

Filipino women in leadership: Government and industry

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uided by the principle of “leaving no one behind”, the world targets to achieve gender equality as part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Through the said SDG, United Nations member-states, like the Philippines, have committed to ensure that the rights and privileges afforded to all citizens are the same regardless of sex.

This *Policy Note* presents current statistics on female representation in key leadership positions in the Philippine government and industry. It reveals a dearth of female representation in senior or lead positions and discusses some recommendations to address this systemic underrepresentation of Filipino women.

Gender equality in the Philippine context

The Philippines generally does well in various international metrics of gender equality. In

terms of education, Filipino girls and women are more likely to obtain a high school diploma, more likely to enter college, and more likely to graduate than their boys and male counterpart (David et al. 2009; David and Albert 2015). In the workforce, while still accounting for a lower proportion of the total workforce, jobs that tend to have higher-paying positions like supervision/management, professionals, service, and sales are more likely to be done by women than men (PSA 2017). In terms of salaries, the gender pay gap on a per-hour basis is also small in the country, even smaller than that of many advanced economies (Albert and Vizmanos 2017). Women holding leadership positions is also not unusual in the Philippines. Since the end of the Marcos dictatorship, for instance, Filipinos have already installed two female presidents and two female vice presidents.

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However, these national aggregates hide pictures of persistent gender gaps across specific industries and occupations (Albert and Vizmanos 2017). Filipino women remain sorely underrepresented in the highest positions in both the government and industry, where most important decisions are made and directions are set. In the government, these positions include elective and appointive positions across the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. In the industry, they include chief-level positions, board memberships, and director positions.

This pursuit of greater female representation in the realms of governance and business is critical to sustain any developments in gender equality in the Philippines. After all, women should have a voice in the decisionmaking process for policies that concern their welfare, such as family leave policies and equity in recruitment and promotion, among others (Piterman 2008).

Female representation in the Philippine government

The 1935 Philippine Constitution denied Filipino women their right to suffrage. Its Article V Section 1 only gave the right to vote to Filipino men who are 21 years and older and able to read and write. However, the said Constitution set a condition that suffrage may still be extended to Filipino women should at least 300,000 of them vote in favor of it in a special plebiscite.

On April 30, 1937, with 447,725 votes, the National Assembly granted Filipino women the

right to vote and run for public office. That same year, the country held its first general elections where women were allowed to vote. Carmen Planas won a seat in the city council of Manila and became the first woman to hold an elected government position in the Philippines.

Since then, the share of positions held by women in the Congress has increased. Although the proportion (27% in 2015) is still below parity, it is comparable to the average in Latin American countries (Apolitical 2017), and higher than other countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (ASEAN Secretariat 2017).

In the Philippine Senate, the number of female senators has been from three to six out of the 24 since 2001. These past two Senates have had the highest proportion of female representation, although women still only occupy 25 percent of the upper chamber. Moreover, since the 12th Congress in 2001, only one female has ever served in a leadership position within the Senate, namely, Loren Legarda as the majority leader of the 12th Senate. Meanwhile, no female has ever assumed the rank of Senate President or House Speaker.

The overall picture is particularly alarming in the local elective offices, such as in the positions of governor, mayor, and lower elected positions. In 2013, only 11 percent of elected local officials were female, a sharp decline from 20 percent in 2010, 18 percent in 2007, and 17 percent in 2004. At the barangay level, specifically, women only occupied

19 percent and 27 percent of all barangay captain and councilperson posts, respectively.

However, it is not because the voting public is not inclined to vote for women. Instead, few women are entering electoral politics. According to the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) (2017), women had comprised only 17 percent of the national and local candidates from 2004 to 2016 (Table 1). About the same proportion won the elections, wherein women currently hold roughly one in every five (21%) national and local elective positions. Clearly, not enough women run for office.

In the executive branch, top positions in agencies (called cabinet offices) have likewise remained largely male dominated since 1986 (Table 2). Women have likewise been more represented in the traditionally female-associated areas of health (28.6%), tourism (33.3%), and social welfare (100%) while less represented in areas of economics (8.3%), budget and management (15.4%), finance (6.7%), and foreign affairs (6.2%). The Department of Social Welfare and Development, in particular, has had only female secretaries since 1986. Not surprisingly, no woman has ever headed the Agriculture, Defense, Interior and Local Government, and Public Works departments, which are traditionally male-dominated offices.

Female representation in leadership positions in industry

Female managers and decisionmakers see additional aspects of problems and solutions

Table 1. Proportion (in %) of female candidates and elected officials in national and local elections, 2004–2016

	2004	2007	2010	2013	2016
Candidates in national and local elections	15	16	17	18	19
Elected in national and local	17	17	19	20	21
Candidates for barangay captain	-	17	16	19	-
Elected local leaders					
Governor	18	23	19	12	23
Vice governor	10	18	14	10	18
Mayor	15	17	21	10	-
Vice mayor	14	15	17	9	-
Representative	15	20	22	16	-
Councilor	18	18	20	-	-
Barangay captain	-	16	16	18	-

Sources: Commission on Elections (2017); Authors' calculations on data sourced from Asian Institute of Management Policy Center Study on Political Dynasties

in the daily operations of their companies (LeanIn.org and McKinsey 2016). Women are informed by their own challenges and experiences, which are different from those of men. This additional source of experience means that greater participation of women in all industry levels is good for business.

Globally, sectors have highlighted the need to craft specific interventions to eliminate gender discrimination in the workplace, change hostile work environments for women, and institutionalize family-friendly policies that encourage balanced family obligations between men and women (Piterman 2008). Unfortunately, few related initiatives have been undertaken in the Philippines.

Still, Filipino women's share in senior and middle management is close to proportional against women in the population. In the past 15 years, for instance, 40–43 percent of

Table 2. Share of female secretaries in the Philippine Cabinet, 1986–2017

Departments	Number of Females	Total Number Appointed	Share of Female Appointed (%)
Agrarian Reform	1*	17	5.9
Agriculture	0	17	0.0
Budget and Management	2***	13	15.4
Education	2	18	11.1
Energy	18	11	9.1
Environment and Natural Resources	18	18	5.6
Finance	1	15	6.7
Foreign Affairs	1	16	6.2
Health	4	14	28.6
Justice	2	18	11.1
Labor and Employment	2	11	18.2
National Defense	0	14	0.0
Public Works and Highways	0	16	0.0
Science and Technology	1	8	12.5
Social Welfare and Development	11	11	100.0
Interior and Local Government	0	18	0.0
Trade and Industry	1*	14	7.1
Transportation and Communications	1*	16	6.2
Tourism	6**	18	33.3
National Economic and Development Authority	1	12	8.3

Note: Excludes officers-in-charge, includes appointees later not confirmed

* Served 1 year or less, or was appointed yet not confirmed; ** 3 of the 6 served <1 year; *** Same appointee for two terms

Source: Authors' compilation

management positions have been occupied by women, a larger proportion than their overall current labor participation rate (PSA 2017). However, female participation in ownership has been stagnant at 69 percent during the same years (WB Various years). Our ASEAN neighbor countries, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Viet Nam, and Lao PDR, have also posted similar levels of participation in top management but lower representation in ownership.

When women are in the labor force, they have a high potential to reach senior management positions. In fact, in a survey of businesses

across different countries, the Philippines ranks among the highest in the proportion of senior management team roles held by women at 40 percent (Grant Thornton 2017). However, the evidence of equity in the promotion process ends at supporting roles in the senior management level (e.g., human resource officer and chief financial officer). Unfortunately, the proportion drops at the level of corporate executives and memberships in boards. Between 2009 and 2015, for instance, the proportion of firms in the Philippines with female top managers declined from 32.7 percent to 29.9 percent, according

Table 3. Percent of firms with female top managers, ASEAN, 2007–2015

Country	Firms with Female Top Manager (% of Firms)				Firms with Female Participation in Ownership (% of Firms)			
	Earliest Year		Latest Year		Earliest Year		Latest Year	
Indonesia	31.2	(2009)	22.1	(2015)	42.8	(2009)	22.1	(2015)
Lao PDR	...		32.2	(2012)	39.3	(2008)	41.9	(2012)
Malaysia	8.7	(2007)	26.3	(2015)	13.1	(2007)	25.4	(2015)
Myanmar	...		29.5	(2014)	...		27.3	(2014)
Philippines	32.7	(2009)	29.9	(2015)	69.4	(2009)	69.2	(2015)
Viet Nam	26.4	(2009)	22.4	(2015)	59.2	(2008)	51.1	(2015)

... = no data available; ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations
Source: World Bank (Various years)

to World Bank (Various years) (Table 3). With the exception of Lao PDR and Malaysia, female participation of owning companies in ASEAN has likewise decreased. Still, the Philippines shows the largest proportion of firms with female participation in ownership.

In the Philippine Stock Exchange's 200 highest market-capitalized companies alone, Filipino women occupy 30 percent of the top executive positions, usually as treasurers, corporate secretaries, and finance managers. Philippine firms that have women as chair or president are also usually in the retail, food, and pharmacy sectors. In a number of these positions, the same person occupies multiple positions. For instance, Teresita Sy-Coson serves as the president and chair of the board of both SM Mart and SM Retail, Inc. The same goes for Robina Gokongwei, who is part of the board of four Robinsons-owned companies.

While the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 aims for a more inclusive and resilient community through social protection for women and other vulnerable groups,

most ASEAN member-states, including the Philippines, still have no specific legislation on equal compensation for men and women for equal value of work as well as nondiscrimination on gender in hiring. Such policies are needed to equalize opportunities for employment between men and women, especially in sectors that have traditionally been gender imbalanced either by overt discrimination or by social stereotyping.

Recommendations

Improving female representation in governance

Given the low level of female participation in governance, interventions in both the public and private sectors are needed to improve their representation. A target of 40-percent representation across all high-level offices is reasonable given that half of the population are women and assuming that voters do not discriminate by sex.

Interventions for elective posts must happen at the candidacy level through policy and electoral changes. Bolivia, for example,



Filipino women remain sorely underrepresented in the highest positions in both the government and industry, where most important decisions are made and directions are set. Further indepth studies are needed to understand the nature of constraints women experience in the workplace. These studies should ideally cover issues such as workplace culture, family-related benefits and the challenges of primary providers of childcare, and gender stereotyping in promotions processes. (Photo by ILO/Ruben Hamahiga Dela Cruz/Flickr)

improved the share of women in its parliament from 12 percent in 2000 to 53 percent in 2017 by instituting an alternating system between women and men among political parties.

However, the overwhelming majority of the highest-level local offices in the Philippines are currently dominated by political dynasties, which will make it especially difficult for women to enter politics without dynastic connections. If federalism were to push through, it is likely that current power dynamics will continue, if not become less inclusive, unless political reforms are initiated before federalism takes root.

Electoral reform efforts have, in the past, acknowledged the need for programs that address the gender imbalance. However, little

has been done in the Philippines. COMELEC's voter education programs and outreach geared toward greater inclusivity can build in incentive schemes to encourage more females to run for office and make political systems and workplaces more attractive to, or at least less hostile for, women. Such systems will require meticulous design and sustained support.

It is less difficult to change the makeup of appointed officials, including in the judiciary, because the decisions are made centrally, and the universe of qualified candidates for most cabinet positions and the judiciary would include many competent women. As such, aggressive advocacy and promotion of female candidates should shore up visibility of highly qualified professionals in the area. Soft quota systems and specific affirmative-action-type

policies can be adopted to help ensure that a fair proportion of appointees are women. These policies, if adopted, can be monitored across time and appropriately revised, if need be.

Improving female representation in industry

Further indepth studies are needed to understand the nature of constraints women experience in the workplace. These studies, which ideally should cover issues such as workplace culture, family-related benefits and the challenges of primary providers of childcare, and gender stereotyping in promotions processes, among others, should guide the design of policies to ease women's paths toward leadership positions in industry. These issues, often social and sometimes institutional forms of discrimination (Kabeer 2012), are often understudied because they are difficult to detect.

Pushing for greater participation of women in top industry positions will allow the diverse experiences of women to inform hiring, retention, and promotion in their companies. In order to even detect the various ways a workplace can be hostile to women, it helps to have had personal experience and first-hand knowledge of the barriers in lower levels of corporate environments. According to The Rockefeller Foundation and Global Strategy Group (n.d.), men and women do not view the workplace in the same way. This is primarily because men have more opportunities to be visible in the office among bosses, making them more likely to win promotions, enabled

by their relative freedom from home-related responsibilities (Waller 2016). While these existing research studies from other countries can help inform local policies, the conditions in the Philippine business and industry need closer examination so that more strategic and specific interventions can be designed. Relatedly, it remains the responsibility of the government to conduct systematic studies that would identify the causes of the gender imbalances, and to make recommendations and craft regulations that will foster equal opportunity for women and men in workplaces throughout the country.

Indeed, a closer investigation is needed to address disparities that persist at the highest levels of both public and private sectors. For instance, although we have existing policies and regulations in place to protect women in workplaces particularly against sexual harassment, few mechanisms have been crafted to facilitate women's path toward leadership positions. Partly behind this dearth of policies is the lack of clear evidence upon which we can base initiatives pushing for women's leadership.

On the part of the government, it needs to review its current regulations to ensure more inclusive and gender-balanced political participation and leadership. Private companies should also examine their own existing policies to ensure equity in hiring, retention, and promotion that will clear the path for women, especially working mothers. These conversations can be strongly promoted

by national government agencies as well, specifically those that have mandates over ensuring inclusivity and gender equality in labor and employment. 📄

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