



# Women in Bureaucratic Leadership Amid Political Polarization in the Philippines: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of women's bureaucratic leadership amid political polarization in the Philippines through a systematic literature review of recent global and local research. Findings show that while women's representation in bureaucratic leadership has increased, it remains concentrated in traditionally feminized sectors such as health, education, and welfare, with limited access to high-prestige and resource-rich agencies. Organizational mechanisms constrain women's substantive authority, and political polarization intensifies challenges by politicizing appointments and exposing women to gendered disinformation and legitimacy crises. Public perceptions reinforce stereotypes that limit women's leadership credibility, while crisis governance offers both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Significant research gaps persist in the Philippine context. Most studies focus on descriptive representation without analyzing how leadership translates to substantive policy influence. Political polarization's impact on women's bureaucratic roles remains underexplored, particularly its effects on appointments, perceptions, and influence opportunities. Intersectionality regarding region, ethnicity, and class and the temporal shifts in polarization during election cycles and crises also lack thorough investigation. Addressing these gaps is essential for understanding how women leaders navigate bureaucratic authority amid political and institutional turbulence. This review calls for future empirical studies incorporating primary data and intersectional, longitudinal analyses to deepen insights into women's leadership experiences and institutional impact during polarized governance. Such research is critical for advancing gender-inclusive reforms that expand substantive authority and safeguard women leaders in the Philippine bureaucracy.

**Keywords:** bureaucratic leadership, political polarization, Philippines bureaucracy, descriptive vs. substantive representation, intersectionality, gendered disinformation, public perceptions



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## INTRODUCTION

Political polarization has increasingly shaped democratic institutions across the globe, including in Southeast Asia, where the Philippines provides a particularly compelling case. The country's bureaucratic institutions operate under conditions of intense political contestation, driven by long-standing partisan divides, populist leadership, and dynastic politics (Teahanke & Rivera, 2022a). In this context, questions of gender representation in bureaucratic leadership take on renewed importance. Women's presence in top administrative roles is not only a matter of equity but also a determinant of bureaucratic legitimacy, responsiveness, and resilience amid polarized politics. As state institutions continue to mediate between rival partisan agendas, the

leadership identities of bureaucrats—particularly women—are politicized in ways that shape both their effectiveness and public perception.

Despite the growing visibility of women in the Philippine bureaucracy, with many occupying prominent leadership roles frequently covered in mainstream media and social platforms, significant challenges remain beneath this surface. Women are notably represented in traditionally feminized sectors such as health, education, and social welfare, yet their presence in high-prestige, resource-intensive, and security-related agencies remains limited. While women leaders often capture public attention and are lauded for their contributions, their substantive authority within bureaucratic structures is frequently constrained by

organizational dynamics and cultural gender norms.

Moreover, the Philippine bureaucratic landscape is heavily influenced by political polarization, which politicizes appointments and intensifies scrutiny of women leaders' legitimacy, exposing them to gendered disinformation, online harassment, and heightened pressure to perform. This politicized environment complicates women's leadership experience, often placing them under double burdens of proving competency and political neutrality.

The central research gap lies in the disconnect between women's visible presence and their actual influence within politically charged bureaucracies. While descriptive representation is better documented, fewer studies have systematically investigated how political polarization shapes the authority, policy impact, and resilience of women leaders. Additionally, intersectional aspects such as ethnicity, region, and class and the temporal dynamics of polarization during election cycles and crises are underexplored. This study addresses these gaps, aiming to deepen the understanding of women's bureaucratic leadership beyond visibility to substantive influence amid political turbulence.

**Background.** Scholars and practitioners increasingly recognize that women's leadership in bureaucracies carries both symbolic and instrumental significance. Symbolically, it signals inclusivity and strengthens perceptions of fairness, which can enhance the legitimacy of public institutions. Instrumentally, it has been associated with substantive outcomes in policy domains where women's perspectives may broaden institutional priorities. For example, Potter and Volden (2021) documented a "female policy premium" in the U.S. federal bureaucracy, showing that women leaders were more likely to advance equity-oriented policies under certain agency conditions. Similarly, Heinzl, Weaver and Jorgensen (2025a) found that in the World Bank, gender-mainstreaming initiatives were more likely to succeed when women held supervisory roles and were represented on

project teams. These findings suggest that descriptive representation in bureaucracies can translate into substantive outcomes, though the relationship is mediated by organizational structures and political context.

In the Philippines, these dynamics manifest in distinctive ways. The country's bureaucracy is highly professionalized in some sectors, such as education, health, and social welfare, where women are well represented in leadership. Yet women remain underrepresented in senior positions within "hard" agencies such as finance, infrastructure, and national defense (Philippine Commission on Women, 2023). This uneven distribution reflects broader societal gender norms and occupational segregation, but it also underscores how institutional cultures shape the opportunities available to women leaders. During times of political polarization, these differences are amplified, as agencies associated with partisan agendas become arenas of heightened contestation.

Political polarization itself compounds the challenges of women's leadership. Research on pragmatic bias in political leadership demonstrates that even when citizens support gender equality, they may hesitate to back women leaders if they doubt their perceived viability (Corbett, Voelkel, Cooper & Willer, 2022a). In bureaucratic contexts, this translates into risk-averse appointment practices, where political elites may prefer male candidates who fit conventional molds of authority. In the Philippines, where bureaucratic appointments are often intertwined with political patronage and dynastic networks, polarization intensifies the salience of gender, making women leaders more vulnerable to criticism and less secure in their roles.

Furthermore, polarization affects the autonomy and legitimacy of bureaucracies. In the Philippines, executive dominance has historically politicized the civil service, with leaders using appointments to consolidate influence (Teehankee & Rivera, 2022a). During highly polarized periods, such as the Duterte and Marcos Jr. administrations, bureaucratic leaders are evaluated not only for technical

competence but also for perceived political alignment. For women leaders, this double burden—proving both competence and neutrality in polarized climates—creates heightened vulnerability. Global evidence shows similar patterns: women leaders are more likely to be scrutinized for partisanship or competence under polarized conditions (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025).

Despite such challenges, women's leadership can also offer strategic advantages in polarized settings. Diverse leadership teams are associated with greater adaptability and innovative problem-solving, attributes especially valuable when institutions are under partisan pressure. In the Philippines, women leaders in agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development and the Commission on Human Rights have often positioned themselves as consensus-builders, leveraging perceptions of inclusivity to navigate contentious issues. These examples suggest that polarization not only constrains women's leadership; it can also create opportunities for them to frame their leadership as technocratic or bridge-building.

However, empirical research in the Philippines on these dynamics remains limited. Most gender scholarship has focused on legislative representation or electoral politics, with less attention to bureaucratic leadership. While descriptive statistics document women's representation in the civil service, fewer studies examine how polarization shapes their leadership roles, authority, or policy influence. The Philippine case thus provides fertile ground for bridging global debates on women's bureaucratic leadership and political polarization.

**Research Gap.** Although progress has been made in documenting women's participation in bureaucratic leadership, several research gaps persist in the Philippine context. First, most studies emphasize descriptive representation—tracking how many women occupy senior posts—without adequately exploring the mechanisms through which leadership translates into substantive policy influence.

While international research underscores the importance of agency context and supervisory authority (Heinzel et al., 2025a; Potter & Volden, 2021), Philippine scholarship has yet to systematically analyze how institutional design, organizational culture, and political pressures mediate women leaders' effectiveness.

Second, political polarization has not been sufficiently integrated into studies of women's bureaucratic leadership in the Philippines. While research on Philippine politics has documented the rise of populism, dynastic control, and partisan divides (Teahankee & Rivera, 2022b), few works explicitly connect these dynamics to gendered leadership experiences in bureaucracies. This gap leaves unanswered questions: How does polarization affect appointment practices in the Philippine civil service? How does it shape public and elite perceptions of women leaders? Does it constrain or expand women's opportunities for policy influence?

Third, intersectionality remains underexplored. The Philippine bureaucracy is diverse, yet scholarship rarely investigates how factors such as region, ethnicity, or class intersect with gender in shaping bureaucratic leadership trajectories. Given the salience of regional identities and ethnic divides in Philippine politics, neglecting intersectionality risks oversimplifying women's experiences in bureaucratic institutions.

Fourth, the temporal effects of polarization have yet to be fully examined. Philippine politics is highly dynamic, with polarization intensifying during election cycles and periods of crisis. Women leaders' opportunities and constraints may shift across these cycles, yet few studies trace these dynamics over time. Understanding these temporal patterns is essential for capturing the full scope of how polarization interacts with gender in bureaucratic leadership.

**Research Objectives.** Based on these gaps, this literature review has three main objectives. First, it synthesizes recent empirical and theoretical scholarships on women in

bureaucratic leadership, situating the Philippine case within global debates while highlighting its unique features. Second, it integrates insights from research on political polarization to assess how partisan conflict reshapes the opportunities, constraints, and perceptions of women leaders in Philippine bureaucracies. Third, it identifies conceptual and methodological directions for future research, emphasizing the importance of intersectionality, temporal analysis, and comparative approaches.

By addressing these objectives, the review contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of women's bureaucratic leadership amid political polarization in the Philippines. It highlights not only the equity dimensions of representation but also the institutional and democratic stakes of ensuring inclusive and resilient bureaucracies in times of partisan division.

## LITERATURES

**Women's Representation in Bureaucratic Leadership.** Research on women's representation in bureaucratic leadership highlights important progress but also reveals enduring disparities. At the global level, the share of women in public administration has risen, yet women continue to be concentrated in sectors historically associated with caregiving and social welfare, while they remain marginalized in high-prestige portfolios such as finance, defense, and infrastructure (Lara & Baird, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2023). These patterns suggest that descriptive representation has not translated into structural equality across all domains of governance. The Philippine case reflects this unevenness. Data from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (2024) reveal that although women hold Cabinet positions, their appointments are often confined to ministries tied to health, tourism, or social welfare, while economic and security posts remain dominated by men. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2025) similarly reports that women constitute only about 24% of elected officials, demonstrating how the gender gap extends

across both political and bureaucratic leadership. Micro-level studies provide additional insight into these dynamics. Lubguban (2022), in her study of women executives in Siquijor, found that women often ascended to leadership through strong family and community networks, yet their authority was constrained by limited political capital relative to their male counterparts. Meanwhile, Tugonon and Adlawan (2022) documented near gender parity in academic leadership across State Universities and Colleges in Region VIII, but also revealed functional disparities: men disproportionately occupied research and administrative roles, while women were overrepresented in academic teaching leadership. This "role segregation" is echoed in private higher education, where women leaders in Cavite were shown to possess strong leadership attributes but faced organizational structures that curtailed their influence over governance and resources (Manalo, 2024). These findings confirm that while descriptive representation is improving, women's authority remains conditional and uneven, raising questions about the depth of gender inclusivity in bureaucratic institutions.

**From Descriptive to Substantive Leadership Effects.** Beyond numbers, scholars have asked whether women's presence in bureaucratic leadership results in distinct policy outcomes. Potter and Volden (2021) describe a "female policy premium" in the United States, showing that agencies led by women leaders were more likely to produce equity-oriented outcomes, though effects varied by agency context. Similarly, Heinzl, Weaver, and Jorgensen (2025b) argue that the influence of women in international organizations is greatest when they hold supervisory authority, enabling them to shape staffing and decision-making structures. These studies emphasize that leadership effects are not uniform but conditional, depending on the institutional environment in which women operate.

In the Philippines, scholarship has also moved beyond representation to examine substantive leadership. Tugonon and Adlawan's (2022) study of SUCs in Region VIII illustrates that gender

parity in numbers does not guarantee equal influence: men concentrated in strategic administrative functions were able to exert greater institutional control, while women leaders remained clustered in teaching-related leadership. Similarly, research on women leaders in Cavite private higher education institutions (IJRISS, 2024) found that although women reported strong competencies in collaboration and transformational leadership, institutional cultures and gendered expectations constrained their ability to translate these qualities into organizational decision-making power. Lubguban's (2022) work likewise shows that women executives in local government units often lacked control over budget allocation, which is crucial for shaping policy outcomes. These findings suggest that substantive authority—rather than descriptive presence alone—determines the capacity of women leaders to enact change. The Philippine experience demonstrates that while representation has improved, substantive impact remains contingent upon the type of roles women occupy and the degree of organizational autonomy granted to them.

**Political Polarization and Bureaucratic Leadership.** Political polarization is increasingly recognized as a force that shapes bureaucratic governance, often amplifying gendered barriers to leadership. Globally, polarization has been linked to declining bureaucratic legitimacy and heightened scrutiny of leaders, with women facing disproportionate questioning of their competence (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025; Corbett, Voelkel, Cooper & Willer, 2022b). In contexts where partisan conflict is intense, bureaucratic leaders are evaluated not only for administrative performance but also for perceived political loyalty.

In the Philippines, polarization is deeply intertwined with populism and dynastic politics. Teehankee and Rivera (2022b) argue that populist leadership styles have intensified partisan divides, producing an environment where bureaucratic appointments are heavily politicized. The Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI, 2024) similarly reports that bureaucratic stability has been

undermined by political rifts, leaving leaders vulnerable to rapid turnover. This dynamic was vividly illustrated by the 2024 resignation of Vice President Sara Duterte from her Cabinet posts amid tensions with President Marcos Jr., highlighting how partisan divisions can destabilize leadership regardless of technical competence (Associated Press, 2024). Women leaders in particular face additional risks under such conditions. Policy briefs by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (2023) and the Senate Electoral and Political Office (2024) stress that women are more exposed to online harassment, gendered disinformation, and hostile political environments, which further disincentivize women from pursuing or sustaining bureaucratic leadership roles.

The convergence of polarization and gender thus presents a dual challenge in the Philippine bureaucracy. On the one hand, polarization heightens the precarity of leadership appointments; on the other hand, it amplifies societal biases against women leaders, framing them not only as bureaucrats but also as partisan actors or symbolic figures in political battles. This intersection underscores the need to analyze how political conflict and gender interact to shape the authority and tenure of bureaucratic leaders in polarized contexts.

**Organizational Mechanisms and Constraints.** The organizational context within which women lead plays a crucial role in shaping their opportunities for influence. Heinzl et al. (2025b) highlight that in international bureaucracies, women leaders' capacity to promote gender-sensitive agendas depends significantly on whether they hold supervisory roles that allow them to influence team composition and organizational processes. Similarly, Potter and Volden (2021) underscore that the impact of women leaders is mediated by agency-specific rules and structures.

In the Philippines, organizational dynamics are equally decisive. The country's bureaucracy operates under a dual structure of career civil service and political appointments. Career service officials often rise through merit-based



promotion, while presidential appointees are subject to the dynamics of political patronage. As the PIDS (2024) reports, this arrangement creates distinct pathways for women leaders, with appointees particularly vulnerable to political turnover during polarized administrations. Lubguban (2022) found that women leaders in provincial government relied heavily on personal and family networks, which could both enable access to leadership roles and restrict their autonomy once in office. Intersectionality adds further complexity: factors such as socioeconomic status, regional affiliation, and ethnicity intersect with gender to shape opportunities for advancement, though Philippine scholarship has yet to fully explore these dimensions.

These findings reinforce the idea that organizational mechanisms are not gender-neutral. Instead, they interact with cultural norms and political pressures to structure the leadership trajectories of women in bureaucracy. In the Philippine case, navigating organizational cultures shaped by patronage and hierarchy often determines whether women leaders can convert their representation into substantive influence.

#### **Public Perceptions and Media Representations.**

Public perceptions and media portrayals also shape the leadership experiences of women in bureaucracies. International research indicates that women leaders continue to face “pragmatic bias,” where voters and stakeholders endorse gender equality in principle but question women’s viability as effective leaders (Corbett et al., 2022a). This bias often manifests in heightened scrutiny of competence and authority, particularly in policy domains traditionally coded as masculine.

In the Philippine context, these biases are reinforced by polarized political and media environments. Women leaders are frequently portrayed through gendered lenses, such as moral guardians, compassionate technocrats, or symbols of inclusivity, but are simultaneously subjected to skepticism about their ability to manage economic or security-related portfolios. The Senate Electoral and Political

Office (2024) has documented how women leaders experience hostile online environments, including harassment and disinformation campaigns, which weaken their public legitimacy. Similarly, UP CIDS (2023) emphasizes that cultural norms and gendered narratives reinforce stereotypes that limit women’s credibility in leadership. These dynamics are not merely symbolic; they shape bureaucratic authority by influencing public trust and political support for women leaders. The interaction of media framing, public perception, and polarization thus contributes to a climate where women leaders must constantly negotiate their authority. In the Philippine bureaucracy, where legitimacy is crucial for navigating politicized institutions, such perceptions significantly impact women’s ability to sustain influence and enact policy agendas.

#### **Crisis Leadership and Opportunities for Visibility.**

Crisis provide both opportunities and challenges for women’s bureaucratic leadership. Global research suggests that during crises, qualities often associated with women’s leadership—collaboration, inclusivity, and responsiveness—become particularly valued, providing women leaders with greater visibility and legitimacy (Barnes & O’Brien, 2025). However, crises can also intensify scrutiny and politicization, exposing women to higher risks of criticism and dismissal.

In the Philippines, the COVID-19 pandemic and frequent natural disasters have highlighted these dynamics. Women leaders in health and social welfare agencies played highly visible roles during the pandemic response, gaining recognition for their expertise and responsiveness. However, these same crises also placed women leaders under greater political pressure, with polarized debates over health protocols and relief distribution sometimes framing them as partisan actors rather than neutral administrators. The BTI (2024) report notes that crises in the Philippines often exacerbate political conflict, increasing the precarity of bureaucratic appointments. This duality was evident in disaster management agencies, where women leaders were praised

for their crisis-handling capacities but also faced resource constraints and politicized evaluations of their performance.

Thus, while crises can serve as entry points for women's bureaucratic leadership, they simultaneously highlight the fragility of women's authority in polarized contexts. For Philippine institutions, this underscores the importance of designing structures that protect bureaucratic autonomy and reduce the vulnerability of women leaders during times of political and social upheaval.

**Synthesis of Related Studies.** The reviewed literature illustrates that women's presence in bureaucratic leadership has increased globally and in the Philippines, but representation remains uneven across sectors and levels of authority. Studies consistently show that women leaders are more visible in social welfare, health, and education agencies, while their representation in finance, defense, and infrastructure lags behind (Lara & Baird, 2025; PIDS, 2024; PSA, 2025). Philippine-specific research echoes these patterns, highlighting role segregation and functional disparities that limit women's access to high-prestige or resource-controlling positions (Tugonon & Adlawan, 2022; IJRIS, 2024). Representation alone, therefore, does not guarantee equal influence, as substantive authority remains concentrated among male counterparts.

A second theme that emerges is the conditional nature of women's leadership effects. Evidence suggests that women in bureaucratic leadership can advance equity-oriented outcomes, particularly when they hold supervisory or resource-controlling positions (Potter & Volden, 2021; Heinzl et al., 2025a). Philippine findings similarly point to structural constraints that prevent women leaders from fully exercising authority, such as their confinement to teaching-related leadership in higher education or their reliance on community networks in provincial governance (Lubguban, 2022; Tugonon & Adlawan, 2022). These studies emphasize that meaningful impact is tied not to representation per se, but to the degree of

institutional autonomy and authority that women leaders are afforded.

The role of political polarization also emerges as a critical factor shaping women's bureaucratic leadership. In polarized contexts, bureaucratic appointments become politicized, legitimacy is undermined, and women are more vulnerable to harassment and partisan attacks (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025; Corbett et al., 2022b; UP CIDS, 2023; Senate SEPO, 2024). Philippine scholarship highlights how populist leadership styles intensify these dynamics, with women leaders facing heightened scrutiny and instability in politically charged environments (Teahanke & Rivera, 2022a; BTI, 2024). This suggests that polarization compounds existing gender inequalities, making women's leadership more precarious than that of their male counterparts.

Further, organizational structures play a decisive role in shaping women's leadership experiences. Comparative studies point to the significance of supervisory authority, mentorship, and institutional culture in enabling or constraining women leaders (Potter & Volden, 2021; Heinzl et al., 2025b). Philippine studies highlight the dual-track nature of bureaucratic appointments, where career officials rise through merit while appointees face the risks of patronage politics (PIDS, 2024). For women leaders, this arrangement often means limited stability, especially in politically volatile environments. Intersectional factors such as class, ethnicity, and region remain underexplored in the Philippine context, indicating a gap in the literature.

Finally, the role of crises underscores the paradoxical position of women leaders. Emergencies such as pandemics and natural disasters create openings for women to gain visibility and recognition for inclusive and responsive leadership (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025). In the Philippines, women leaders were highly visible during the COVID-19 response and disaster management, but crises also amplified partisan attacks and resource constraints (BTI, 2024). This duality reflects the precariousness of women's bureaucratic authority under

conditions of heightened political and social stress.

Taken together, the reviewed studies reveal three important insights. First, representation is improving but remains stratified across sectors and functions. Second, substantive influence depends less on numbers and more on authority, autonomy, and institutional context. Third, political polarization and crises intensify the precarity of women's bureaucratic leadership, making their legitimacy more contested and unstable. Despite a growing body of scholarship, significant gaps remain—particularly in the Philippine context—regarding intersectionality, longitudinal analysis of women's bureaucratic careers, and the mechanisms by which polarization specifically shapes women's leadership trajectories. These gaps underscore the need for further inquiry into how women navigate leadership amid political and institutional turbulence in the Philippines.

**Conceptual Framework.** The conceptual framework guiding this study is anchored in the intersection of gender representation, organizational structures, and political polarization within the Philippine bureaucracy. It assumes that women's bureaucratic leadership cannot be fully understood through descriptive representation alone; rather, their effectiveness and stability as leaders are contingent upon the authority they hold, the organizational context they navigate, and the broader political environment in which they operate.

At its foundation, the framework distinguishes between descriptive representation (numerical presence of women in bureaucratic posts) and substantive leadership (the actual influence and decision-making power women exercise). Existing literature emphasizes that while women's representation has increased in various bureaucracies worldwide and in the Philippines, their positions are often concentrated in traditionally feminized sectors such as health, education, and welfare (Lara & Baird, 2025; PSA, 2025). This clustering reflects structural barriers that prevent women from

accessing high-prestige, resource-rich, or security-related posts. The framework, therefore, situates representation as necessary but insufficient for achieving substantive leadership.

The second component highlights organizational mechanisms and constraints. Factors such as supervisory authority, access to resources, organizational culture, and pathways to leadership (e.g., career service vs. political appointments) shape the capacity of women leaders to translate representation into meaningful influence (Potter & Volden, 2021; Heinzel et al., 2025b). Philippine studies demonstrate that women leaders often rely on personal networks and community legitimacy (Lubguban, 2022), but such reliance may simultaneously limit autonomy and reinforce dependence on existing patronage systems. These organizational dynamics underscore the importance of institutional design in determining the depth of women's bureaucratic influence.

The third dimension incorporates political polarization as a contextual force. In polarized environments, bureaucratic leadership becomes highly politicized, legitimacy is contested, and leaders are subject to heightened scrutiny (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025; Teehankee & Rivera, 2022a). Women, in particular, face additional vulnerabilities, including online harassment, gendered disinformation, and partisan narratives that undermine their credibility (UP CIDS, 2023; Senate SEPO, 2024). The framework positions polarization not only as a backdrop but as an active force that interacts with gender and organizational dynamics, amplifying existing inequalities and destabilizing women's leadership trajectories.

Finally, the framework accounts for crisis governance as a conditional factor. Crises such as pandemics and natural disasters can elevate women leaders by spotlighting inclusive and responsive leadership styles (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025). However, they also magnify political conflict and resource scarcity, which can expose women leaders to intensified blame and



precarity (BTI, 2024). Thus, crises act as double-edged contexts that simultaneously provide opportunities for visibility and risks of delegitimization.

In sum, the conceptual framework posits that women's bureaucratic leadership amid polarization is shaped by the interaction of four key dimensions: representation, organizational mechanisms, political polarization, and crisis governance. The model assumes that achieving gender-inclusive bureaucracies in the Philippines requires moving beyond headcounts of women in leadership and toward institutional reforms that expand authority, safeguard autonomy, and protect leaders from partisan and gendered vulnerabilities.

## METHODS

**Research Design.** This study employed a systematic literature review design to examine the intersection of women's bureaucratic leadership and political polarization, with a particular focus on the Philippine context. Literature reviews are essential research strategies for mapping, synthesizing, and critically evaluating scholarly contributions to a field, enabling the identification of theoretical trends, empirical gaps, and future research directions (Snyder, 2019). The approach followed here is integrative, combining international and local studies published in peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs, institutional reports, and government publications between 2020 and 2025.

**Sources of Data.** The review covered both international literatures to provide comparative perspectives and Philippine-specific studies to ground the analysis contextually. International works were drawn primarily from journals in public administration, political science, gender studies, and governance (e.g., *Journal of Politics, Governance, Public Administration Review*). Philippine sources included publications from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP-CIDS), and the Senate

Electoral and Political Office (SEPO). This dual-level sourcing ensured that global theoretical insights were contextualized within the dynamics of Philippine bureaucracy and political polarization.

**Search and Selection Strategy.** A systematic search was conducted across multidisciplinary databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Google Scholar for international studies, while Philippine-specific works were retrieved from institutional websites (e.g., PIDS, PSA, UP CIDS) and academic repositories. Keywords included combinations of terms such as “*women in bureaucracy*,” “*bureaucratic leadership*,” “*gender and public administration*,” “*political polarization and governance*,” “*Philippines women leaders*,” and “*gender and political institutions*.”

The inclusion criteria were: (a) studies published between 2020 and 2025; (b) peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, or government/institutional reports; (c) research explicitly addressing women in bureaucratic or political leadership, organizational dynamics, or the effects of polarization on governance; and (d) studies either focused on the Philippines or offering insights applicable to the Philippine context. Exclusion criteria involved works published before 2020, opinion-based essays without empirical grounding, and studies focusing solely on corporate or private-sector leadership.

**Data Analysis.** The analysis employed thematic synthesis, which enables the integration of findings from diverse sources into coherent analytical categories (Thomas & Harden, 2008). First, studies were categorized into thematic clusters aligned with the research objectives: (1) representation of women in bureaucracies, (2) substantive leadership outcomes, (3) organizational mechanisms, (4) political polarization, (5) public perceptions and media representations, and (6) crisis governance. Second, findings within each cluster were compared across international and Philippine studies to identify patterns, complementarities, and divergences. Finally, cross-theme analysis

was conducted to highlight how organizational and political dynamics interact to shape women's bureaucratic leadership amid polarization.

**Rigor and Trustworthiness.** To enhance reliability, the review applied transparent inclusion criteria and systematic search strategies, reducing bias in study selection (Snyder, 2019). Source triangulation was also employed by integrating multiple types of literature (academic journals, institutional reports, and statistical data). Moreover, the thematic synthesis approach ensured that both descriptive patterns and analytical insights were systematically captured, providing a balanced review of the field.

**Ethical Considerations.** This study did not involve human participants, and therefore, issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, or participant risk were not directly applicable. Nevertheless, ethical standards were upheld through intellectual integrity, transparency, and sensitivity in analysis. All sources were properly cited and referenced following APA 7th edition guidelines to avoid plagiarism and ensure respect for intellectual property (Snyder, 2019). Only credible and peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, and institutional reports were included in order to preserve accuracy and reliability, and findings were presented faithfully without distortion or selective interpretation (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Furthermore, given the study's focus on women in bureaucratic leadership amid political polarization, the analysis was framed carefully to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes or partisan bias, thereby ensuring that conclusions contribute constructively to academic discourse and policy development.

**Limitations.** Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the review focused only on works published between 2020 and 2025, which, while ensuring relevance, excluded older foundational studies that might have provided a richer historical perspective on women's bureaucratic participation in the Philippines. Second, there is

a scarcity of Philippine-based studies explicitly linking women's bureaucratic leadership to political polarization. Much of the existing local literature discusses women in politics more broadly or in educational leadership, requiring this study to extrapolate insights from broader governance and gender research (Lubguban, 2022; Tugonon & Adlawan, 2022). Third, because the study relied exclusively on secondary sources, the findings depend entirely on the quality and scope of existing literature. The absence of primary data, such as interviews or surveys, limits the ability to capture firsthand narratives and lived experiences of women in bureaucratic leadership. Fourth, the findings cannot be assumed to be fully generalizable across all sectors of the Philippine bureaucracy since women's representation and challenges vary depending on the agency, with higher concentrations in social service sectors compared to security or finance-related posts. Finally, the dynamic nature of Philippine politics presents another limitation, as the context of polarization is fluid and rapidly evolving. Consequently, the conclusions of this review may shift over time as political climates change, which underscores the need for continued and updated research in this area.

## RESULTS

The review of literature yielded findings that reflect the complex interplay of gender, bureaucracy, and political polarization in both global and Philippine contexts. The results are presented according to thematic areas aligned with the objectives of this study: (1) representation of women in bureaucratic leadership, (2) organizational mechanisms and constraints, (3) political polarization and its impact on leadership, (4) public perception and gendered narratives, and (5) crisis governance as a contextual factor.

**Representation of Women in Bureaucratic Leadership.** Findings indicate that while women's representation in bureaucratic leadership has increased in recent years, their presence remains uneven across sectors and leadership levels. Globally, women are more frequently appointed to positions in social

service agencies such as education, health, and welfare, but remain underrepresented in finance, security, and foreign affairs (Lara & Baird, 2025). This pattern is also observed in the Philippines, where women occupy mid- and upper-level positions in education and health agencies but remain scarce in the Department of Finance, Department of National Defense, and other male-dominated bureaucracies (Philippine Institute for Development Studies [PIDS], 2024; Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2025). This suggests that numerical gains in women's representation have not translated into equal access to the most influential bureaucratic posts, which limits their capacity to shape national-level decision-making.

#### **Organizational Mechanisms and Constraints.**

The analysis further reveals that organizational structures and cultures play a decisive role in shaping the scope of women's influence. Studies show that women leaders often occupy posts with limited supervisory authority or budgetary control, which undermines their ability to exercise substantive leadership (Potter & Volden, 2021). In the Philippine bureaucracy, women leaders frequently rely on informal networks and community legitimacy to strengthen their positions (Lubguban, 2022). While these strategies provide short-term support, they can also entrench dependence on patronage systems, restricting autonomy and long-term leadership stability. Furthermore, gendered organizational cultures persist, reinforcing stereotypes that associate women with "soft" leadership roles and men with authority in technical or security-related agencies (Tugonon & Adlawan, 2022). These findings underscore the structural barriers that limit women's ability to convert descriptive representation into substantive bureaucratic power.

**Political Polarization and Its Impact on Leadership.** The findings also point to political polarization as a significant factor that shapes women's bureaucratic leadership. In polarized environments, leadership roles are highly politicized, with appointments often framed as partisan rather than merit-based (Teahankee & Rivera, 2022b). This exposes women leaders to

increased scrutiny, not only based on their political affiliations but also through gendered narratives that question their legitimacy. International studies confirm that polarization intensifies challenges for women leaders, who are more vulnerable to partisan attacks, disinformation, and efforts to undermine their credibility (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025). Philippine evidence echoes this, showing that women leaders and politicians alike are frequently subjected to online harassment and gender-based attacks that delegitimize their authority (University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies [UP CIDS], 2023; Senate Electoral and Political Office [SEPO], 2024). These dynamics highlight the compounded barriers faced by women leaders operating in politically divided societies.

#### **Public Perception and Gendered Narratives.**

The literature also underscores the role of public perception in shaping the experiences of women in leadership. Studies reveal that women leaders are often expected to embody moral integrity, empathy, and inclusiveness, yet these expectations can create a double bind when they operate in highly politicized environments (Corbett et al., 2022b). Philippine-based analyses further show that while women are often praised for their community-oriented leadership, they are simultaneously criticized as less suited for high-stakes political or security-oriented decision-making (Lubguban, 2022). Media representations reinforce this narrative by amplifying gendered stereotypes, which can erode public confidence in women leaders and reduce their political capital. This indicates that societal expectations, while sometimes supportive, can constrain the scope of women's leadership in bureaucracies under polarization.

#### **Crisis Governance as a Contextual Factor.**

Finally, findings show that crises create both opportunities and risks for women in bureaucratic leadership. International evidence suggests that women leaders are often perceived as more trustworthy, transparent, and effective during crises, particularly in health and social welfare contexts (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025). In the Philippines, the COVID-19

pandemic highlighted the strengths of women leaders in local and regional bureaucracies, particularly in terms of responsiveness and community engagement (PIDS, 2024). However, crises also exacerbate political tensions and resource scarcity, which can lead to heightened scrutiny and politicization of women's leadership roles (BTI, 2024). As such, crises act as double-edged contexts: they enhance visibility and trust but also expose women leaders to intensified risks of delegitimization and blame.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex dynamics surrounding women in bureaucratic leadership amid political polarization. Anchored in the conceptual framework, the results underscore how women's representation, organizational mechanisms, political polarization, public perceptions, and crisis governance interact to shape leadership outcomes. Taken together, these results suggest that while strides have been made toward gender inclusion in the Philippine bureaucracy, systemic and contextual barriers continue to hinder the realization of substantive leadership for women.

One key insight is that representation alone is insufficient for meaningful gender inclusion. Although women are numerically present in Philippine bureaucracies, they remain clustered in agencies traditionally associated with caregiving and social services, such as health and education, while their presence in economic and security agencies is minimal (PSA, 2025; PIDS, 2024). This reflects global trends where women are underrepresented in high-prestige, resource-rich bureaucracies (Lara & Baird, 2025). Such patterns affirm the conceptual framework's argument that descriptive representation must be complemented by substantive authority if gender parity is to be achieved in governance. The results also emphasize the decisive role of organizational mechanisms and constraints. Women leaders in the Philippines often rely on informal networks and community legitimacy (Lubguban, 2022), which reflects both resilience

and vulnerability. While these mechanisms provide access to authority in male-dominated bureaucracies, they simultaneously perpetuate dependence on patronage and hinder autonomy. This supports Potter and Volden's (2021) argument that the organizational positioning of leaders—whether through career-based or politically appointed roles—significantly influences their capacity to exercise authority. For women in the Philippines, bureaucratic pathways remain constrained by both gendered cultures and institutional structures that privilege men's leadership in technical or security domains.

Equally important is the impact of political polarization, which magnifies the precarity of women leaders. In the Philippine context, bureaucratic appointments are often framed as partisan rather than merit-based, making leaders vulnerable to delegitimization (Teehankee & Rivera, 2022a). Women bear a double burden, as they face not only partisan attacks but also gendered disinformation campaigns that undermine their credibility (UP CIDS, 2023; SEPO, 2024). This aligns with Barnes and O'Brien's (2025) observation that polarization amplifies gender-specific vulnerabilities in leadership, turning women into easy targets of political hostility. The framework thus holds: polarization is not merely a backdrop but an active force that interacts with gender and organizational dynamics to undermine leadership stability.

The findings further show that public perception and gendered narratives shape leadership outcomes in subtle yet powerful ways. Women leaders are often expected to be more inclusive, empathetic, and morally upright, which creates a paradox of expectations. While these traits are valued in community-level leadership, they are frequently construed as weaknesses in high-stakes bureaucratic decision-making (Corbett et al., 2022a). In the Philippines, this narrative is reinforced by media portrayals that highlight women's caregiving qualities while overlooking their administrative and strategic capacities (Lubguban, 2022). This cultural framing not only limits women's authority but also conditions the public to view them as

unsuitable for leadership roles in polarized, conflict-prone contexts.

Finally, the role of crisis governance illustrates the double-edged nature of opportunities for women leaders. On one hand, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the visibility of women bureaucrats in health and local governance, where their responsiveness and transparency were highly valued (PIDS, 2024). On the other hand, crises also heightened polarization, with resource shortages and partisan contestations intensifying scrutiny of women leaders' decisions (BTI, 2024). This dynamic supports the conceptual framework's view that crises can simultaneously expand women's leadership legitimacy while exposing them to new vulnerabilities, making crisis contexts both enabling and destabilizing.

In sum, the discussion confirms that women's bureaucratic leadership in the Philippines exists within a layered set of structural, cultural, and political constraints. Representation has increased, but organizational mechanisms, polarized politics, gendered narratives, and crisis pressures continue to restrict women's substantive leadership. These findings reinforce the need for institutional reforms that move beyond numerical representation toward the empowerment of women leaders with real decision-making authority. Moreover, efforts to address polarization and disinformation are essential not only for strengthening democracy but also for safeguarding women's bureaucratic leadership against gendered vulnerabilities.

**Conclusion and Recommendations.** This study set out to examine women's bureaucratic leadership amid political polarization, with a particular focus on the Philippine context. Through a review of global and local literature, the study found that while women's representation in bureaucratic positions has gradually increased, their presence remains concentrated in traditionally feminized agencies such as education, health, and social welfare. This clustering reflects enduring structural barriers that prevent women from accessing high-prestige and resource-rich bureaucratic

posts, thus limiting their capacity for substantive leadership.

The analysis also revealed that organizational mechanisms and cultures play a critical role in shaping women's bureaucratic experiences. Filipino women leaders often rely on informal networks and community legitimacy to navigate male-dominated bureaucracies, but such dependence can reinforce their vulnerability to patronage politics and weaken their institutional autonomy. Furthermore, political polarization amplifies the challenges faced by women in bureaucratic leadership. In polarized environments like the Philippines, bureaucratic roles are politicized, exposing women to heightened scrutiny, gendered disinformation, and legitimacy challenges that undermine their authority.

Public perceptions further complicate women's leadership. While women leaders are often praised for empathy, inclusiveness, and moral authority, these traits can become liabilities in highly competitive or conflict-driven contexts where decisiveness and assertiveness are prized. Crisis governance illustrates this paradox: although crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have elevated the visibility of women leaders, they have also magnified risks of political attacks and delegitimization. Taken together, these findings underscore that descriptive representation alone is insufficient. Achieving substantive gender equality in bureaucratic leadership requires addressing organizational structures, political polarization, and cultural narratives that restrict women's agency.

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations emerge. First, institutional reforms are needed to expand women's access to leadership positions beyond the social service sector. This may include gender-sensitive recruitment, career development, and succession planning policies within the Philippine bureaucracy. Second, mechanisms that strengthen women's substantive authority—such as ensuring equitable distribution of supervisory and budgetary powers—should be prioritized. This would allow



women not only to occupy leadership positions but also to influence decision-making meaningfully.

Third, addressing political polarization is critical. Efforts must be made to insulate bureaucratic appointments from partisan politics and to safeguard women leaders from gendered disinformation and online harassment. This requires both legal frameworks and digital literacy programs to counteract harmful narratives that delegitimize women's authority. Fourth, public awareness campaigns and media engagement strategies should be developed to challenge persistent gender stereotypes, highlight women's leadership competencies, and normalize their presence in high-stakes governance roles. Finally, future research should build on this literature review by incorporating primary data through interviews or surveys with women bureaucratic leaders in the Philippines. Such studies would provide richer, context-specific insights into their lived experiences and strategies for navigating organizational and political challenges.

In conclusion, women's bureaucratic leadership amid political polarization remains an unfinished project in the Philippines. While progress has been made in terms of representation, systemic reforms are necessary to translate these gains into substantive equality. By addressing structural, political, and cultural barriers, the Philippines can move toward a more inclusive bureaucracy that empowers women leaders to play transformative roles in governance, even in the face of polarization and crisis.

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