on conflict and engaged fellow students who snapped out of their groupthink and apathy to help effect small but significant changes in people's attitudes and institutions' ways of proceeding. Burns (1978) described

transformational leadership as a challenge to the status quo, and a process whereby leaders and followers help each other create valuable, positive changes in individuals and systems. While these changes do not happen overnight, the participants' leadership experiences and the lessons learned from these experiences may serve as a catalyst towards lasting transformational changes for the school community.

### **Unique Context, Challenging Climate**

The participants' leadership experiences, while generally echoing women's struggles in many parts of the world, happened within a very unique context of suddenly becoming part of a minority in a private Catholic school with many years of history and tradition as a boys' school. Because of the limited admission slots for women in grade 11, they comprised roughly 30 to 35 percent of the grade level population. Batch 2018 likewise had the sole distinction of sharing the new campus building with the last all-male batch of the senior high school in grade 12. The admission quota was perceived by the participants as systematic marginalization which did not help their adjustment to their new environment. Ay Kay explained, "So systematically, unless that quota is removed, women will always be the minority."

Given the rigorous screening process of transfer students for admission to the school, coupled with a preferential cutoff score for the male applicants from the university's feeder (junior high) school, the female students who joined the newly coeducational senior high school were the best of their class, considered elite, academics-wise and in terms of co-curricular achievements. About a third of the female students were also top students from public schools who were granted scholarships. This contextualizes why Kay described the men in her batch as feeling "threatened". As in the case of Russell's (1993) experience of transitioning to coeducation in her Boston school, the women "brought with them a forthright seriousness of academic purpose that had been missing from some of the all-male classrooms" (p. 12).

Learning is said to be influenced by the quality and character of one's school life. School climate has also been found to be a strong predictor of leadership development (Loukas, 2007; Castillo et al., 2019). While participants did not categorically state that the climate in their new school environment was unwelcoming, most of them shared that their experiences with some of their male schoolmates made them feel like they still needed to prove that they belonged there. As a minority, and as conflicts with the male students escalated, their need for psychological safety and support became highlighted. According to the NSCC (National School Climate Center at Ramapo for Children, 2022), in assessing school climate, five key areas need to be looked into: (a) safety, (b) interpersonal relations, (c) social media, (d) teaching / learning, and (e) institutional environment. However, amidst participants' challenges in the matter of school climate, they still expressed a strong sense of connectedness to the school despite their negative leadership experiences, and through their own initiatives and the support of sympathetic members of the school community they took it upon themselves to ensure safe spaces by creating formal mechanisms that provided protective aid to students who felt marginalized and unsafe.

### **Limitations and Implications for Research**

A major limitation in this study pertains to the uniqueness of its context in that it does not represent the experience of other schools in the Philippines, particularly of public senior high schools where male and female populations are nearly equal. A possible implication for further research would be to look into young women's leader emergence and leadership experiences in other contexts – such as in private and public, urban and rural schools, where male and female students are equal in number, or where female students outnumber males. It would be interesting to explore how various contexts and school cultures impact young women's leadership experiences. Local studies conducted in various contexts on the topic would provide a deeper appreciation of the wealth of this phenomenon about gender and leadership.

This study also did not include the impact of the shift to online schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic on student leadership particularly for batch 2020 and succeeding cohorts. In a future study, it might be interesting to explore how practices and processes related to choosing student leaders may have influenced female students' experiences of doing primarily online campaigns, participating in online elections, and remote leadership.

### **Implications for Practice**

Earlier in this paper, it has been noted that the issue of subconscious gender bias is generally excluded as a consideration for designing and developing leadership programs for women (and men) (Madsen and Andrade, 2018). Considering the unique participant sample in this study, a co-constructed leader formation and leadership development program between the intended beneficiaries and education experts highly familiar with gender studies is recommended. As shown in this study, internalized or implicit gender bias among students and other members of the school community has had implications on the formation and experiences of female student leaders. A gender-fair leadership development program would need to be evidence-based while remaining faithful to the core values of the senior high school.

### **Summary**

This retrospective IPA was concerned with the lived leadership experiences of seven women who belonged to the first three batches (2018, 2019, and 2020) of a newly coeducational senior high school in a Filipino, Catholic basic education institution. Due to a transferee admission quota, the women belonged to a minority, comprising about one-third of the student population. Their lived experiences of leadership as pioneering female leaders in the former exclusive school for boys are summarized into the following key themes: Leadership as (a) unsafe space (for women), (b) a response to systematized injustice, (c) adaptive resilience-building, (d) building social support systems, (e) character-forming, and (f) purpose-driven.

### **Reflexivity**

The researcher is a former head counselor in the research setting and had over two decades of teaching and counseling experience in the all-male high school of the university before

its shift to coeducation in compliance with the country's K-12 reform. On the last school year of the research period, the researcher was appointed as the school's first female assistant principal for student affairs and formation. The researcher made an effort to completely dissociate from and step out of these past roles as she listened to the participants, read and reread each interview transcript, conferred with the hired transcriptionists and initial coders, identified themes, subthemes and consulted with an internal auditor – a fellow PhD in Leadership Studies major who has completed an IPA study – before abstracting participants' ascribed meanings into a coherent structure. Having stepped out of the institution officially in 2020 facilitated this process.

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