Women in Academia, East and West: Navigating Institutional and Cultural Challenges and Leadership Styles

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1. Introduction

Background

❑Women's remarkable progress in life and higher education worldwide (Dang, 2020; Luke, 2002; Unin, 2010; World Bank, 2017)

❖ Opportunities for women's promotion to leadership posts

❑ Under-representation of academic women in full professorship and leadership worldwide (Dang, 2020; Northouse & Lee, 2019; Unin, 2010)

- disproportionately concentrated in lower level and lower authority positions (Dang, 2020; Northouse & Lee, 2019)

Purpose of the Study

❑Explore lived experiences of mid-level women leaders in Viet Nam, Malaysia, and the U.S.

❑Examine and compare the persistence of cultural and institutional obstacles to women's leadership advancement in the three countries

❑Produce new knowledge for students taking leadership courses in the primary researcher's university and the three countries under study.

2. Research Design & Methodology
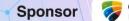
Research Design

❑Key research questions

❖What is the nature of the experiences of mid-level women leaders in higher education in Viet Nam, Malaysia, and the U.S., and how do they advance into leadership positions?

❑ Qualitative longitudinal research

Methodology

Primary Research Approach: Phenomenography (Marton, 1981, 1994)

❑Phenomenography allows researchers to
- describe, analyze, and understand "people's experience of various aspects of the world" (Marton, 1981, p. 177).
- use multiple techniques such as "group interviews, observations, drawings, written responses, and historical documents" to gather information (Marton, 1994, p. 4425);

Sampling

❑Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990, 2002)
- To select women having attained leadership positions in higher education

❑ Snowballing technique (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Holloway, 1997)
- To select 5 mid-level women leaders + 1-2 gatekeepers from each country under study.

Data Collection

❑ In-depth phenomenographic interviews through Zoom

❑ Analysis of national and institutional statutes and documents on gender issues and academic promotion policies.

3. Preliminary Findings

Similarities in Three Countries

❑Under-representation of women in top and key leadership positions such as president/rector, vice president, chairperson of board of trustees/university council, and dean

  ❖No female presidents/rectors at 6 universities under study (3 in the U.S., 1 in Malaysia, and 2 in Viet Nam)

  ❖20-30 % dean posts held by women

❑Women's salary is lower than men's for the same position

  ✓Women's hesitance and discomfort in negotiating for salary

"Something that women struggle with is negotiating for your salary… Negotiating for promotion and salary, I typically haven't stood up for myself very well to do that." (US Participant 1)

  ✓In Viet Nam: Lower wages and far worse working conditions for women in casual labor (World Bank, 2017)
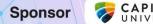
Similarities (Cont.)

❑ Challenges at work, typically for women

❖ In the U.S.

✓ When replacing her boss to assume the new role of Director of the International Office at her former university, a US participant faced challenges typical of her sex, pointing out *"I think there are challenges that I faced were probably pretty typical of what another woman in that role might have faced." (US Participant 1)*

❖ In Malaysia

✓ Challenges common for Malaysian women leaders, "partly is cultural, partly is expectation, partly is status quo"

"Well, to a certain extent, you know, those challenges, I think whoever is going to, you know, take on that position or any other positions would get a sample of those challenges... When there are qualified men, they are readily promoted. But when there are qualified women, they have to compete... When there is a vacancy [exist], you know, so if there are men qualified, they will get it first. If there are women qualified, maybe women will have to compete." (Malaysian Participant 2)
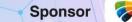
Similarities (Cont.)

❖ In Viet Nam
 ➢ Biggest challenges for Vietnamese women leaders
   ✓ Balancing work/life and family responsibilities;

"Women also have the burden of children… When my son is two years old, if I go abroad to pursue my doctoral program, who will take of him? Moreover, there are also issues related to being close to and educating him; I have to tutor him and educate him. Therefore, I think another challenge to women is their family responsibilities as mothers… If I was selfish to think only for myself then, that would adversely affect my son's future and his development." (Vietnamese Participant 1)

   ✓ Being a woman in an all-men-leadership world.

"The promotion of men to leadership positions takes place as what is described in the criteria list, but when coming to the promotion of women, there are unwritten criteria, which are only stated or spoken out in the review meeting and are not in the list, for example, whether a woman staff has small kids or not, whether she can join meetings outside the university or not, or whether she can often go on business trips far from home… And based on these unwritten criteria, the review board may conclude that she is not appropriate for a certain leadership position… Men on the other hand can interact with the outside world more easily, and he can go on business trips with the Rector or Board of Rectors more easily. Above him are all men, so he can get along with them more easily." (Vietnamese Participant 2)

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Similarities (Cont.)

❑Adverse influences of the Covid-19 pandemic

❖Stress and tiredness caused by huge online workload; loss of directions to move forward

"Initially, the abrupt transition to online teaching only 3 weeks after the new semester's face-to-face teaching was overwhelming. Teaching online for 2 hours per class, and 6 hours per day at times, was very tiring and draining!" (Malaysian Participant 1)

"Sorry, my response has been slow- it's been so hectic here this semester. I feel like things haven't slowed down since the pandemic started!... Yes I am tired! We all need a break!... We will make it! But I don't see any slowdown of work in the near future!... I think that I ultimately had to deal with the challenges of during the pandemic—a lot of unknown and confusion about how to move forward with things." (US Participant 2)

"Since the pandemic started, I have been busier with all the online teaching, research and mentoring undergraduate and graduate students. It seems to me that I cannot have any break now since students keep sending emails to me everyday even when I told them I would have a few days off… My work and life here are also hectic." (Vietnamese Participant 4)

Similarities (Cont.)

❑ Increasing amount of work "after" the Covid-19 pandemic, including the insoluble and aftermath

"I would say the only big change is that during and after the pandemic, I've been more understanding about time constraints and honoring limitations (both of my own and others). The pandemic has been difficult with a lot of responsibilities." (US Participant 2)

"After the Covid there is too much work to do. This means that during the Covid-19 pandemic, we could only carry out tasks at an acceptable level but not at 100% level. Sincerely speaking, my university could only complete 50% of the workload and couldn't operate like the time before the pandemic. Therefore, 50% of the remaining work was pushed to the present, and we have tried our best but cannot finish it. In fact, we are not able to do anything new except the remaining tasks left during the lockdown... After the Covid, not only I but also my staff have had to work like crazy." (Vietnamese Participant 3).

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Similarities in 2 Southeast Asian Countries

❑ Quota: 30% women in leadership positions at national and institutional levels in both Viet Nam and Malaysia
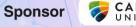
❑ Not yet achieved goal

- In Viet Nam in 2020: females held 26.7% of seats in the National Assembly

- In Malaysia:

"In terms of laws and policies I think there is already something in place where the expectation is to have 30% women in senior management positions, but actually if we look at the statistics for 2019 in Malaysia, women as legislators or senior officials or even senior managers, there is only 24.7%, only a quarter... Actually in labor force participation, we are already 50%, and in tertiary education we are 50%... And when it comes to political empowerment, that's even lower. For example, if we look at elected women parliamentarians in Malaysia, it's only 14%, 14.4%, very low. And then for women ministers, it's also very low, only 17.9%." (Malaysian Participant 1)

Similarities in 2 Southeast Asian Countries

❑ Enactment of the law and policy on gender equality, but there is not yet equality in reality.

❖ In Malaysia: Women are equal with men in law but not in reality.

"The thing is when it comes to the reality of it like, for example, when the vacancy exists, you know. If there are men qualified, men will get it first; if there are women qualified, maybe women have to compete." (Malaysian Participant 3)

❖ In Viet Nam: Regardless of the Law on Gender Equality enacted in 2006, women's status is not equal to men's in reality.

➢ Comments of a Vietnamese participant upon realizing that the prize for the Vietnamese women's national soccer team winning the championship in the Sea Games in early 2010s only equaled a small fraction of the amount their male counterparts received for a lower prize,

"This is not fair because women also played for the same amount of time, the same number of halves, and even won a higher prize…. Moreover, in the government bodies, you see, how many women leaders there are. You can only count them on your fingers, but men do not outnumber women in the population." (Vietnamese Participant 3)

Leadership Styles

Leadership Styles

❑**Authentic Leadership** (Northouse & Lee, 2019; Owolabi, 2020)

 ❖ Genuine, real, trustworthy, and good leadership that is transparent, morally grounded, and responsive to people's needs and values

"I am very clear in how to assign tasks to my staff and evaluate them. The assignments are based on their strengths so that they can grow." (Vietnamese Participant 4)

"I think maybe I am a people person. Normally, I engage everyone in the meeting, monthly meeting… for one hour, very casual. So, I want the staff to know the vision… I would like everybody to know where we are going. Although at the end it is my decision, but I just want to get their opinions first on the pros and cons of the idea…" (Malaysian Participant 3)

"I try to be very organized and systematic, and try to entrust my team to do whatever is needed to be done. I give clear expectations and guidance and try to communicate well." (US Participant 3)

Leadership Styles

□ **Situational Leadership** (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 2013; Northouse & Lee, 2019)
  ❖ Adapting the leadership style to the demands of different situations and individuals under one's leadership
  ❖ Applied especially during the Covid-19 pandemic

  ✓ A US academic program coordinator:

"I would say the only big change is that during and after the pandemic, I've been more understanding about time constraints and honoring limitations (both of my own and others). The pandemic has been difficult with a lot of responsibilities, so I think as a leader, I am less rigid and more open to trying to support others." (US Participant 2).

  ✓ A Vietnamese library director

"During the Covid time, I interacted with my staff through Google Meet (I don't use Zoom), Zalo, email, and I assigned, monitored, and evaluated all the tasks through the IT system… The staff could do their work at home, and I went online, for example, to check the results, to get to know whether they worked or not or what they did was correct or not, and so on." (Vietnamese Participant 2).

  ✓ A Malaysian dean and research project manager

"Covid-19, oh my God! The shifting was easy. To go online, it was not difficult. What I was not prepared with was staying home 24/7. We don't have accidental conversations. It was the ones that I missed the most…We still keep our schedules, meaning that we do meet on a timely basis…, but it's also frustrating for the team because you know part of our work is interacting with people, to interview people, to observe people. But we can't do that. What can you do from your home? So we turned a lot of the conversations into looking at the theories, looking at the methodology, you know, rather than actually collecting data." (Malaysian Participant 3)

4. Concluding Remarks

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❑ Geographical, cultural, and institutional differences

→ Challenges facing women in academia

❑ Some commonalities in leadership styles

❖ *Authentic and situational leadership*

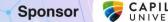❑ Data under analysis and triangulation

❖ *Preliminary results*

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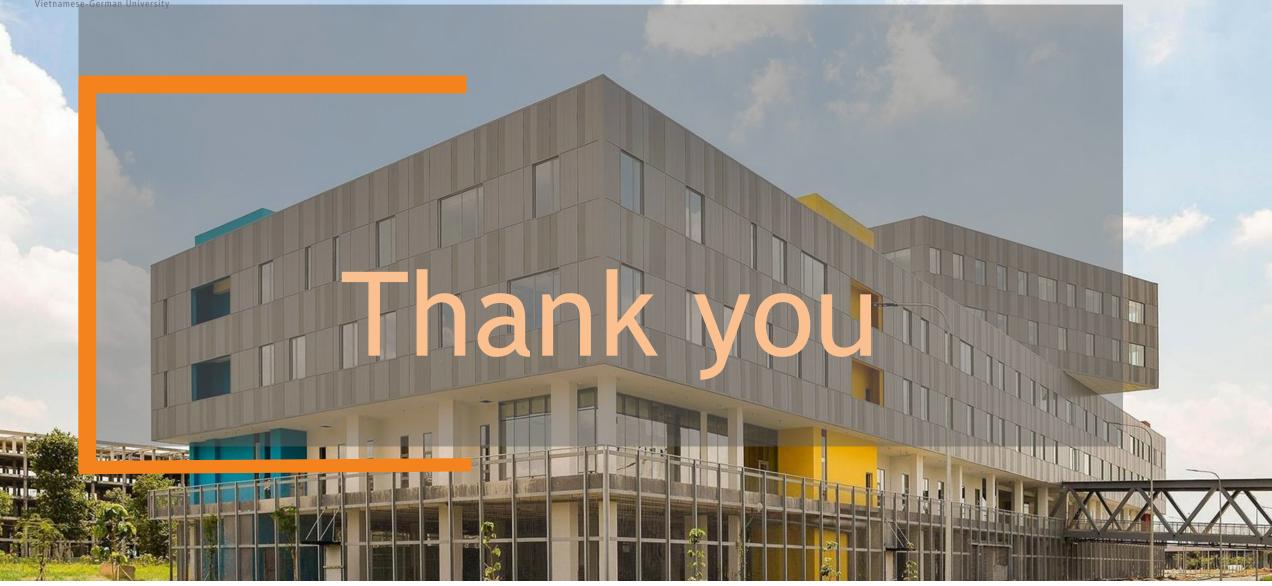
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Thank you

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