

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Framing the Story of A Woman Politician in the Dinagat Islands, Philippines: A Post-Structural Analysis

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Abstract: In this study, Bacchi and Benan's (2016) framework is used to analyze the story of Vice Mayor Fely of Tubajon, Dinagat Islands. Her story is looked into to serve as a platform where the habits, practices, and situations in connection to structures and power relations in the political arena in her municipality and the province are brought to the fore to be in dialogue with a few critical questions. Some of these questions include: (a) Why do women politicians find it difficult to land a political position? and (b) Should women politicians be forced to carve political identities when their male counterparts are not expected to do the same? In framing the story of Vice Mayor Fely following the post-structuralist perspective, this qualitative case study presents these insights: (a) her humble beginnings is reflective of the peripheral space of women in relation to seats of power and influence, (b) her unique entry point as church volunteer points to the variety of paths for future women leaders in contrast to homogenous routes of women and men belonging to traditional political families, and (c) her story questions pervasive habits in traditional politics such as having a sense of entitlement to political positions.

Keywords: Dinagat Islands, post-structuralist analysis, woman politician

Increasing the count of women occupying political posts is a key interest of feminist transformational leadership (Antrobus, 2002). In the Philippines, such an advocate is also underscored in the Magna Carta of Women (2009). The law hopes to improve the number of women politicians and challenge traditional routes to politics, which historically has disenfranchised women from running for and winning political posts (Sobritchea, 2000). Such struggles can be gleaned from the results of the 2016 May election whereby the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW, 2017)

indicated that 78.5% of the nationally elected posts were won by men, with 21.5% being occupied by women. Such results were also slightly different from the results in the 2013 May elections, wherein male politicians got 80% of the total political posts, and women occupying the remaining 20% (PCW, 2017). Such an increase in women's participation as politicians may be taken to mean that more and more women have found ways to take part in leadership and governance roles, and have hopefully been given a chance to contribute in changing the way people view

politics from being a male-centric and male-dominated institution.

With such statistical improvements, however, the narratives of women politicians as they enter the generally patriarchal political landscape still needs grounding research and scrutiny (Corbett & Liki, 2015). Such need, thus, conditions a research gap that is wanting of critical attention to help identify and understand the experiences, challenges, and opportunities of women politicians in the country. The following questions articulate and summarize such general curiosity: How did women break the stereotype of patriarchal political leadership? Is there a substantive difference in the way women politicians frame their political posts and functions? Given these queries, and the need to make sense of women in politics in Mindanao being a case in point for this paper, it is to such interests and aims that this paper finds its purpose. Hoping to contribute to the gathering of such stories and opening a space for discursive analyses that revolve around gender justice and feminist transformational leadership, this study hopes to make a dent on researches on women in politics and feminist leadership, specifically in Mindanao.

To contribute to the foregoing goals, this paper examines the life story of a woman politician in the Dinagat Islands, Philippines. Characterized as a site where politics has been dominated by one political clan since the 1960s, the presence of a woman politician who chose not to be dissuaded by the dominant political force deserves attention and scrutiny. Standing as a different narrative in a rather traditional political landscape in the province, this paper explores the post-structural context and meaning of her life story. Three intersecting interests are looked into: (1) the life story of a church volunteer who turned into public servant, (2) the context of her inclusion process in the realm of politics as a Vice-Mayor of a municipality, and (3) her political identity as she explores herself and traverses the path of self-discovery.

But what is a post-structuralist position? Centering on the concept of “politicized personhood,” Bacchi and Binham (2016) endorsed seven interrelated questions that endeavor to situate the circumstances that make a story or account politicized and post-structural. These questions, which are used as a guide in the analysis of the selected narrative, are as follows:

(1) What is said in the interview?

- (2) How was it, or is it possible to say those things?
- (3) Which networks of relations are relevant to the interview topic?
- (4) What do the selected “things said” produce as “subjects,” “objects,” and “places”?
- (5) How do the interviewers and interviewees problematize “what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live?”
- (6) Which “things said” put in question pervasive ways of thinking?
- (7) What political consequences follow from interviewers’ selection and distribution practices?

Upon close scrutiny, the foregoing steps and questions revolve around two Foucauldian concerns: the historical context of power and the transcendental feature of the same notion of power (Foucault, 1988). Interpreted as a critical effort to emancipate the self or situations from structures (Foucault, 1972) that condition and constrain participation and chances in the realm of politics (Bacchi & Binham, 2016), what the post-structuralist frame accomplishes is it helps reveal the tension and contradictions that situate stories (Harcourt, 2007). For instance, the story of a woman politician as a case in point expects herself to be different from the traditional way of doing politics. On this concern, the post-structuralist analysis lends its capacity to unearth and makes sense of the struggles that a non-traditional woman politician needs to deal with and face as a consequence of her marginal and, at times, secondary role in shaping the landscape of politics in a municipality or province. Hence, this is where the seven-tiered analytical steps of Bacchi and Binham (2016) showcase its theoretical force as the reflective process facilitates the articulation of core and critical values that seem to weave the concerns and issues that the Vice Mayor from Tubajon deal within the local municipality and province as a whole.

Methods

This paper is part of a larger research project which we conducted in 2016 funded by the Center for Women’s and Gender Studies (UPCWGS) of the UP System. In such research, four women politicians were interviewed in the Dinagat Islands with the hope of articulating an argument against the benchmark

phenomenon. As a concept, the benchwarmer phenomenon stands for women who enter politics primarily as a seat warmer, hence, functioning as a warm body that waits until the male member of the family or party is legally allowed to run for another term of office (Diamond, 1977, as cited in Cammisa & Reingold, 2004; Coronel, Chua, Cruz, & Rimban, 2004). In that research, the interviewed politicians were grouped into two. The first group is composed of politicians from a political clan or a family of politicians. In contrast, the second group is composed of politicians who came from families who do not have political families or background. As both groups established that they are no longer part of the benchwarmer phenomenon, the latter group is of special interest in this study because, prior to becoming politicians, they belong to networks of critics to traditional forms of governance. Joining the political bandwagon meant becoming potential subjects of the criticisms they used to throw against the government that they now serve.

Between the two groups of women politicians, this paper zooms into the second group of women politicians who had no political affiliations and background. More specifically, the story of Vice Mayor Fely of Tubajon is selected because her background brings to the fore three crucial elements: (1) she used to work as volunteer in a Catholic Social Action Center; (2) she started as Barangay Captain until becoming a Vice Mayor, which gives an exploratory dimension to her political career as she transitioned from a church volunteer to a Barangay Captain, and as the Vice Mayor of her municipality; and (3) she is part of a group of politicians in the province symbolically headed by Representative Kaka Bag-ao who underscores the importance of avoiding traditional tools in politicking.

As her story somehow reflects the experiences of women politicians who do not come from traditional entry points, her narrative is an interesting account in investigating how the self becomes politicized. The process of politicizing personhood, according to Bacchi and Binham (2016), can be recognized via the seven inquiries which seek to articulate the covert-overt practices, the networks of meaning, and contradictions or tensions with one's self as life in politics proceeds. It is also important to note that the narrative of Vice Mayor Fely has been validated by the informant back in 2016, which means that the cogency and veracity

of her account have been looked into. In subjecting her narrative to the post-structuralist lens is, therefore, motivated by a desire to understand better how her context, history, and decisions shape her political life and describe at length her identity as a counterfactual to the benchwarmer phenomenon.

Given the foregoing methodological considerations, this paper adheres to the discursive approach of the post-structuralist position in making sense of the narrative of Vice Mayor Fely. Coming from a philosophical and feminist position, the seven steps of Bacchi and Binham (2016) uncover the relative assumptions or presuppositions that regulate the politicized identity of Vice Mayor Fely. Moving away from the essentialist vantage point, the post-structuralist and feminist position reveals the intersecting roles and contributions of contexts, power, vision, and identities that make, re-make, or unmake positions. Hence, these are the conceptual interests following the notion of theoretical sampling in qualitative research (Guetterman, 2015), which the post-structuralist position and this paper underscore.

Location of the Study

Dinagat Islands is a province in the CARAGA region in Mindanao. It was created through Republic Act No. 9355 in 2007 but immediately faced legal battles before its official validation by the Supreme Court on April 12, 2011. It is a single legislative district comprised of seven municipalities, namely, Basilisa, Cagdianao, Dinagat, Libjo, Loreto, San Jose, and Tubajon. The capital and seat of government is the Municipality of San Jose, with a population of around 26,000 people. It has a land area of 79,970.67 hectares (Lagat, 2019). In a 2015 census, Dinagat Islands has a population of 127,000 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2016). Majority speak Cebuano and Surigaonon, although many migrants from other provinces also speak Boholano and Hiligaynon.

From a religious and political standpoint, the province is home to Ruben Ecleo, Sr.'s Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association (PBMA). Ecleo is known as the "Divine Master" by his followers founded PBMA in 1967, which he led up until his death in 1987. PBMA's membership grew and to date, remains the primary religion in the province. As Divine Master, Ecleo was elected mayor of Dinagat when it was still a part of Surigao Del Norte Province, and remained an official until 1987. He was survived by

his wife and children who also held and continue to hold major elective posts in the province. His wife, Glenda, is the current Governor of the province, and their children also occupy various political posts. This is a glimpse as to how this strong dynastic family remained in key positions for over three decades.

Given such a context, the presence of women politicians who dissociate themselves from the dominant political party is the reason why the area is selected as the site of the study. Against the background of political families ruling for decades, the presence of women politicians who opted to stand on their own condition an urgent sense of curiosity. How did these women politicians reach their current positions of power? How do they regard themselves in relation to the political dynasty in the province? What identities do these women politicians uphold as they discover and mark their unique political stance? These are the main queries that justify the selection of the Dinagat Islands as the site of this study given that it is one of the areas in Mindanao where such questions can be comprehended or better understood.

Results

Narrative From a Post-Structural Lens

The interview with Vice Mayor Fely happened in her residence in Tubajon Municipality. We arrived at her place at around 10 a.m. after departing from San Jose, the municipal capital of the province of Dinagat Islands. In the interview, we stayed in her balcony and, like many Filipino households, we were greeted with a prepared *merienda* (snacks) and juice. The interview lasted close to two hours, with a few interruptions from calls and messages related to the concerns of her office. The house of Vice Mayor Fely was also quite modest, which was a mix of concrete and wood. In her simple jeans and shirt, Vice Mayor Fely shared her reflections on the following themes: (a) the role and influence of the family in running for a political office, (b) the political machineries usually employed or invoked that dispose a candidate's chance to win an elected post, and (c) the emerging challenges or constraints to a woman's candidacy, and political participation as government elected official. Given these themes, the interview proceeded, and the following points describe Vice Mayor Fely's perspective:

Vice Mayor Fely raised this query: "Will I be different from traditional politicians?" Prior to such a

question, she shared her background as a volunteer in the local parish's social action center. As a volunteer, Fely has been exposed to the ideals of the church with regard to clean and honest elections. It is this ideal which formed Fely's core value and principle for transparent elections. Also accustomed to working in a group who are vocal with their criticisms against machinations during elections, such background made her more cautious in joining traditional politics. These are ideas and concerns that regulated her dealings with her social work and advocacies, couple by the prevalence of poverty in the area, the lack of roads that connect the seven municipalities, the absence of health care options, and other issues that demand radical changes in the municipality and province.

Because Fely spent a long period of time with the community in the social action center, her question becomes a double-edged test: either she can walk the talk, or she will be the very object of her own criticisms. This is where a self-critical subject unfolds, given that she is also already aware of the consequences if she falters and falls into the trap of patronage politics. This hesitation can be seen in her facial reaction.

Will Fely be different from traditional politicians? This is a question that we also want to ask in the near future. Given Fely's strong background in volunteerism, this other question is also in order: Will the position and power that comes along government posts make her realize that she is not that different from the brand of politics which she has always been wary of? As Fely struggled with these thoughts and the uncertainties of the future, she proved unafraid of such possibilities as she started her political path as *Punong Barangay* (Barangay Captain), and won the Vice Mayor position in 2010.

As the interview ensued, Fely shared this remark: "Why is the project proposal like this? One should carefully tract the completion of activities. Projects are not done chronologically. This project is not needed. This is what should be done instead." When talking about the trappings of mediocrity, Fely underscored that women politicians have an advantage because "Women are more conscientious than men." This is where Fely expressed her distrust of male politicians who initiate projects which may only end up as white elephants. While in the position, she could not stress enough the importance of upholding standards. When errors or mistakes occur, she considers such episodes as learning opportunities.

Being in a government position, Fely realized that it takes the whole team to work together so that processes are not delayed. She remarked, "Each strand should work for the completion of the entire project." Although the problems with too much bureaucracy were not directly articulated, it was not far behind from the interview and discussion. However, Fely admitted that she somehow struggled with her words when criticizing such processes because she knows that she is also working within the government and that she is a decision-maker herself. Hence, the timing of these questions was occasioned: (1) How does one become an agent of change in ensuring that government projects are properly implemented? and (2) How does one assess if projects are either half-baked or successful?

In raising such questions, it became evident in the interview that Fely is reminded of an important objective why she ventured into politics—to help the people regain their sense of trust in the government's capacity and sincerity to help them. Connecting such a goal to the problems she encountered in the prioritization and implementation of government projects, Fely specified that there is a need to correct the impression that when projects are done by the government, people have low expectations in terms of the project's quality and efficiency. "Half-baked" is a common moniker attached to government-initiated projects. In stressing the importance of quality, Fely, however, also acknowledged the challenge to make such ideals real or concrete because such projects use the people's money.

When the quality of so-called finished projects questions the integrity of politicians, Fely was quick to revert to lessons she learned while still working for the church: "My conscience tells me that is my responsibility." This is also enriched by another statement when asked how she deals with issues or comments that question her sincerity and capability: "I become restless. I asked myself, God, what have I done? I cannot even sleep properly." Both statements speak volumes of Fely's regard on the importance of focus and commitment to one's function. Although she is quick to clarify that she is not in the position to please others, what worries Fely is the possibility that her projects may not stand the test of time, and may also be not at par to quality standards. The idea of losing the people's trust stirs a kind of anxiety that hovers around her mind. Understanding how her position

naturally courts criticism, Fely makes it a point to be as reflective as possible. For her, it means always trying to become a good example of a woman public servant to her constituents and fellow government employees.

To deal with the pressures of a government post, we realized that Fely is trying to cultivate new aspects of herself that will keep her from deviating from her standards. By maintaining a self-critical and reflective disposition, Fely admitted that there are a lot of things to be learned as an administrator. These points subsequently conditioned this question: How does one balance a person's capacity to do one's job properly and the need to learn new concepts and skills as a politician? These questions remind Fely of the need to constantly evaluate her skills and capacity and to seek ways to augment identified gaps or lack. With this topic, however, Fely was quick to recall a double standard between women and men politicians. She mentioned that if male politicians made the mistakes, people would just shrug-off the incident. However, if women commit mistakes, people "just roll their eyes and give negative judgments." Fely hopes that the disparity in treatment and expectation will be removed as such bias makes it more difficult for people to regain their trust in the government.

Is there a set of qualifications that individuals must have so he or she is fit to run for a seat in the government? Referring to her background, Fely underscored the importance of the question as a lesson she learned from volunteer work. Upon reflection, we realized that this is actually a context that Fely uses to challenge pervasive entry points to politics. Traditional politics expect a candidate to have the influential clout and capital as the backbone for a win in times of election. Fely's story on how she entered politics, however, shows another route—the path of volunteerism.

Such a path also explains why Fely shared this line: "You really need to work hard because you have more than 2,000 individuals who trusted you, so you need to give back to the people the service they deserve." The statement makes it clear that for Fely, a government post is like a contract to the people. As a contract, it is something that should be acknowledged and respected. It is this stance which forms the central and broader context of her office. This means that the people in her municipality are the core of her government position, and its broader context includes other institutions that intersect with herself and her functions. It is

these elements that form the web of relations which constitute the contract that Fely has in mind. This is also the reason why Fely keeps on reminding herself that she needs to work hard to give back the trust that was given to her by the people who put her into office. A sense of continuum has to be established, which starts with the people's trust or vote of confidence to the seat or government post, work ethics, and the proper delivery of projects for the people. Unless this continuum or link is upheld, it may be difficult to regain the people's trust.

As a critique of pervasive habits, Fely's account brings to mind the contrast before, during, and after elections. Although politicians will be so endearing to the people during the election period, the situation after is usually different. Is there a way to get back at politicians who do not keep their promises? Or, is there a way to remind or confront politicians that words or promises will never suffice? These are questions that we also talked about, wondering if there will ever be an end to the cycle of mistrust. The people in the locality usually know if a politician delivered his or her promises, or at least, the politician tried his or her hardest to bring about change and development. These are realities and memories that keep on hounding people's minds every time election time begins. People also wonder if politicians will also get tired of their tricks. These are some concerns discussed, noting what Fely said on how difficult it is to truly keep the trust of the people, and how it has become a habit in the realm of politics to shortchange peoples' trust and expectations easily.

Hoping to create a legacy in the town that she is serving, Fely quipped these lines: "My time has passed; and now is your turn. Please make sure to accomplish more than what I have done and pursue those that I have not accomplished." Her advice to future women leaders is to face their fears that prevent them from serving the public. Noting the scant number of women politicians in the province, Fely is hoping that she can also become a mentor to these upcoming young women who may be interested in serving the government as politicians. Upon reflection, the idea of becoming a mentor is enabled by this group of women politicians that Fely gives her loyalty to. This group is composed of Representative Bag-ao, Mayor Nena, and Sangguniang Panlungsod Board Member Ann. This small group of women politicians in the province work and help each other in bringing change

and development via their respective responsibilities. Also, in the time we spent with them, we observed that they are open to receiving each other's feedback and suggestions. With this support system, Fely is looking forward to the time that their group will include emerging women politicians in the province of Dinagat Islands, and "become the front liners in governance."

In eyeing this new blood of women politicians, Fely is also hoping that they will have a strong sense of volunteerism. This is a trait which Fely has always considered as the pillar of good governance. Also, it will remind future women politicians from the dangers of feeling or thinking that he or she is entitled to the post. Through Fely's account and disposition, we realized this insight: when one feels or thinks that he or she is entitled to the position, public service becomes secondary. It is this sense of entitlement among men in government positions that explains why the majority of political candidates are men, and few women run for political posts. Going back to Fely's perspective, a woman politician can be at their best when they follow the right path. This, for Fely, is the only way for women to become truly empowered.

When talking about one's style of governance, Fely had this statement to say: "It is good if your partners are teachers. They are professionals, they do not have any political interests, and they are experts when it comes to development." This collaborative strategy was also instanced in a workshop with teachers, which we witnessed in a municipal hall where we were about to see Fely. To better make sense of this notion of working with the teachers, Fely shared this story about a *Lumad* leader (somebody who is born in Dinagat but who is not a member of the PBMA) who only knew how to read and write his name and was appointed chairperson in his community. Aware of his limitations, he asked the assistance of the teachers in his community. In turn, the teachers helped him understand the various letters he received and filed them accordingly. Together, as suggested by the teachers, they did budget planning. The *Lumad* leader followed their advice, including the presentation of the budget to the community during Parent-Teachers' Association (PTA) gatherings where the financial status and usage of community funds are also reported. For Fely, the collaborative practice meant transparency and assured the participation of the people in the community. It is this story that keeps Fely grounded and open to the idea of collaboration. For her, the story is a reminder that we need to seek help from

people who are skilled and who value the good of the community. The teachers, for Fely, is a good example of such people in the community.

Her close alliance with teachers is also one reason why Fely thinks that development can only happen through education. “Graduation is development in itself.” Fely believes that if one member of the family can graduate, it will serve as the family’s ticket out of poverty. In Fely’s words, “*Kung matabangan nako ang mga anak, natabangan pud nako ang ila pamilya*” (If I helped the children, I also helped their parents and families). This has been her philosophy ever since she started working as Barangay Captain. Fely recalled how she would often visit the local schools in their place as Barangay Captain, checking if there are concerns where she can be of help. Knowing the profile of education of her constituents, Fely imagines and dreams that someday, each household in her municipality will have one college degree holder. How will the government be of assistance to such a possibility? For now, Fely and the group of women that she is working with are eyeing for other sources of funds for scholarships, especially after the Presidential Disbursement Acceleration Funds (PDAF) was rendered illegal by the government. As their scholarship grants were charged against such funds, they had to look for other fund sources so those students who already started studying can continue. The stress caused by the lifting of the PDAF was evident in Fely’s expression. This is where the collaborative spirit also comes in. Such changes in fund source is an experience that taught Fely to do her best and give access to opportunities to the people. As an insight, Fely’s narrative also means that although some resources may fall short of its potential, it is the strong sense of volunteerism that should bridge and complete a politician’s tasks.

Some Discursive Notes

The narrative of Vice Mayor Fely and its post-structural analysis bring to mind the challenges of women’s political participation in the country. This reminds us, for instance, of Tancangco’s (1990) observation that between men and women, the posts occupied by the latter have always remained marginal. Although certain increases in the number of women politicians were recorded as reported by Arguillas (2013), the increase from 11.5% to 28% in the last 25 years, the welcomed growth is clouded by the presence

of the benchwarmer phenomenon. To such point, Sobritchea (personal communication, May 23, 2015), however, is quick to see the more difficult expectations placed on the shoulders of women politicians. Is the benchwarmer phenomenon used to challenge the entry points of men in politics? To date, such a category is confined to women politicians; hence, Sobritchea’s (2015) critique remains on-point.

Given such challenges, the narrative of Vice Mayor Fely brings a story of hope. It speaks of a vantage point that continues to struggle but is brave enough to cultivate change in the way politics in the country shapes itself. To take better note of the contributions of Fely’s story to women’s political participation, the ensuing section presents and discusses Fely’s “subject positions” (Bacchi & Binham, 2016), which can shed light to select and specific practices in a brand of politics that is traditional and male-dominated:

(a) As a community volunteer, Fely’s background prepared her to eventually demonstrate Agarwal’s (2001) interactive or empowering participation in the realm of politics. As a volunteer in a social action center, Fely already exercised early-on her voice and contributed to making a positive influence on the community. This sense of volunteerism is something that Fely valued as a person, which logically makes it possible for her to extend it to others. Building on the adage that “one cannot give what one does not have,” Fely showed in her term as a politician that it is her experience with and high regard for volunteerism, which helped form a substantive part of her standard of an ideal and dignified politician. Thus, Fely’s narrative also somehow argues that Agarwal’s (2001) interactive or empowering participation will not make sense in the absence of the spirit of volunteerism. Conversely, the absence of such spirit or commitment may mean that political participation can easily regress into nominal or passive forms of political participation (Agarwal, 2001). Using Fely’s life story as inspiration, it can also be suggested that it is the lack of heart for the people which disposes politicians to feel entitled to “own” or assert ascendancy over government positions.

As a political discourse, Fely’s narrative also underlines the role and influence of communities, centers, or institutions that cultivate volunteerism. Owing to such centers, it is in such locations where the seeds of political awareness and participation initially take form. This perhaps is an insight that Fely’s experience can suggest to the path or route, which

Lamprianou (2013) underscored so women can make their presence felt in political activities. If Hague and Harrop (1987) talked about the formal intent of women to influence the landscape of governance, volunteering might be regarded as an informal, yet substantive, intent to prepare or ready one's self for public service in politics.

(b) As a woman politician, Fely may qualify in two of Pitkin's (1967, as cited in Kurebwa, 2015) typology of women's political representation—descriptive and substantive representation. By descriptive, this pertains to Fely's participation in the group of women politicians (Pitkin, 1967, as cited in Childs & Lovenduski, 2013), which can be captured in abstract representations such as numbers or statistics. By substantive, this is where Fely's strong advocacy against patronage politics comes in as she advances the implementation or advancement of policy preferences and interests (Pitkin, 1967, as cited in Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). Given her transition from a local church volunteer to a Barangay Captain and a Vice Mayor, such a pathway speaks of her contribution to ensuring that some posts in the government are occupied by women. This is an affirmation of the "theory of the politics of presence" (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010), which holds that women are in the best position to also advocate for women's interests and issues. Noting how Fely looks forward to mentoring up and coming young women leaders, it can be taken to mean as reflective of an aspiration that her presence as a woman politician in the municipality will motivate more women to vie for political posts.

As Fely's disdain for so-called "white elephant projects" can be interpreted as an appeal against inefficient government plans and projects, such point also means that projects implemented within her term should stand as counterarguments. This is a point that can be connected to the stance of Representative Bagao, who symbolically inspires the group of women politicians in the province. By having strong and like-minded women politicians, Fely's story reinforces an effective antidote to a common constraint to women's participation in politics—a combination of ideological and socio-cultural baggage (Shvedova, 2005) in a male-centric political culture.

(c) As a woman politician who seeks to contribute changes in the municipality and province, Fely's narrative centers on an important objective: reviving the close and productive relationship amongst the family, community, and state as social-political

institutions. This is an insight that unfolds from Fely's critique of the seeming disjunction in the interests of the state as poverty issues derail the development of communities and families. This is in keeping with her humble beginnings, the critical values that her family and friends in the social action center espouse, and the stress on a participatory approach to governance. Hence, Fely's story underscores the need to connect and tighten the dots amongst the three institutions. Taking inspiration from Lovenduski (2000, as cited in Blomgren, 2010), the standpoint of Vice Mayor Fely may be considered as part of the difference argument. Quoting Childs and Lovenduski (2013), such a stance holds "that women will bring different style and approach to politics than men and that women are a heterogeneous group who require equal descriptive representation if their diversity is to be reflected in decision-making" (p. 49–494). The difference argument, taking cue from Fely's story, point to the following: (1) her life story as a local church volunteer who turned into public servant, (2) the context of her inclusion process in the realm of politics starting as Barangay Captain and becoming a Vice Mayor of a municipality, and (3) her ideals of a dignified political identity. These transitions may be taken to mean as suggestive of a path which politicians can also traverse: starting one's political participation as a volunteer, entering politics in the barangay level prior to municipality levels, and actively creating or crafting a unique and participatory-sensitive political identity.

Conclusion

In this study, the post-structural analytic presentation of Vice Mayor Fely's narrative showcased a microcosm of the experience of women's political representation in the country. Starting with her humble beginnings, her account is reflective of the peripheral space of women in relation to seats of power and influence. Her unique entry point also stands for the variety of ways, paths for future women leaders in contrast to the more homogenous routes of women and men who belong to traditional political families. Coupled with a sense of hesitation in running for office, this type of discomfort is something which keeps Fely, and other women politicians, from the trappings of feeling entitled to government positions.

In this paper, Fely's narrative successfully demonstrates a post-structuralist position because

her story puts into question pervasive and familiar habits in the traditional political landscape. Moreover, the story of Fely gleaned from the post-structuralist approach is capable of raising the question: will Vice Mayor Fely eventually decide not to vie for a political position so other women leaders will have their chance to serve, and in the process create identities in the field of politics? To such question, Fely, together with other progressive women politicians in the province of the Dinagat Islands and the country, are challenged to create opportunities to re-think and re-shape the meaning of participatory and women-inclusive politics.

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Declaration of ownership

This report is our original work.

Conflict of interest

None.

Ethical clearance:

This study was approved by the institution.

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