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## **Revolutionizing Education for Women Empowerment during Pandemic and Beyond Pandemic Times**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Women are underrepresented and denied equal opportunities in the scientific community as a result of a rigid research culture and a lack of genuine academic support. Higher Education should go beyond the superficial treatment of women empowerment. This article reflects on the heightened gender-based inequality during pandemic and calls for the academic community to take social action and contribute to women empowerment. It also advocates re-creating and revolutionizing the educational system to promote women's rights and success stories in pedagogical instruction, as well as forming alliances with more men as one of the potential solutions to strengthen women's empowerment. Higher Education should create and encourage inclusive research cultures, implement mentorship programs, integrate gender equity in institutional metrics, and amplify policy spaces for women beyond COVID-19. Academia should therefore adopt a feminist praxis as an integral part of its structure to enact social change, because women empowerment is beyond mediocrity.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, women empowerment, higher education, gender inequality, feminism

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Higher education can play a pivotal role in disseminating a significant contribution in women's career trajectories in the research world amid the pandemic and beyond pandemic. Despite how COVID-19 accentuates the disparities in the plight of women (Chen & Bougie, 2020), women prevail no matter the disparities and gender inequalities. However, as generations pass by, women are still subjected to stigma for being sensitive, dramatic, and indecisive (Eklund, Barry & Grunberg, 2017). These gender-based stereotypes and gender-based violence are some of the primary reasons why I view feminist praxis as valuable for contributing to social justice. During this global health crisis, I delved into an interpretivist paradigm that focused on women's roles in the academe to fight against COVID-19.

Because stereotypical socio-cultural practices persist, being Asian and living in a developing country may indicate deprivation. Women's traditional roles in parts of Asia are strict, patriarchal practices predominate, and gender inequalities persist (Strachan, et.al, 2015). Nonetheless, I am privileged to be in academia, where my influence as a catalyst for change to a generation of learners is recognized. As an educator and researcher, I have had the privilege of contributing to the empowerment of marginalized people. Similarly, my thoughts and experiences during COVID-19 fueled my desire to advocate for revolutionizing the educational system through a disability and feminist lens as critical to the social outcome of the post-corona

society. I would like to emphasize how academia and science can strengthen feminism practices, liberate women from gender oppression in the face of COVID-19, and engage men to social action for women's empowerment. As a result, I focus my commitment to social justice on the possibility of COVID-19 disproportionately affecting women's career and educational paths (Gabster et al., 2020).

Reflecting on the gender and development programs of some universities is a call for action, so I ponder and dissuade the lack of profundity of the programs with a nexus grounded on the materialism aspect. Such derivative superficiality is earmarked on aesthetic embellishments with an insufficient depth of critical gender lens for socio-cultural transformation. The issues dealing with women empowerment are beyond the well-orchestrated concept of a spectacular Broadway show. The literary context of superficiality for charismatic influence to evoke emotions resulting in frenzied applause is a satirical illusion of theorizing change in the deep-rooted stereotypes of gender discrimination prevalent in society.

Women empowerment is beyond physical beauty, absurdity, and distorted sense of reality. Persuading people in the academe to partake in the women's month and dreaming that shared efforts are accomplished in making the lives of women better— is incomprehensible and unsubstantiated. It is not simply about the embellished banners marked with 'celebrating women's month' in every corner of the university in March every year. Though these are good signs that organizations try to uphold women empowerment in academia, is this good enough to address long-standing issues of women. Following that, people look forward to another year of embroidering pink and violet symbols on the university hallway. To what extent do these aesthetic illusions address the universality of gender discrimination? The answer— it is a metaphorical representation that women do exist.

In my university, a few women have functions and responsibilities in high positions. Male dominance exists in these positions with a ratio of 8 out of 10. In scholarship, we try to incorporate a gender-inclusive approach, but not much of programs and policies cater to address the need for more scholarship among women. Moreover, one of the challenges that women encountered relative to scholarship is the lack of mentoring in navigating the publishing environment. Lack of mentorship would mean slow career progression in academia since publishing can be an uncharted territory. I, for one, had difficulty with publishing when I started out since I received minimal guidance, if any, on how to do things. I studied alone since I had no research mentor and superior to guide me. I unleashed the power of technology and stood on the shoulders of giants, relying on platforms such as Google Scholar to look for answers to my questions about research. In the Philippines, our primary responsibility is focused on teaching rather than publishing. But a rather lackluster network makes publishing ever more challenging, especially since promotion and contribution are also anchored to producing research. Then, women are rated with the same standards as men without looking at the multiple roles played by women at home (motherhood, wife duties, household chores, etc. refer to Whiley et al., 2021) that may hinder such similar career trajectories.

Moreover, I rarely encounter books that depict representation of successful women researchers and prospects of science and political-related careers for women. Scholarships leading to college also do not target those girls in marginalized areas. The incorporation of feminism concepts is also not taught in most courses in the curriculum. If any, there is minimal or limited representation of feminism lens in praxis and pedagogy in the educational system. Hence, peer mentorship, meaningful and relevant empowerment programs, calling men to support feminism, and curriculum feminism praxis are possible entry points to expanding the authenticity of women empowerment.

### **Beyond Superficial: Spectrum of Fragilities due to Pandemic**

The advent of the pandemic has resurfaced dimensions of fragility in systems and institutions that heighten the hallmark of deprivation, unequal treatment, and discrimination on a global scale. Everybody is vulnerable to COVID-19, and so are women. The quarantine posits gendered implications to women (Wenham, Smith & Morgan, 2020). For example, the authors from Pakistan reported that women's vulnerability "get heightened

in situations like COVID-19 mainly due to the religiously inspired dominant patriarchal social behaviors and the state's inability to practically empower its women during normal conditions" (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020, p. 10).

The pandemic has exposed the vast disarray concerning gender inequality in society, and the academe is no exemption. Before the pandemic, masculinity tends to dominate higher positions and ranks (Eagly, Karau & Makhijani, 1995; Ryan & Branscombe, 2013; Eklund et al., 2017) in the socio-political ecosystem, and COVID-19 exacerbates this deprivation for women leadership.

During the surge of the pandemic, I spearheaded and organized international conferences despite the little logistics and limited human resources. Spearheading the events as conference chair, I navigated a whirlwind that included heavy academic workload, household duties, benign physical illness, online learning adjustments, student org advising, three sections of online thesis consultations, publishing numerous papers, networking with foreign practitioners, and coping with psychological exhaustion due to the pandemic. Amid these multiplex and concurrent happenings, a few of my male counterparts labeled me as incapable of managing the stress associated with the international conference without knowing the real context of my motives and reasons behind my supervisory actions- especially when I make sudden decisions that call for desperate measures to mobilize people to action to achieve the goal for the conferences during an extreme period in our lives. Such stereotyping and 'dramatic' labeling is uncalled for. Empowering women necessitates more than just physical aesthetics. Advocating for feminism lens is beyond the superficial display of women empowerment. Women have been fighting for generations to liberate against gender-based societal stereotypes that sprang from patriarchal societal domination imposed through religious, familial, superstitious, cultural, and political standards (Ahmed & Noushad, 2017; Ajala, 2016; Muasya, 2016). All these factors of deeply-entrenched dogmatic norms and values cannot be solved through mediocrity of environmental embellishments. Advocating for women empowerment requires targeting norms and values and sustainable development (Bayeh, 2016) to break the chain of gender discrimination and gender-based violence. I purport that the academe has the most crucial role to play in shaping societal values. Empowering women is a shared vision for human rights and social justice (UN Women, 2015). This empowerment empirically means significantly contributing to the decrease of multidimensional poverty and socio-economic related issues in society, aside from its great influence to education and well-being (Wei et al., 2021).

### **Amplifying Policy Spaces and Enjoining Men for Social Action**

To improve the plight of women, unity is essential to dismantle patriarchal dominion. We must not allow the pandemic to exacerbate existing disparities in women empowerment so that those feminism movements that existed prior to the pandemic are not in vain. However, men's involvement to alleviate gender stigmatization is also important for women's empowerment (Toquero & Ulanday, 2023). They are part of the cause of the problem, so they can also partake in the solution (Flood, 2015). When more men join in advocating for women's rights, despite the inherent complexities of this involvement, there is a better chance that laws and policies formulated by men in positions of power will favor women. We can strengthen women empowerment when we enjoin men as our allies in social action and call out justice for women. One of the challenges is how to engage more men to advocate for women's welfare. These are desperate times, and we need all the help in amplifying policy spaces for women empowerment. COVID-19 exposed the spectrum of fragilities and mounting complexities in academia (Stack, 2021), but this pandemic era is a time for an educational and societal revolution.

Since men tend to dominate many of the higher positions in some universities in the Philippines, including positions in research, then cooperation of men and women is crucial to raise academic voices for social action. One instance after the pandemic lockdowns, in meeting with other researchers during conferences, I encountered that there were only very few women who participated in a Philosophy forum. This event suggests that men have the platform to call for more women participation in the field of Philosophy.

Integrating gender equity in university metrics will challenge institutions for accountability towards systemic change. Equal representation will afford both men and women opportunities for professional growth in academia encompassing leadership, resources, and dignity. Practicing an inclusive scientific culture in an institution is crucial for balancing funding distributions, implementing flexible work arrangements, and improving programs and interventions.

Despite the adverse effects of the pandemic to some people in the world today, particularly women, this pandemic presents opportunities for women empowerment. This is not the time to be afraid of initiating change, even if society resents it, because times have changed and many people are either suffering or reflecting on inner changes. Thus, today is a hallmark for a dynamic revolution to make women's lives better and liberate women from brusque treatment and undesirable typecasts. There is a need to capture the opportunities (Yan, 2020) and make use of this hiatus to effect change for women. The lingering question is not why, it is how? There is a need to focus on where feminism can advance its movement and proliferate where it can serve best—academia.

### **Expanding Scientific Opportunities for Women**

In the research spheres of the university and the transnational scientific community, research opportunities should be equally granted to women. There are only very few existing publishing houses that cater to women studies. But every university needs to create more scientific outlets for both men and women with the groundwork on women empowerment and intersectionality. There is also a significant gap in the scientific studies, such as in the Philippines, that delve into feminism studies. I have only read a few of that in-depth research that tackle real issues confronting women. Although there are funding grants that are provisioned for incorporating feminism, very few researchers opt to do research on critical issues surrounding women, which may be due to multifaceted factors. Women should be encouraged and supported to propose and publish more research for the transnational scientific community during pandemic and beyond the pandemic.

Research journals also need to cater to the feminist movements to support more women to publish scientific research. “Scientific expertise and knowledge from all genders are essential to build diverse, inclusive research organizations and improve the rigour of medical research to tackle COVID-19” (Gabster et al., 2020, p. 1969). Hence, the research culture should be kinder for both men and women throughout the pandemic and beyond pandemic to generate more shreds of evidence focused on women studies and advance women empowerment. We are in times of gender dynamics, but it takes academia and the research culture to change stereotypes against women. Taking structural action to address the challenges of women commits to honoring the Sustainable Development Goals (Burzynska & Contreras, 2020). This endeavor is more than merely cosmetic.

### **Curricular Response through Feminism Praxis**

The academe needs to proliferate knowledge by making the curriculum more responsive for inclusivity and create more research opportunities with a focus on advancing women empowerment in the society. The educational system needs to incorporate relevance and responsiveness to meet the needs of the changing times. Courses could be created in the country with the nucleus on women empowerment so that the younger generations can provide knowledge generation for the society. Such curricular responses may engender legitimate strategies to advance the welfare of women as aligned to the sustainable development goals.

With reference to equality, we hope to see more women leaders in academia and the country's political ecosystem in the future. Character education should incorporate the values of feminism and lessons of women's achievements that changed the course of history. Books should be rewritten to highlight the role of women from earlier times leading to the pandemic in which women are the first line of military defense against the spread of the novel coronavirus. By doing so, the younger generations of student citizenry, both boys and girls will be taught that both men and women have equal rights and equal opportunities in society. Let us

imagine a future in which more men advocate for women's rights. Changing norms and values clearly necessitates the participation of the entire academe and society. "Social awareness and civic conscience are now needed more than ever. Feminist thinking and community work are key to the development of empathy and actions that foster togetherness rather than otherness" (Boncori, 2020, p. 3). This is more than superficial.

### **Rebirth for Academia during Extraordinary Times**

The pandemic sparks the beginning for uncertainty, and we never know where the university efforts will lead its influence, but this pandemic represents a rebirth for academia. Uprooting gender inequalities is the first step toward reimagining how society should live, treat, and respect women's rights. Women should not be relegated to the shadows, waiting to be discriminated against and abused by patriarchal society. This systemic role has to change, this is more than superficial. In these dark times, academia can serve as a torch to educate society on how women should be granted equal rights, research opportunities, and social protection. We do not want a business-as-usual market in which women remain in the dark ages and only exist during women's month in the post-pandemic world. There is more work to be done. The Great Wall of China was not built overnight, but the painstaking efforts of people propelled it to the ranks of the world's seven great wonders. Hence, academia must seize this opportunity to initiate change for women beyond superficial panacea. Women create success. Lest we are not going to assert the feminism movement during these extraordinary times and effect change for women empowerment in society, a woman will always be behind every man's success.

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