Women in Local Politics: Experiences in Mainstream Governance

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Abstract— *There is a growing global presence of women in politics because of synergized international effort to empower women. In the Philippines, women enjoy a more-friendly political culture compared to other neighboring countries. However, women remain a minority in influencing policy and decision making as legislators and chief executives. This research focused on women political participation in male-dominated mainstream governance. Using interpretative phenomenology, the political experiences of six local women politicians (LWPs) were analyzed vis-à-vis their political history and political challenges. Based on the results, the political history of LWPs is underscored by kinship politics. Their experience as lawmakers and chief executives provide evidence that women remain a minority in political decision-making bodies, despite a women-friendly political culture. In terms of political challenges, LWPs reveal that barriers for women participation are ideological factors, political culture, economic constraints, and inexperience. Therefore, there is a need for local initiatives (a) capacitating women who are not from political families but who have potential in political leadership, (b) intensive training for aspiring and incumbent women political leaders, and (c) strengthening women-friendly political culture to reduce gender stereotypes through awareness and sensitivity workshops.*

Keywords— *Gender and governance, local Philippine politic, women empowerment, women political participation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Mainstream governance or formal politics is traditionally dominated by men. Through a global effort to recognize women's rights, women were empowered to use political power to instigate development. International policies called on nations to instigate affirmative action to empower women in all aspects of life. This included their participation in government affairs. The political participation of women began with their struggle for the right to vote. With the synergized international effort, women political participation evolved into a broader power of crafting and implementing legislation.

Despite the long-standing international effort towards women empowerment in politics, there is still a wide gap in the area of political power and decision-making between sexes. This is evidenced by the 2017 Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI). The GGGI is a framework capturing the degree of gender disparities all over the world. It showed that only 23% of the political gap between men and women was closed in 2017. Around the world, men are still overrepresented in most political bodies. Women are still underrepresented in the most influential political positions (Gustafsson, as cited in Lundgren & Petrosiute, 2017). It is still an elite-male dominated political landscape.

There is a disparity between the presence of legislation to ensure women political participation and the actual extent of influence of women political leaders. This holds true in the Philippines. The Philippines belongs to the top countries in the world in terms of female political representation. Among 144 economies, the Philippines is the world's tenth most gender equal society (GGGI, 2017). In recent years, Filipinas took on broader political involvements. They have an increased presence in Philippine bureaucracy and they have successfully advocated the passage of more gender-oriented policies and services (Tapales, 2005). Yet regardless of broader political involvements, there is no dramatic increase in the number of women running and getting elected for political positions. They remain a minority in influencing policy and decision making as legislators and chief executives at the national and local levels (GGGI, 2017).

Problematizing women political participation at the national level is not enough. There is a need to contextualize women's public involvement at the local level since their political involvement usually begins with local level groups and associations (UNESCO, 1993). Therefore, the aim of the present study was to validate the local trend on women political participation to contextualize it at the grassroots level. Specifically, the study focused on women political experiences in the province of Bukidnon. Election data showed that out of the 503 candidates vying for local positions in Bukidnon, only 73 are women (Commission on Elections, 2016). Of these number, only 30 women won actual seats in the elections. Using interpretative phenomenology, the research examined the lived experiences of LWPs to generate themes. The themes were analyzed to determine significant phenomena in the lived experiences of the LWPs to answer the reverberating question of the scarcity of women's presence in the political arena.

II. FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The schematic diagram of the present study is below (Figure 1). This research investigated the political experiences of LWPs in two aspects: political history and political challenges.

The social construction of gender is a view in feminism and sociology. According to this paradigm, society and culture create gender roles or expected behavior based on one's gender (Lindsey, 2015). Through the socialization process,

gender roles perpetuate gender assignments which eventually lead to gender stereotypes. These are the overgeneralized conceptions that all men and all women share common traits (Lindsey, 2015; Levant & Alto, 2017). For instance, the Philippine socio-cultural norms stress the necessity of women spending their time and money on their family or household life (Tolentino, 2009). Because women possess the sole capacity to bear children, they are naturally assigned child-care and child-rearing functions. As a result, women's roles and abilities are perceived as extensions of reproductive functions and home life (Tapales, 2005).
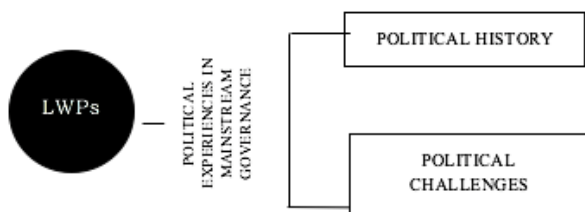

Figure 1: Schematic diagram of the research

When women do enter politics, Henderson and Jeydel (2014) said they do so in four pathways. The first path is via membership to a political family. Women in this path are members of families with a long history of involvement in electoral politics. Family ties with male politicians (e.g. father-daughter, husband-wife, brother-sister relationships) allowed women to enter politics (Silvestre, 2001; Lundgren & Petrosiute, 2017). The second path is by becoming surrogate politicians. Women in this path assumed office, usually temporarily, as a substitute for a father, husband, or brother who has recently died. They serve as place-holders, serving the position only as a replacement of their male relative (Labonne et al, 2016). The third path for women to enter politics is by being a party or political insider. Women recruited via this path start at the bottom of the political ladder and work their way up over time. Women in this path build an impressive political resumé as they gain extensive political experience. The final path for women politicians is as a political outsider. Political outsiders do not have political experience but they run on a platform stressing new political changes. They serve as an alternative to the status quo wherein voters are discontented with traditional politicians (Henderson & Alana, 2014).

This goes to show that women who enter politics challenge the status quo. Therefore, there are inherent challenges in choosing politics over their "assigned" reproductive role. Politics, therefore, becomes an unattractive option for women.

In addition, Bari (2005) enumerated barriers to women's political participation. First, there are ideological factors hindering women's participation in government. As mentioned in the social construction of gender paradigm, the domestic sphere is still considered women's territory, while public sphere is considered as the domain of men. Second, political factors reinforce the predominance of men in politics, in political parties and in formal political structures. In political parties for example, national priorities are analyzed

from a male perspective. In effect, women's needs are often ignored and not reflected in the policies of the parties or in the budget designed to implement political projects. The dynamics of political organizations are all focused on male models thus implying an affinity problem for women. Another factor hindering women participation in politics involve socio-cultural aspects. Gender roles restrict women in areas considered feminine (e.g. education, health, environment, social welfare). Gender stereotypes strengthen the lack of credibility of their actions and their leadership in the political world (Labani, et.al, 2009). There are also economic factors. To be able to participate in politics, it is necessary to have access to important material resources. Electoral campaigns are privately financed and material resources are indispensable to guarantee a degree of influential power. Women's lack of access to production resources and to the ownership of goods limit their possibilities for action in the political arena (Bari, 2005). Finally, women need to improve their social capital and political capabilities. With the exception of few women, traditional female gender roles have prevented women from reaching a position of leadership. As a result, women lack capabilities and means for political participation. They also lack political training, economic resources, education, empowerment, and access to information technology (Bari, 2005).

In sum, the political experiences of LWPs are explored vis-à-vis the pervasive political culture and dynamics of the Philippines and the gender initiatives of the country. The research aims to piece together a local picture of the political standing of women in the country.

III. METHODOLOGY

To gain insights on the experience of LWPs, the qualitative research design was utilized in this study. Using the lens of phenomenology, the current research attempted to describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of the LWPs in the context of their experiences in local governance. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, bracketing assumptions and usual ways of perceiving (Moustakas, 1994). Specifically, interpretative phenomenology was used to analyze the political experiences of LWPs. Interpretative phenomenology is anchored on the view of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) that interpretation or the attachment of meaning to lived experiences is indispensable in understanding phenomenon (Heidegger, 1962; Dowling, 2007; van Manen, 2007). The political experiences of the LWPs, for example, are interpreted in an iterative process of meaning-making or hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1962; Willig, 2013). Derivation of themes from the experiences of the LWPs, occur in a circular process of how the participants interpreted their own experiences, and how the researcher objectively interpreted their interpretation (van Manen, 2007).

Six (6) LWPs from the province of Bukidnon were the participants of the study. Five of the LWPs are presently holding either executive or legislative functions, while the sixth LWP was a past Bukidnon representative to the Philippine Congress. The age range of the participants is 25 to

85 years old. All of them have bachelor's degrees with at least three participants with a professional license. The participants have extensive political experience in terms of number of years (5 to 30 years) and the various political positions they have held (executive and legislative functions). One participant is currently married, one is annulled and another one is a widow. The other two participants are single.

The research tool used in this study was an adapted interview guide from the study of Lundgren and Petrosiute (2017). It was composed of open-ended questions designed to capture the feelings and thoughts of the LWPs as they narrate their political experiences. The interviews were conducted in the respective offices of the participants. Transcription immediately followed the interviews of the LWPs. To check the accuracy of the transcription made by the researcher, two faculty members from the Social Science Department validated the transcript against the audio-recording and made the necessary changes.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to capture the quality and texture of the LWPs' individual experience, while recognizing that their authentic experience will never be directly accessible to the researcher (Willig, 2013). Smith and Osborne's model of interpretative phenomenological analysis (2007) was utilized to code and analyze the transcripts from the interviews.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of political history, the lived experiences of the LWPs validate earlier findings on how "kinship politics" in the Philippines accommodated the entry and increase of women in politics. Kinship politics deals with how political power is bequeathed, inherited, and "cycled" in a prominent political clan (Tapales, 2005; Lundgren & Petrosiute, 2017; Roces, 2000). It dictates that women function as a support system for the male politician (Roces, 2000). Hence, the traditional role of women as wife, daughter, sister has provided the power base from which to exercise power and reinforce the family's political influence.

Based on emergent themes, the LWPs were initially apolitical and uninterested in politics but in actuality, they were actually "prepared" for the political tasks they have taken on by virtue of membership and upbringing in a political family. Veneracion-Rallonza (2008) explains that as the female kin of male politicians, these women also engage in political activities like fund-raising, charity work, dispensation of funds to aid constituents in times of great necessity. By doing so, these women do not only project the image of a caring leader to their male kin, but they also have a foretaste of public service and are inadvertently introduced to the community as well. The political recruitment of these LWPs also validate the findings of studies that "family political experience seems to be the main factor [in making] Filipino women who, while aware of their own influence from the sidelines, transcend the covert area of politics…to the overt political domain of elections" (Hega, 2003; Tapales, 2005; Aguilar, 2000). Veneracion-Rallonza (2008) described a phenomenon of "women benchwarmers." With the term limits for public officials, the male figure has no other choice but to 'pass' his political career to a female member of the family. Usually, when it is the end of the male's term of office, he will run for another position and his wife, daughter or sister will run for the position that he has vacated.

Underlying the immense influence of kinship politics is political elitism and money politics. As Sidel (1997) noted, local economically elite families who own sizeable lands can dispense funds needed for campaigns, can also engineer the entry of their own scions into government. These women therefore have resources to dispense for election campaign, and they have the network established by their family members to support them in their bid for candidacy.

Without downplaying the extent of achievement and accomplishment of LWPs, their political history is a manifestation of the fact that women are elected into public office, not because they are women but because they are members of political families who can provide a venue to perpetuate power in the current and succeeding generations. Patronage may come from an expansive familial kinship network or from cultivating relationships with those who are seen to be maintaining political power. In this light, women politicians, especially those who come from informal power, subscribe to the same cycle of self-perpetuation in power.

Delving into the lived experiences of the LWPs, it can be deduced from their narratives that there are only a few women occupying elected government positions. This makes the LWPs a minority in the decision making bodies such as the Sangguniang Bayan. Albeit being the minority, the LWPs assert that they experienced no discrimination. The LWPs emphasize that their number is not important because the most important thing is the resolutions they make and the quality of their output as lawmakers. It is also evident that the political culture is friendly to women politicians because they assert that there is no discrimination from their male colleagues. This validates the findings of Aguilar (1990) that women are accepted in politics and are supported in politics even by the most competent men in the society. Accordingly, gender discrimination if any, is dispelled when the women can truly prove their ability as administrators, legislators and politicians (Aguilar, 1990).

However, there is a gap between the evolution of a friendlier women political culture and the quantity of women getting elected to political decision-making seats in the local government. Moreover, women politicians are assigned gendered roles such as those in education, beautification and tourism. It was also observed that there were no activities or local policies focused on the political participation of women. Local programs on economic empowerment of women, as well as awareness on VAWC, are being implemented and supported by the LWPs. But there are no existing policies and programs focusing on women political empowerment.

Finally, the LWPs narrated five political challenges. First, there is a systemic challenge for LWPs due to the existing stereotypes and the multiple roles of women. The stereotypes on women include the existing notion of incompetence and lesser capacity of women for governance. Across many generations, women have always been portrayed as weak and incapable of making smart decisions (Komath, 2014). They

have been depicted as capable only of trivial matters. With the constant reinforcement of the notion that women are inferior in every aspect, it became hard for women to pursue their political rights as an active participant (Komath, 2014). women also carry the burden of having multiple roles. One primary role of women is that of being the primary caretaker of the home. This includes being a dutiful wife and loving mother. The expectation that women should assume primary family responsibilities, inhibit their political participation.

Second, the dominant patriarchal political culture reinforces the idea that men are more capable of handling power and responsibility than women, thereby making women political surrogates to male members of the family. Political life is organized according to male norms and values, and in some cases, even male lifestyles. This environment is alien to women, both to their nature and to their experiences. Due to the existence of this male-dominated model, women either reject politics altogether or they reject male-style politics. Thus, when women do participate in politics, they tend to do so in small number.

Third, work-life balance is a challenge for women vying for an electoral position especially because women are given by society with more domestic responsibilities and expectations compared to men. home and the demands of their political office. There are certain repercussions when a woman ventures into politics without ample strategy to balance public and private life. That is why politics is not appealing to a lot of women because they are certain that the family would become a "hazard."

Fourth, money politics restricts the political participation of women because election requires stable political machineries and resources. As a result, only women with strong economic background have the capacity and machinery to win local elections. The presence of money politics as an obstacle to political participation of women is explained by Wide (2006). Accordingly, there is a correlation between women's socio-economic conditions, and women's political representation. This is because economic development tends to reduce traditional values about gender, which in turn lead to changed attitudes about female politicians from both parties and voters. The economic development makes more women able to study, work and thus become more interested in politics. That is why, all participants in the study are educated, professionals, and economically well-off.

Lastly, inexperience is a challenge for women in entering politics. Youth is stereotyped as inexperience while being apolitical and not having prior political knowledge impede the entry of women into politics. However, they are able to overcome this challenge by engaging in further studies and research.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The present study explored the lived political experiences of LWPs in Bukidnon, in terms of their political history and political challenges.

Based on the results, it is the conclusion of this study that in mainstream governance, there is a gap between the extent of political participation of men and women. There is a myriad of factors that limit women involvement in government affairs. The family-oriented political culture of the Philippines (kinship politics) influences women's progress in achieving powerful government positions. Evidence from this study supports the literature that most of the women who enter politics come from prominent political families. This means that access to political power is limited to women who are members of powerful political families who have the resources to support their candidacy and the necessary guidance for these women who were initially apolitical.

While political culture is more friendly to women, LWPs felt no discrimination even if they were still a minority in government decision-making bodies. However, there are still existing gender stereotypes for women in government positions. This is evidenced by the assignment of gendered tasks for LWPs. In addition, women political empowerment is not a focus of local women policies and initiatives, compared to the prevalence of economic activities and anti-VAWC related programs for women in the LGU.

Finally, structural or systemic challenges impede political participation of women. This includes the prevailing gender stereotypes on women, the patriarchal political culture, the economic facet of winning elections and the inexperience of women in politics.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above-mentioned results and conclusions of the present study and the absence of local indicators for women political participation, the following are recommended: (1) The presence of policies capacitating women who are not from political families to run for an elected position, and ensuring that local machineries be made available for these women. Such an endeavor would pave the way to accommodate women who have the necessary capabilities for good governance, even if they are not members of political clans, (2) increasing the number of women in policy and decision-making positions is not enough. Enabling women to meaningfully participate and bring to the discussion how to address gender issues and inequalities, should be a priority. Therefore, there should be a presence of local initiatives and capability development programs for women who have potential for leadership and who are currently holding political positions. This includes seminar workshops for aspiring women political leaders, campaign for strengthening women-friendly political culture in government units and in-service training for incumbent women political leaders and (3) further research should be done especially in the following areas: (a) male politicians' perspective on women political participation, (b) policy studies on increasing women political participation, (c) capability development program for aspiring women political leaders and incumbent women government officials, (d) quantitative study on the reasons why politics is not a career for women from the perspective of women voters, (e) a qualitative study on women local leaders with more participants and from other research locales and (f) a tracer study on women politicians in Bukidnon to chronicle women political empowerment in the province throughout the years.

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