

**VIETNAMESE WOMEN FACULTY ATTAINING HIGHER EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP POSITIONS AT AN GIANG UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM:
OPPORTUNITIES, BARRIERS AND TRENDS FOR FUTURE LEADERSHIP
CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT**

Chau Soryaly

Chau Khon

An Giang University

ABSTRACT

A 2012 An Giang University (AGU) Report revealed a population breakdown of 48 percent men and 52 percent women working in various roles at the university. The number of women engaged in administrative positions at AGU continued to increase over the last ten years. However, only a small number of women (32 percent) have achieved a key leadership position such as Dean, Vice Dean, Chairman, and Vice Chairman of colleges and departments at the university. The principal board and higher level education administration positions are still viewed as masculine-dominated occupations (68 percent men). A qualitative phenomenological study was deployed to explore the lived experiences of women faculty attaining leadership positions. Three main themes emerged including (1) the availability of opportunities (institutional motivation and personal motivation), (2) barriers and challenges to leadership attainment (cultural norms, institutional obstacles, and personal obstacles), and (3) the lack of preparation programs (mentoring and networking, women leadership training programs and workshops, and leadership skill development programs) for women. The findings of this study would be beneficial for educators, administrators, and policymakers from AGU and other Vietnamese institutions to determine policies, programs, and practices to support women in their advancement to leadership roles.

Rationale of the Study

The number of women in the labor force has increased over the past decade, especially in higher education management (McCullough, 2011). According to the “World’s Women 2000”, women held 33 percent of the management roles in the developed world, 15 percent in Africa, and 13 percent in Asia and the Pacific (Gumbi, 2006; Sadie, 2005; UNESCO, 2012; World’s Women, 2000). The American Council on Education (2007) indicated that the percentage of female presidents in higher education increased by more than double from 10 percent in 1986 to 23 percent in 2006. In South Africa, the number of women in senior management across 17 higher education institutions was approximately 24 percent in 2003 (Gumbi, 2006). In some countries in Asia, such as Cambodia, women occupied fewer than 20 percent of positions in public administration, including administrative positions in the academy. In Indonesia, the proportion of women climbed from 11 percent in 2004 to 18 percent in 2009 (National Women’s Education Center, 2011). The evidence shows that there are increasing numbers of women in management roles.

In Vietnam, women have increasingly active roles in socio-economic development, constituting approximately 50 percent of the labor market in various sectors. However, the majority of directors and vice-directors at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) and Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology (VAST) were men. While VASS had 36 male vice-directors and VAST had 59 male vice- directors, there were only 8 female vice-directors in VASS and VAST respectively (Women’s Representation in Leadership in Vietnam (WRLV), 2012). According to the Vice Director of the Center for

Education Promotion and Empowerment of Women, although the number of women in academic leadership positions has increased over the last few years, the percentage of women holding key leadership still remained low.

In regards to leadership development and women's empowerment in the Asia-Pacific region and the contribution to institutional growth and professional capacities, the Asia Foundation has worked with the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment and the Research Center for Gender, Family, and Environment in Development in Vietnam to help Vietnamese women explore career choices as well as build their vision of leadership in different sectors (NWEC, 2011). The Vietnamese government has implemented policies to promote gender equality to increase women's participation in public decision-making and political life. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) through a variety of supporting programs also encourages women faculty in higher education to take their roles and responsibilities into different academic leadership positions. The population of women in Vietnamese higher education has increased and they now occupy a half of academy positions but their status is still influenced by the complexities of society, family, economics, and cultural factors (United Nations, 2007; WRLV; 2012).

The number of female faculty at An Giang University in Vietnam has increased over the last ten years and now females outnumber male faculty; however, there is still great disparity in the actual number of female versus male leaders and administrators, especially as there has not been a female president at AGU since its establishment. As a woman faculty member working at AGU for approximately eight years, I have experienced both opportunities and obstacles in advancing my career to undertake key leadership positions at the institution. I am particularly interested in the issues of women's leadership development at the institution, as there has been a lack of research and literature at AGU that has identified and explored the opportunities and challenges that AGU's women faculty face in assuming leadership positions. Currently, no empirical research has been executed at AGU to explore strategies that help women faculty gain leadership positions and to develop their future leadership capacity.

Context of the Study

An Giang University (AGU), located in An Giang province in Vietnam, was established in 2000. AGU staff and faculty are committed to student success to contribute to socio-economical and cultural development of the Mekong Delta region. AGU is also concerned with personal and professional development among faculty and staff in addition to enhancing AGU's educational system and its quality. AGU considers women's development and women's leadership to be one of their most important obligations to develop the management system of AGU. AGU, the second public university in the Mekong Delta, serves as a higher education institution providing opportunities for student and staff development in alignment with its missions and goals. There are nine departments, five centers, and six colleges, in which the Colleges of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Education are the largest and most essential at AGU.

As a newly established university, there are many challenges for AGU, especially within the administration system and its academic policies. In the last five years, the principal board has changed due to a variety of reasons such as moving to new institutions and retirement. According to the 2012 AGU Report, although there has been considerable progress in quality and quantity of faculty and administrators, the number of women participating in institutional management and administration are limited. The 2012 AGU Report reported 48 percent of AGU's population were male and 52 percent were female;

however, 68 percent of the principals and administrators were male compared to 32 percent of females in the same positions. The report also highlights the challenges and barriers such as workplace attitudes and social norms and expectations women face in their aspirations to gain leadership positions.

Although women have become more active in society over the past several decades, they are still underrepresented at the highest level in organizations. Female leaders are assessed more harshly than their male counterparts. Women work more hours than men each week, but their work is often unpaid and unaccounted for. While women do the same work as men, they are paid 30 to 40 percent less than men (WRLV, 2012). Within the context of AGU - the number of female faculty increasing and accounting for more than half of staff, but there are so few women in leadership - AGU strives for leadership development for women to increase the number of women in leadership positions from lower to upper levels. There is a need for a study on the experiences of women faculty at AGU and the opportunities and barriers they face.

Research Questions

This study will seek to answer the three research questions:

- (1) What opportunities are offered to Vietnamese women faculty in attaining higher education leadership positions to become academic administrators at AGU?
- (2) What challenges or barriers do AGU's women faculty encounter with regard to accessing the various leadership positions at the institution?
- (3) What strategies - preparations, programs, and trends - can lead AGU's women faculty to move up into higher leadership positions as well as develop their future leadership capacity and competence?

Sampling and Data Collection

In order to recruit the participants, AGU's women faculty, to join in the interviews, a demographic survey profile was created, posted on campus, and disseminated in an email announcement to recruit volunteers. However, to determine how many demographic survey profiles were needed to send to only women faculty from different colleges, departments, and centers at AGU, I eliminated the number of males and women leaders emerging from the 2012 Report of AGU.

The demographic questionnaires contained ten questions about the personal and academic characteristics of the participants such as name, age, marriage status, college or department, the length of time employed at AGU, and their responsibilities at the workplace. The profile also included a section for other information such as email address, mail address, and phone number if the respondents were available or comfortable to provide for contact. I attempted to select 25 appropriate participants for the in-depth face-to-face interview; however, there were only 20 AGU women faculty who volunteered to participate in this study. It was important to ensure that all participants had experienced the phenomenon being studied and they were willing to articulate their lived experiences.

The interview process was digitally recorded and lasted from 30 to 45 minutes (Creswell, 2007; Fraenkel et al., 2012; Merriam, 2009). Two or three days before the interviews, I called the participants on their office phones, which I accessed on institution website or interviewee demographic profiles, to remind them of the interview appointments. They were asked to read the form in advance in order to make sure that they understand the important points - the purpose of study, the agreement as participants, and the potential risks.

Findings

A demographic overview of the participants

The participants selected for this phenomenological study must have experienced a similar phenomenon, known as “the lived experience”. The participants had shared a similar experience and met the following criteria: they were women faculty at AGU, had worked in different offices at AGU, and had at least five years of work experience. Figure 1 documents potential participants who were contacted for the study. There were a total of 100 women faculty members who met the criteria. Of the 100 women, 20 agreed to participate in the interview (see Table 1), while 48 declined due to the following reasons: too busy to make time for the interview, not confident to answer, not familiar with digital recordings, not familiar with the topic, and uncertainty that anonymity could be guaranteed. There were 32 no responses.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Twenty Appropriate Participants

Participants	Age	Length of Time Employed (Years)	Highest Level of Education	Departments/Colleges/Centers
AGUWF01	26	5	Bachelor	Student Affairs
AGUWF02	28	6-9	Bachelor	Political Administration Affairs
AGUWF03	28	6-9	Bachelor	Agriculture and Natural Resources
AGUWF04	29	6-9	Master	Research & International Relations
AGUWF05	30	6-9	Master	Insurance and Testing Affairs
AGUWF06	31	6-9	Master	Social Sciences and Humanities Research
AGUWF07	32	6-9	Master	Educational Psychology
AGUWF08	32	6-9	Bachelor	Insurance and Testing Affairs
AGUWF09	32	10-19	Master	Mathematics
AGUWF10	32	10-19	Master	Teaching English as a Second Language
AGUWF11	33	10-19	Master	Rural Development Research
AGUWF12	34	10-19	Master	Rural Development Research
AGUWF13	35	10-19	Master	Teaching English as a Second Language
AGUWF14	36	10-19	Master	Literature
AGUWF15	39	10-19	Master	Agriculture and Natural Resources
AGUWF16	40	10-19	Master	Literature
AGUWF17	41	10-19	Master	Teaching English as a Second Language
AGUWF18	43	6-9	Master	Research & International Relations
AGUWF19	49	> 20	Master	History
AGUWF20	52	> 20	Master	Academic Affairs

Table 1 includes the age distribution of the twenty appropriate participants. The data in the table indicate a wide range in age for the study participants, in which the youngest was 26, and the oldest was 52. The data contributes to the generality of the study by providing stories from different women faculty at different stages in life. The next column of Table 2 indicates the number of employees within different years of experience at AGU. The participants worked at AGU ranging from 5 to more than 20 years. A majority of the participants worked between 6-9 years and 10-19 years. Despite the range in years of

experience, the data shows that the participants encountered the same “lived experience” or “the phenomenon” (Van Manen, 1990). Women faculty education levels ranged from university completion to a master’s degree. The majority of participants had completed master’s and several of them were working on a doctoral degree. The study is also generalized as the twenty participants are from different departments, colleges, and centers of AGU (Table 1) and share a similar “lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990). In addition, pseudonyms, shown as AGUWF01 to AGUWF20, were used to ensure anonymity and to protect the privacy of the participants in the current study.

Themes and Sub-themes Analysis

Theme 1: Opportunities

All of the participants concurred that a wide range of opportunities has derived from both institutional motivation and personal motivation when asked about different opportunities offered to them in attaining higher education leadership positions at AGU. They not only appreciated different motivation offered by the university but also emphasized on the efforts of each individual in seeking a key leadership to become academic leaders at the institution. These sub-themes emerged from the conversation with the participants.

Institutional Motivation

This sub-theme characterized participants’ thoughts and reflections upon their lived experiences on motivation offered by AGU. One of the opportunities that AGU has provided to encourage women faculty in attaining leadership positions was the building a new list of potential human resources every year, including men and women, for future leaders. However, most of faculty in this list was already a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In Vietnam, the Communist Party is the only political party in power and it is the leading governing body of the country. As a result, leaders in all governmental organizations and in the university are supposed to be Party members. At AGU, the principal or vice-principal and other deans and vice deans of departments and colleges must have a doctorate or master’s degree associated with being a member of the Party. All participants agreed that women faculty who possessed an advanced degree and were already a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party would have a chance to become leaders at AGU. AGUWF05 eagerly shared: *“I have been working at AGU for 6 years but I finished a master’s program two years ago and I am studying doctorate program now. I will graduate next year. I was already a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In fact, I am now selected in the list of future leaders at AGU because of my above mention”*.

Moreover, in order to provide different opportunities for women to become leaders, the university has held different activities like Vietnamese Women’s Day, International Women’s Day, and the Annual Official Conference that allowed women to use their voices. Participating in these activities, women faculty were offered greater opportunities to share their ideas, thoughts, experiences, challenges, and even question the AGU’s Principal Board. They also received opportunities to present, develop social communication skills, and display their leadership capacity. New policies and opportunities at AGU were negotiated and many relevant to women’s empowerment were also presented. Women faculty might increase their knowledge, connect with other potential women, improve their bargaining power, and raise their visibility so they could advance their future professional careers. All research participants agreed that these activities were crucial opportunities that motivated women faculty in attaining leadership positions at AGU. Three of the participants had very similar ideas and stated that Annual Official Conference at AGU is

the greatest chance for women who want to become leaders because of receiving freedom to share everything as well as showing leadership ability.

Another opportunity that AGU has provided to support women faculty was to provide different national and international scholarships. An Education Exchange Program between AGU and other foreign countries was established and many different international scholarships from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, England, Thailand, Lao, and Cambodia offered women faculty opportunities for higher studying and training. Ford Foundation, Fulbright, and AusAID are some of the most prestigious and popular scholarships that encourage AGU's women to pursue leadership development. These were the greatest opportunities for women faculty who desired to advance their careers at AGU, especially to gain leadership positions, as the training programs and study abroad experiences advanced their knowledge and professionalism. AGUWF05 described: "*I think that I am very lucky because the university gave me a good condition to study higher and finished my master's degree two years ago despite earning in Vietnam. AGU right after gave me another chance to encourage me to pursuit doctorate degree and I am now in the third year of doctorate program in Hanoi*". In support of this point AGUWF19 stated: "*I see there are a few current women leaders after finishing their master and doctorate programs in the United States and Australia were selected in different positions of head and vice-head of departments and colleges*".

Although there were a little courses opened at AGU and often taken in short time, such as Enhancing Leadership Skills for Executive Director, Educating and Training Leadership Human Resources, and Supporting Leadership Skills in Higher Educational Administration, these courses have encouraged several women faculty to participate in. Pursuing these courses, women faculty who were still not leaders or principals had opportunities for learning theory and concepts of leadership as well as practicing their potential ability. The participants in these courses must take a final examination. The AGU's Principal Board was based on the result of them considered and suggested several of them into a leadership position. One of the participants, AGUWF02 shared: "*My friend and I used to take one of these courses. We learned a lot of leadership skills and its theories. My friend was also designated a Head of Student Affairs Department because of her greatest results coupled with other conditions. I think this is a good thing for who participates in these training programs*".

Personal Motivation

Besides opportunities offered by the university, each individual faculty member must strive for their own development, in which the participants described it as "personal motivation". They said that the university provided different opportunities and all women faculty were welcome, but women faculty themselves should have their own motivation to obtain a leadership position. With regards to personal motivation, they included the importance of educational background and learning continually, the advancement of personal growth, and the potential leadership competence of each individual.

Importance of Educational Background and Learning Continually

This sub-theme examined the importance of educational background influenced by the participants' career advancement to gain leadership positions. In this research study, all participants had obtained a university first degree, which was a minimum requirement for becoming leaders in AGU. Moreover, 80 percent of them had a master's degree and several of them were in early stages of their doctorate programs. Most of the participants posited that the more women faculty has higher degrees, the better they can receive opportunities for seeking leadership positions at AGU. It should be noted that at AGU, qualification in

education was a condition for becoming leaders. As a result, if women faculty who wanted to attain a key leadership position or wanted to become a head of a department and college at AGU, they had to continue pursuing higher education. AGUWF01 described: “*I am young at AGU as I have worked here for 5 years, but I know that if I have higher degrees than now, I will have a chance in seeking a leadership position*”. AGUWF19, a participant with more than twenty years of employment experiences at AGU, explained: “*I think that to become leaders or even obtain a higher level of leadership position at AGU, at least a women faculty must have a master’s degree, and of course, a doctorate degree is greatest. The evidence shows that most current women leaders at AGU possess greatest education background*”. In support of this point, a participant, AGUWF09 noted: “*Hopefully, the percentage of women gaining master and doctoral degrees is growing, which points to a more equitable future for women in higher education leadership positions*”.

Advancing Personal Growth

This sub-theme referred to the opportunity for women faculty to advance personal growth to attain a key leadership at the university. The women had the ability to balance the amount of work and time at the workplace and at home; and were ready to transcend cultural barriers and rise to positions of leadership as they could. It is evident that even with gender equity policies in place, women needed to monitor implementation themselves. They also needed to change their mindset - their partners could share domestic and childcare responsibilities with them very well. When their husbands could share with them, it would reduce women being shy away from accepting leadership positions as well as to enhance their capabilities and confidence to obtain leadership opportunities. AGUWF16 commented: “*I think besides different opportunities, women needed to get involved in their personal growth. This is important because if one person is determined to be leader since her talent, but she is not ready in getting involved in personal growth, feels unconfident, and does not know how to balance home-work responsibilities, she may loose an opportunity to obtain and become a leader*”. Another participant, AGUWF15 noted: “*At AGU, everybody is offered the same opportunities in attaining leadership positions. However, a woman faculty can become a leader or not, it depends on her efforts, especially her own motivation to personal growth. Personal motivation is seen as a critical facet in career advancement*”.

Potential Leadership Competence

This sub-theme was included in the finding’s analysis when a majority of the participants throughout the interview mentioned potential leadership competence of women faculty in comparison to men, which they considered to be an opportunity to gain leadership positions at AGU. Women themselves addressed several behaviors and skills that were different from men. They possessed specific leadership characteristics because they acknowledged that today organizations expect men and women leaders to behave differently. Masculine behaviors included toughness, decisiveness, and assertiveness while feminine behaviors retained high levels of emotional intelligence like self-motivation, self-awareness, impulse control, empathy, and social swiftness. AGUWF15 pointed out: “*In fact, as women are better family leaders, they tend to be less selfish, fairer, and more resilient to outside pressure than men. Women have also better listening skill, are better at conflict management, and possess more tolerance and empathy*”. Another participant concurred as well, AGUWF05 offered: “*I think that women have their own style of leadership. They have very soft voice but assertive and persuasive throughout the communication. Women are also very careful and responsible at the workplace. I think if women faculty want to gain a leadership position this is a good thing for them to obtain an*

opportunity because the fact is that the organization needs women leaders within these characteristics". AGUWF16 added: "I see women can understand followers very good. They have an inclusive, team-building style of problem solving and decision-making. They also enable them to read situations accurately and take in information from all sides. This willingness to see all sides of a situation enhances their persuasive ability. Within these good features, they are easier to look for an opportunity in gaining leadership roles".

In summary, all participants indicated that the amalgamation of education background, a pursuit of continual learning, advancement of personal growth, and showing leadership competence was used strategically to distinguish themselves from others, proving to be pivotal behaviors and capacity in their career advancement and leadership positions. However, the participants also posited that women faculty who wanted to gain a key leadership and become leaders was supported by the institution as evidenced by the opportunities and motivation provided by the institution.

Theme 2: Barriers and Challenges

Cultural Norms and Stereotypes

All participants believed that traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes, especially influences of Chinese Confucianism ideology, was the first and critical barrier that prevented women faculty from attaining leadership positions at AGU. The ideology of Confucianism considered women's roles as staying at home and being responsible for the domestic sphere. As such a consideration, Vietnamese women were required to spend most their time and efforts for family caring. Several women felt criticized if they spent too much time at the workplace and less time caring for children and family well. The participants argued that their role and status in society were still underrepresented although they were good at balancing work and home responsibilities. One of women, AGUWF15, shared: "*I think that Vietnamese women including me found that it is difficult to dislocate from this culture because it is traditional beliefs and influenced by Confucianism long time. Despite women's education and entry into the job market, the woman's role is typically one of homemaker. The man, on the other hand, is breadwinner, head of household and has a right to public life*". The oldest participant, AGUWF20, acknowledged: "*Apart from sociological and cultural barriers often restrain faculty women from obtaining leadership positions. They are affected by Confucianism thoughts like women must focus much on domestic duties, women cannot do good job like man, and women are not necessary to study higher*".

More than half of the interviewees reported they had experienced gender bias and stereotypes. They sometimes felt alone and separated from male board members. There were many people who still thought that responsibilities of caring for children or family belong to women not to men. AGUWF04 commented: "*In fact, some people still have the idea that Vietnamese women must be staying at the home and that is enough. Women do not need to obtain leadership position or to become leaders because of caring children or family belongs to women's tasks*". AGUWF05 added: "*I often see many men think that women lack the capacity to engage in leadership, which of course is not true. Leadership is all about people and requires wisdom, vision, and management skill, as well as the ability to chart out, execute, and revise plans. It is not related to gender-specific while there are more women faculty receive higher education and home skills in professional leadership. They are really prepared more than ever to take on leadership responsibility*". Another participant concurred, offering: "*I think to promote women's progress and motivate them to leadership positions, thoughts and beliefs on women's roles and status are necessary to be changed. Many interviewees expressed their perspectives that because of cultural values,*

especially gender bias, some women thought that being female was a disadvantage ". While women carried the burden of domestic work, they were required to be good at their workplace despite not receiving support from the family and their partners". AGUWF16 shared: "*For me, after finishing work at my office, I must go shopping for food right after that, and then cook and then take care my children. It seems not any time for me and I have these barriers since I am a woman. I see all Vietnamese women face the same barriers that must be always responsible for family. I really need a strong support and an understanding from my family, especially my husband*". Several parents of women faculty were themselves educated and so did not feel any inhibition on female-child education. Moreover, those parents were broad-minded and bold enough to support their daughters to go to work. Nevertheless, several interviewees acknowledged that there were many parents who were still culturally pressured to ensure that "boys to do well, girls just stay at home". AGUWF04 indicated that her husband and her mother-in-law wanted her to be a fulltime housewife and not work or teach. They often complained when she sometimes had a meeting and having food with the delegations after work.

In addition, women's attainment of leadership positions has been limited by discrimination and stereotyping. Women received lesser opportunities for executive positions. This was largely due to society's attitude toward appropriate male and female roles. In the discussion on barriers of women faculty, all participants agreed that compared to men, women received little or no encouragement to seek leadership positions because of stereotypes. AGUWF11 shared: "*I think men have much time than women, as a result, men are easier to be selected in executive positions. They can spend nights away from home or even go into bars, and of course, these things are not easily accepted for Vietnamese women*". The community will criticize them and put them in the public eye. Men do not spend much time for their family, so they are responsible for leadership role much better than women for sure. Such considerations make many women shy away from becoming or taking leadership roles. Another stereotype that the participants mentioned was the length of time employed in the university. Although many women faculty showcased good leadership competence, had advanced educational backgrounds such as having master's and doctorate degree, and possessed other skills, they have been hindered in attaining positions of leadership at the institution because they were very new at the workplace. One of the interviewees, AGUWF19, felt very disappointed revealed: "*I realize that there are many young women faculty who are very potential in leadership positions but they were refused to become leaders at the institution because they are still young to become leaders as well as take leadership roles. I totally disagree with this idea*". AGUWF11 commented: "*I see young women leaders are very successful in running their office. I hope AGU will recruit more young potential women faculty to leadership positions*".

In summary, traditional thoughts and beliefs and its stereotypes due to the influences of the Confucian ideology continue to impact the roles and status of women. It was also considered a crucial barrier that limited women faculty at AGU from developing their potential leadership roles and prevented them from obtaining leadership positions.

Organizational obstacles

This sub-theme described institutional obstacles that the interviewees have experienced at the workplace. AGU's women faculty was limited to attaining leadership positions because of the legal law. While women were forced to retire at 55, men could work until they were 60. Women faculty considered it as discrimination that against women on retirement age and impact on women's career advancement. All participants explained that this was an obstacle at the organization that prevented women faculty to a key

leadership position. One woman stated “the retirement age, in fact, is a disadvantage for Vietnamese women to pursue and advance their careers, especially to become leaders”

Another institutional obstacle that all participants have experienced was related to the system management and leadership position recruitment at AGU. AGUWF07 argued: “*The education system in Vietnam is highly centralized so leadership position vacancies at universities are not advertised, especially in the public sector; therefore, women lose job opportunities because they do not know about them*”.

In addition, as mentioned earlier that a principal, a dean, or a vice dean at AGU must be a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Women faculty had different and higher degrees like master’s or doctorate degrees and possessed very good leadership ability, but if they were not members of the Vietnamese Communist Party, they found difficulty in attaining leadership positions. AGUWF19 shared here challenges: “*I have been working here for twenty-three years, but still not a member of the Communist Party. Despite my good education background and my leadership ability, I cannot attain a leadership position until I must be a member of the Party. For me, I do not care to become leaders or not because I just wonder about other people who are very potential one but were refused due to this obstacle*”.

Another institutional obstacle shows that if women were determined and selected to be leaders, the highest positions that women at AGU have occupied were as heads of departments and colleges. Moreover, women faculty who got married, especially having children and taking six months for rest after giving childbirth, were limited to attain leadership positions. They were considered to be very busy at caring children and family and could not do good job of leadership roles. AGUWF15 experienced the situation and commented: “*I had two times for bearing my little children. It really took my time to do good at both jobs: taking care my children and teaching. I try my best and I did a good job. However, I was refused in a list of determining leadership position. That is true because the Board seemed me not have enough time for doing leader job*”.

In addition, at the institution, several programs offered by AGU specifically targeting women for career advancement were virtually non-existent. AGU offered women faculty development programs and activities, however, few programs explicitly focused on women. In support of this point, AGUWF11 noted: “*There are programs driven by employee resource group, but none specifically targeting women. The programs are opened to both men and women*”.

Personal obstacles

The last sub-theme in the discussion of barriers and challenges AGU’s women faculty face was their own personal obstacle. Throughout the discussion, many Vietnamese women generally did not aspire to leadership roles because they were responsible for domestic duties like caring for children and taking care of the household. Time consuming was the most challenge to them. The evidence shows that they had to work harder compared to men. Due to spending much time on both household roles and working at the office, they suffered from low levels of education and limited access to training, which implied less understanding of technology and lower capacity to adapt to changes and perceived as backward compared with others. AGUWF20 expressed: “*After finishing jobs in the workplace, I continue to carry the bulk of household responsibilities; therefore, I am then perceived as less committed to my work and ultimately seen as less promotable into leadership positions*”.

Another person continued to explain about time consuming and work-life balance: Since I see that women leaders at AGU overwhelmed with huge workloads and domestic

duties. It is very hard for them to balance their work and other areas of life. As a result, many women faculty including me feel that do not want to attain leadership roles due to the difficulty of balancing work and family roles. AGUWF12 commented: “*My husband did not share the housework and child rearing with me, so I found myself with two full-time jobs. I must work very hard. Unfortunately, this is my own obstacle that prevented me to participant in other activities of the university to obtain leadership opportunity*”.

Moreover, a majority of women faculty described their own personal challenges such as feeling very unconfident, especially when giving presentation in public. Also, misperceptions of women were a result of how women saw themselves. They accepted traditional roles to care family but were denied participation in society. These women faculty were ready to give up professional opportunities in order to serve family roles. Some of them thought that there were a higher proportion of women leaders who were divorced or living independently. In addition, as spending much time on working, a higher proportion of women leaders had no children. As a result, these women avoided participating in leadership roles because of their perception of higher responsibility for family life. As such, it was little wonder that many women faculty were hesitant to seek positions of leadership. AGUWF08 stated: “*I accepted to be at home and ready for caring children and housework. I do not want to spend much time at the workplace, just finish and that is enough. I know this is one of my obstacles that prevent me from gaining a position of leadership*”.

Theme 3: Preparation Programs

The last theme focused on trends and preparation programs, which were suggested as good strategies by the research participants to help women faculty have more opportunities to obtain leadership position at the institution. This theme included three sub-themes: mentoring and networking programs, women leadership workshop, and training. Compared to the two previous themes, in this theme, the interviewees did not have as many ideas to share since they were not familiar and not really experienced with the leadership development programs at AGU.

Mentoring and Networking Programs

This sub-theme characterized two kinds of programs: mentoring and networking that all interviewees considered supporting and motivating women faculty to be more confident to obtain leadership role. Many women faculty were reticent to take on the role of leadership because of the potential stress on family life. Therefore, role models and mentors in academic leadership emerged as important ways to encourage both senior and junior leadership in sharing their experiences, their leadership expertise, and political knowledge to other women faculty. These caring relationships benefit other women to gain confidence to advance their careers and to seek leadership positions. Also, the relationships provided a great opportunity for women faculty to establish professional networking on developing women leadership skills. AGUWF05 felt very happy to share: “*I wish to have a great mentor who can see the potential in me. Mentors will take me under their brightness and help me to see myself in the light I wanted to be in. I think if there is a mentoring program at AGU, it is very good because mentoring is a critical part of each individual's growth and development. As a result, a woman faculty feels more confident to seek a key leadership*”.

Another woman, AGUWF15 added: “*Networking is essential among women leaders and women faculty because it is indicative to what a strong relationship will be. Participating in networking, women have a chance to share each other, especially with the current women leaders. Many problems and questions can be solved based on the networking*”.

To emphasize the importance of networking program, AGUWF18 noted: “*One of the challenges is a lack of support system within the community to empower women. My recommendation on how to assist women to take place their roles in leadership positions is necessary to have a network with other women leaders inside and outside the institution sharing experiences and barriers*”.

Women Leadership Workshops and Training Programs

This sub-theme indicated that leadership training programs or workshops for women were very helpful for women’s empowerment at AGU. Throughout the training courses - short time and long time, formal and informal - it helped to provide women faculty with new insights into useful women’s leadership skills and capacities. In particular, women faculty themselves could obtain theories and practices of leadership. A majority of the respondents indicated that there were very few leadership training programs targeting women’s development skills over the last ten years at AGU. They expected to have much more since many women faculty have pursued positions as managers and leaders but lack of leadership skills and knowledge. AGUWF11 stated: “*I see AGU does not have women leaders because of a lack of leadership training programs offered to potential women faculty. I would like to pursue a position of leadership at AGU for five years but I later hesitated and was unsure to continue or not. Therefore, if I can participate in leadership training course, I feel more confident to pursue and I think I enable to do a good job*”.

Another participant, AGUWF09 noticed: “*I think that AGU, throughout the exchange programs with other universities, should send more woman staff to study in short time inside and outside the country about leadership programs. Hopefully, there are much more talented women faculty sent to foreign universities or even in Hanoi for obtaining knowledge and theories of leadership skills*”.

Conclusion

While no previous empirical research is available on women’s leadership at AGU, this current qualitative phenomenological study has explored, described, and presented the lived experiences on opportunities, barriers, and strategies shared by AGU’s women faculty in aspiring to key leadership positions at the institution. In light of this, the findings of this study have answered three research questions using the qualitative phenomenological methodology. The participants, who were involved in this study, experienced a variety of opportunities and challenges in attaining a key leadership position at AGU. They reflected upon women leadership development preparation programs at AGU and shared their thoughts for future trends and programs. The study may be significant to the issue of women leadership’s aspiration through the patterns and themes that emerged from the data. The study contributed to the body of knowledge on the ability of women faculty at AGU to attain leadership positions. Moreover, important insights may be revealed for education policy makers and institutional leaders, especially the AGU’s Principal Board with regards to strategies of women leadership development programs to encourage more women faculty into career advancement and leadership achievement. Through such actions, the AGU’s Principal Board can also increase the number of women leaders at the institution of AGU.

REFERENCES

- American Council on Education (ACE). (2007). *Executive summary: American college president.* Washington, DC: Author.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). (2nd Ed.). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fraenkel, J. R., Wallen, N. E., & Hyun, H. H. (2012). (8th Ed.). *How to design and evaluate research in education.* New York: Mc-Graw Hill.
- Gumbi, R. V. (2006). *Women in higher education leadership in the 21st century: address at the launch of WHEEL*, Protea Hotel President, Capetown. In UNCFSPTEL Hacifazlioglu, O. (2010). Balance in academic leadership: Voices of women from Turkey and the U.S. *Perspectives in Education*, 28(2), 51-62
- McCullough, L. (2011). Women's leadership in science, technology, engineering and mathematics: Barriers to participation. *Forum On Public Policy Online*, 2011(2)
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- National Women's Education Center of Japan (NWEC). (2011). 2010 International forum for women's empowerment: Role of education to develop women's leadership.
- Sadie, Y. (2005). Women in political decision-making in the southern Africa development community region. *Agenda*, 65, 17-31
- The 2012 An Giang University Report. Retrieved from <http://www.agu.edu.vn/congvan/index.php/topic,8057.msg8057.html#msg8057>
- United Nations (2007). Concluding comments of the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Vietnam. Retrieved from http://vietnamunfpa.org/documents/CEDAWComments_2007_e.pdf
- UNESCO (2012). *World atlas of gender equality in education.* Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002155/215522E.pdf>
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy.* New York: SUNY Press
- Women's Representation in Leadership in Vietnam. (2012). Retrieved from http://www.undp.org/content/dam/vietnam/docs/Publications/31204_Women_s_Representation_in_Leadership_in_Viet_Nam.pdf
- The World's Women 2000: *Trends and Statistics* is available from United Nations Publications, Two UN Plaza, Room DC2-853, Dept. PRES, New York, NY 10017. Retrieved from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/wwpub2000press.htm>