

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Breaking barriers and claiming space: Career insights and advice from Filipino women leaders in health

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Women in Global Health Philippines

ABSTRACT

This virtual forum showcased successful women leaders in the Philippine health sector who shared their journeys and advice with early-career professionals. The speakers emphasized the significance of mentorship, claiming space, and taking risks. They also highlighted the need for support systems to encourage non-traditional career paths in the health sector for women. The discussion acknowledged the challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in accessing appropriate healthcare and the importance of generating evidence and dialogue to address their unique health needs. Across these contexts, common themes emerged in the importance of mentorship for women leaders in overcoming societal biases and stereotypes.

Keywords: *health leadership, gender equity, mentorship, career development*

Introduction

Increasing women's participation in health will have wide benefits, enabling the expansion of the global health workforce needed to achieve Sustainable Development Goals, Universal Health Coverage, and realizing a triple gender dividend seen in better health, gender equality, and economic growth [1]. Women comprise around 70% of the global health workforce [2]. They are the main decision makers for meeting the health needs of their families [3,4]. It is beneficial for all if women were strongly represented in health leadership roles. However, women continue to be underrepresented in global health leadership, with only 25% holding senior roles [5]. This underrepresentation results from continued systemic gender biases, discrimination, and inequities to women entering and advancing in their professions. Health policy decisions are not influenced equally by the priorities and experiences of men and women, and global health is diminished by lost female ideas, innovation, expertise, and talent.

In the Philippines, there has been a move towards better feminization in traditionally male-dominated health care professions, such as physicians (56.9%, 2015) and physiotherapists (61.9%, 2015) [6]. However, only 4 of 29 Secretaries of Health have been female [7]. Additionally,

there continues to be a pay gap between Filipino women and men in the health and medical profession (Php 62,000 vs Php 71,200 average monthly salary) [8].

Forum Information

This article is based on the proceedings of an online forum entitled "Career Navigation for Women in Health" that was organized on 25 March 2023 by Women in Global Health Philippines. The event was held to promote gender equity and women's empowerment in the health sector by providing a platform for women leaders to share their experiences and advice. It was attended by 54 individuals online and featured women leaders that illustrate different paths to leadership: working in the Department of Health (DOH), navigating a career pivot in an uncertain terrain, and advocating for health services for a vulnerable community. The speakers focused their talks on the following key questions:

- What is your role as a woman leader in Philippine public health?
- What is the value of increasing women's participation in health, particularly in leadership positions?
- What have been the enablers and barriers in your career as a woman in the health sector?

The talks were followed by a panel discussion on the importance of women mentorship and advice to early career women professionals in health.

Forum Highlights

Dr. Maria Rosario S. Vergeire, MPH, CESO II

Undersecretary of Health, Department of Health Philippines

Dr. Vergeire emphasized the importance of addressing gender disparities and gaps in health. Although women make up 70% of healthcare workers, they hold only around 30% of leadership positions. The DOH has made progress in reversing these trends, with 72% of their officials being women, who also comprise the majority of their Executive Committee. She discussed the historical context of women's roles in health, noting that women were traditionally confined to household duties. She cited the increasing number of women Secretaries of Health in the Philippines in recent years, with a shift toward more acceptance for women in this leadership role since 2015.

Dr. Vergeire highlighted societal biases that associate specific medical specialties with certain genders. Women were expected to pursue obstetrics or pediatrics, while men were encouraged to enter surgical fields. These biases extend to other health professions as well, such as nursing and midwifery, where male practitioners were considered atypical.

While the expression of gender inequality in the Philippines is not as extreme as in other parts of the world, societal biases persist in perceiving women in leadership roles. Dr. Vergeire emphasized the need to overcome these biases and the double standards faced by women in leadership. Women are often criticized for being assertive, while men with similar traits are praised for their competence. She argued for changing societal perceptions of both women and men to achieve true gender equality.

Dr. Venus Oliva Cloma-Rosales

Founder, 101 Health Research

Dr. Ivy, as she is usually called, transitioned from being a clinician to establishing 101 Health Research in 2014, focusing on data analysis in health policy and systems research. This career shift enabled her to focus on community-level and population-level data analysis. The COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges to her work. She had clients outside the health sector for the first time and conducted outbreak investigations in factories. In this setting, she observed the manifestation of gender disparity, with women being the majority of workers but men predominantly owning the factories.

She highlighted the importance of balanced perspectives and detail-oriented decision-making for women in leadership positions. She explained that women are often characterized as detail-oriented, which is crucial in policy-making and

Textbox 1. Quotes from Undersecretary Vergeire

Women leading the health sector in the Philippines has started to become more acceptable in recent years.

"The best example I have is in the Department of Health. The Department started its existence in 1941. We have had 5 women Secretaries of Health since then. Three out of these 5 actually came in only starting 2015. That's the time that we saw that maybe it became acceptable to our nation's leaders that a woman can lead our healthcare sector. We had Secretary Reodica in 1996 and there was a big gap before we had another woman Secretary in Secretary Cabral in 2010. After her, we had Secretary Garin (2014) and Secretary Ubial (2016)."

On how women are perceived in exercising their leadership roles

"When a woman is pregnant and has to work, you will be branded as irresponsible. You neglect your children. Why are you working? Take care of them. But when the man is the one doing the work, they're the breadwinner, the provider, it's great."

Textbox 2. Quotes from Dr. Cloma-Rosales

The value of women in decision-making roles

"Overall, women are characterized as detail oriented and that's extremely important because as you know, the devil is always in the details for any policy, for any research project. In business and finance, there are studies that show that male leaders are very good in times of stability and prosperity. But it is really female leaders that do better in times of crisis because of more cautious decision making. That is the value of increasing women's participation in business."

Male-dominated space of startups

"This was 10 years ago, but I saw the characteristics of startups. It's usually all males and they are foreigners. Not only are they male, they are foreign males. Because I saw they were all foreign males, I couldn't...I didn't try to pitch, you know. I didn't try to go into those circles anyway."

research. She discussed the value of increasing women's participation in businesses, as studies have shown that female leaders perform better in times of crisis due to more cautious decision-making.

Reflecting on her career, Dr. Ivy identified barriers she faced, such as a lack of visible alternative career tracks in medicine and limited knowledge of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. She noted that the startup scene was dominated by foreign men, which made it challenging for her to feel comfortable entering those circles. However, she found enablers for her growth, including support from family, her educational background, and engaging in well-being activities.

Magdalena Robinson

Founder and Executive Director, Cebu United Rainbow LGBT+ Sector

Magdalena shared her journey from being a beauty queen to advocating for transgender health. After attending an HIV advocacy training in 2010, she realized the need for greater action in addressing the health concerns of the transgender community. This led her to form an organization to address HIV and transgender health needs. As a leader, Magdalena pushes for changes and interventions in her community, tackling stigma and discrimination, and contributing to the passing of the Anti-Discrimination ordinance in Cebu City. She manages a trans health program that aims to inform national-level policies on these issues.

A key issue for the community is the lack of established clinical practice guidelines for gender-affirming hormone therapy, which leads many transgender individuals to self-medicate. She emphasized the importance of providing access to gender-affirming health programs and creating safe spaces for transgender individuals to access necessary healthcare services without fear of discrimination. She believes in the rights-based approach to health services and the right to quality healthcare for everyone.

Textbox 3. Quotes from Magdalena Robinson

On her realization that she wanted to be an advocate for the LGBTQIA+ community

"I realized that when I was on stage as a beauty queen, we always got a question and answer portion and we were not taking action. We were informing the public that our community is discriminated against, but we were not taking action."

Self-medication on transgender people in the Philippines

"...we realized that we're self medicating as trans people. We tolerated the public health system in the country. But these health needs are not provided for us because we don't yet have established clinical practice guidelines for gender affirming hormone therapy. So the system itself is not ready and has not much information. How can you be healthy when you transition using hormone therapy? Our existing practice and culture in the trans community is that we just have to access whatever we feel affirms our gender identity."

As a transwoman leader in community health, Magdalena has faced numerous barriers, including gender bias and limited opportunities for growth. Despite these challenges, she remains committed to her advocacy work and hopes to inspire others to address the needs of marginalized communities and work towards equality.

Magdalena's story demonstrates the power of personal experience and dedication in creating change. Her advocacy for transgender health and her leadership in addressing discrimination highlight the importance of diverse voices in leadership positions. Through her work, Magdalena is striving to create a more inclusive and equitable health sector for all.

Panel Discussion

During a panel discussion, Dr. Vergeire, Dr. Ivy, and Magdalena shared their perspectives and advice on topics related to women's mentorship, career advice, and advocacy.

Dr. Vergeire emphasized the significance of women's mentorship in developing leaders, drawing from her own experience. Leaders are not born, but are shaped by their experiences and environment. Mentorship provides inspiration, motivation, and helps shape one's leadership style. She encouraged early career women professionals to claim their space, set goals, and be vocal in pursuing what they believe in.

"My advice to all of you: claim your space. You don't have to hesitate, think twice, or think about what others are thinking or saying. As long as you think and feel that you're doing the right thing, do it, push for it. Even when you enter a room and all of them are male or only for men, enter the room."

Dr. Ivy highlighted the challenges young professionals face in today's noisy and information-saturated environment. She advised early career women to recalibrate, simplify, and focus their priorities while understanding the value of hard work. She reiterated the importance of self-improvement, exercise, sleep, and socialization to cope with the pressures of modern life.

Magdalena emphasized the need for addressing the unique health concerns of the LGBT community and suggested that allies in the health sector can contribute through research, volunteering, or creating practices that cater to LGBT individuals.

Conclusion

The speakers in this forum provided valuable insights and shared their personal experiences, highlighting the challenges and opportunities faced in bureaucratic spaces, uncertain business environments, and advocating for vulnerable communities. Across these contexts, common themes emerged. The speakers emphasized the significance of mentorship in shaping future women leaders. They encouraged young women professionals to claim their space, and overcome societal biases and stereotypes. The event reaffirmed the importance of women's empowerment in the health sector. By embracing diversity, promoting inclusivity, and creating supportive environments, we can foster a healthcare landscape where all individuals, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to lead, innovate, and make a positive impact on the lives of others.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Sary Valenzuela for hosting the forum.

Consent For Publication

Consent for publication was sought from speakers, documented via a signed form.

Textbox 4. Other panel discussion highlights

On the question: Why is women mentorship important to increase women's participation in health?

Dr. Ivy never perceived any barriers to becoming a leader as a woman, which she attributed to her upbringing and seeing her mother as a successful leader in the medical field. In an uncharted business environment, she also emphasized the importance of having both male and female mentors, as they can offer valuable advice, trust, and support. Her perspective on leadership changed while in business school, where she learned that leadership should be adaptive to the competency and commitment level of the team, and that micromanagement should be avoided with highly competent and committed teams.

Magdalena admitted to disliking leadership positions, but recognized the importance of taking action when necessary from the perspective of an advocate for a marginalized community. Through mentorship and meeting other advocates and leaders, she found inspiration and encouragement. This knowledge helps her advocate for necessary changes and apply insights to various aspects of life.

On the question: What is your advice for early career women professionals in health?

From her experience in the Department of Health, Dr. Vergeire advised early career women in health to recognize the diversity of the public health field, which goes beyond clinical practice and includes policy-making and law. Knowing one's purpose and being consistent in pursuing it is crucial for success. The health sector encompasses various fields, including agriculture, education, and transportation systems, and young women should be confident and unafraid to take up space in any of these areas.

For Magdalena, leadership is not limited to the work environment, but also encompasses the impact and goals one pursues, especially when advocating for a vulnerable population. She advised young professionals and students to recognize that being in a leadership position requires hard work, effort, and dedication, but that true leadership is also demonstrated in daily life by contributing to the common goals one wishes to achieve for everyone.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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