



## **A Gendered View on the responses of select LGUs during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

During the first week of August, the National Capital Region and some Luzon areas have entered the Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ). This is part and parcel of the health community's plea to place the NCR under even a two-week lockdown to "holding the line" in some hospitals (Marquez, 2020). At the time of MECQ the power is vested to the local government units to implement rules and regulations to reduce the transmission of the virus in their respective areas. However, ever since the country was placed under varying quarantine categories, news spread out far and wide about local officials' actions and how they are handling the pandemic. This can be analyzed in different dimensions – economic, political, or even seeing it on the lens of gender can this issue be analyzed. The paper will draw out on a gendered

analysis of the actions of some local officials in the Philippines by citing different examples of their accomplishments and controversies during the pandemic – arguing that male and female local officials in the Philippines have a different view on how to provide services to their constituents despite being presented a similar (crisis) situation.

### **MALE AND FEMALE LEADERS DURING THE PANDEMIC**

Some articles study the difference between male and female leaders during the pandemic. It implies that gender may or may not play a substantial role in handling a crisis, hence, a pandemic. Looking at some international examples, New Zealand, Germany, and even Taiwan successfully contained the virus, and they are all female-led governments (Champoux –

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Paille & Croteau, 2020). Jacinda Ardern's New Zealand can go on months now without local transmissions. They account for their rigorous mass-testing and contact tracing, closing borders, and providing financial assistance to those greatly affected (Reuters, 2020).

Tsai Ing-wen's Taiwan was the first to contain the virus completely with little fatalities and even low cases - this is attributed to the experts who are making the decisions for the government that was prepared since the outbreak of SARS in 2003 (Chen, 2020). Taiwan's local officials have been tasked to provide services to those who are in quarantine to contain the virus as much as possible (Yen, 2020). As much as they are handling the pandemic effectively, Taiwan's application to join the World Health Organization keeps getting rejected because of China's claim over them. Taiwan's membership in the WHO would have them provide processes on how to contain the virus (Yen, 2020). It is then implied that female leaders across the world are handling the situation well, to provide models on how to contain the virus effectively.

Philippines' Vice President Leni Robredo has her COVID-19 efforts, despite being downplayed at and even procuring her funds - as she raised almost Php 55 million, coming from donations, public fundraising, and even her own office's fund (Cator, 2020). She is being praised for her transparency on where and how the funds are allocated and where it was given (Cator, 2020).

Her willingness to help the President alleviate the worsening cases shows her empathy and her priorities to contain the virus in the Philippines. Jacinda Ardern, Tsai Ing-wen, even Angela Merkel of Germany, and Leni Robredo, can be inferred that certainty in their priorities to manage and alleviate the situation is their driving force to carry out with utmost effectiveness and efficiency their policies.

## LGUs DURING THE PANDEMIC

In the Philippines, the news is filled with stories of controversies and accomplishments of local officials. Five NCR LGUs have received high approval ratings - Valenzuela, Pasig, Manila, Marikina, and Taguig, for their effective and efficient delivery of services during pandemic (Lalu, 2020). Vico Sotto, for example, the mayor of Pasig, has been making the rounds on social media for his efforts, such as the practical and on-time delivery of 1 billion cash aid to those who are affected (Sabillo, 2020). While, Isko Moreno, the mayor of Manila, launches a mobile coronavirus test center and a walk-in testing center in Quirino Grandstand (ABS-CBN News, 2020). Together with Manila Vice Mayor Honey Lacuna, he also purchased "remdesivir" vials to kickstart "trials" to treat those infected with the virus (Lalu G., 2020). Lastly, Marcy Teodoro opens Marikina's COVID-19 laboratory to accommodate more tests, despite the DOH's rejection to operate immediately and testing at least 6,000 tricycle drivers in the city (Bajo, 2020). It is seen that most male officials have their priorities

and interests to be aligned with what the people need as of this moment.

On the other side of the spectrum, some officials that seem to be mishandling the situation. Mayor Joy Belmonte of Quezon City is a highly controversial figure during this pandemic due to her handling the case. The delay in the delivery of cash aid sparked the protests on Sitio San Roque, which is considered a violation of the Bayanihan as One Act for illegal gathering (ABS-CBN News, 2020). For observers and to her constituents, it is considered as a lack of action in Belmonte's part for not providing relief for her people. She also became a controversial figure when we vented her anger on social media, attacking those who question her "kits" with her name on it (ABS-CBN News, 2020). She stated that those who hate her ways could not to receive aid from her, alluding to her slow response to provide relief for her constituents (ABS-CBN News, 2020). Another controversial female figure is the Cebu City governor, Gwendolyn Garcia. She became a hot topic after shaming doctors and encouraging 'tuob', which has proven not to alleviate COVID-19 symptoms (Abatayo, 2020). However, these narratives beg whether or not these stated examples of male and female leaders do have their priorities and interests in order, and if so, does this make them an effective leader during a crisis situation?

### **'GENDERED' LEADERSHIP**

On a surface level, one can conclude those female leaders are more effective leaders during the pandemic.

One can say that their identities as women - being "motherly" and having empathy as their dominant trait can be their very strength to handle a crisis. (Carbonaro, 2020). Compassionate, in this accord, can be attributed to the prioritization of human security and health, and this is what the driving force of some women leaders (Carbonaro, 2020). However, it goes beyond than just the gender of their leaders, but on the citizens that elected them (Champoux-Paille & Croteau, 2020).

It is leaning towards the equal participation of women in the civil society, meaning that rather than being homogenous (i.e., men only or women only groups), it is much better and more effective to encourage both men and women to be participative in civil society (Champoux - Paille & Croteau, 2020). It is implied that when men and women are given a chance to take part in policy-making, they are acquiring complete and ample solutions rather than having monotonous ones. So what are the possible insinuations of this to the narrative of LGUs in the Philippines? For one, Vico Sotto or Isko Moreno cannot handle that much responsibility alone, and they had to be surrounded by competent people (men and women alike) that will assist them in the delivery of services to the people - especially on the part of Mayor Moreno, wherein he has the help of Vice Mayor Honey Lacuna in the effective and efficient delivery of services in the City of Manila (Siytangco, 2020). Vice President Leni Robredo will not be able to procure as many funds all by herself. She had to be surrounded by her staff

and people who support her cause, to be able to actualize her efforts in this situation. This simply implies that gender plays no role in the leadership skills of officials during the pandemic and refutes the argument that men and women have different views that make them useful in the pandemic – differing opinions is one thing, competence, and effectiveness of the leaders and the people, no matter the gender, that surrounds them is another. What does that spell out for Mayor Joy Belmonte and Governor Gwen Garcia? For one, it may be assumed that their priorities may not be on the human security and health given their controversial bouts. However, people cannot totally account for the fact that they are not “empathic” as women or as individuals. Instead, their political interests must have a more significant weight than societal interests or even public health concerns.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, although there are states that have successfully contained the virus, and most of them are female-led governments, one cannot account for their gender onto whether or not it was a success factor. It will all eventually come down to the talks of competence and effective leadership in a crisis situation. People that make up their governments are the experts that decide and carve the path towards more significant recovery. It is not a question

of gender, but rather, how empathy, leadership, and setting priorities can co-exist and provide relief to their subjects. The Philippine example demonstrates this perfectly. Everybody hopes for the pandemic to be over soon. While the return to normal is still a long shot, local officials will have to do everything in their power to be able to provide the services that their constituents expect from them. After all, as the Constitution would state, public office is a public trust.

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