

A Phenomenological Study of Educators Handling Gender and Society Course in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of educators handling the Gender and Society course in a selected higher education institution in Tacloban City, Leyte, focusing on their classroom experiences, responses to student disclosures, and the ways these experiences shape their professional identity and teaching pedagogies. Anchored on Bell Hooks' Engaged Pedagogy and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, the study employed a transcendental phenomenological design involving semi-structured interviews with college educators and analyzed using Moustakas' thematic procedure. Findings for the lived experiences of educators revealed two major themes: *Navigating the Classroom Atmosphere* and *Negotiating Religious Conviction and Lived Realities in Gender Discourse*, highlighting classroom tension, hesitation, and the intersection of belief systems and lived experiences in gender discussions. For educators' responses to gender-related student disclosures, four themes emerged: *Active Empathy and Emotional Validation*, *Strategic Referral and Ethical Boundaries*, *De-personalizing Dialogue through Structured Neutrality*, and *Bridging the Gap Between Training and Experience*, reflecting educators' ethical decision-making, and reliance on experiential learning. Meanwhile, educators' professional identity and pedagogical development were shaped by the themes *As a Facilitator of Social Change* and *Cultivating Gender-Responsive Pedagogy*, indicating a shift toward inclusive, reflexive, and transformative teaching practices. The study concludes that teaching Gender and Society is not merely instructional work but a transformative experience that reshapes educators' pedagogical approaches, emotional engagement, and professional identities within a culturally and socially complex higher education context.

Keywords: Engaged pedagogy; Gender and Society; higher education institutions; transformative learning theory

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions across the world have increasingly become spaces where issues of identity, equity, and social justice are critically examined. One of the most significant developments in this transformation is the integration of gender-responsive education into the curriculum, particularly through courses such as Gender and Society. Globally, the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) emphasizes the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of marginalized sectors through education. In the Philippines, this mandate is institutionalized through the implementation of Gender and Development (GAD) programs and the inclusion of gender-related subjects in higher education curricula under Commission on Higher Education (CHED) policies. However, despite the growing institutional focus on gender sensitivity and inclusive education, challenges remain evident in classroom implementation. Educators handling Gender and Society courses are often placed in situations where they must navigate controversial discussions, student resistance, emotional disclosures, and conflicts between progressive gender discourse and conservative cultural or religious beliefs. While much attention has been given to student learning outcomes and institutional compliance, limited studies have explored the lived experiences of educators themselves, particularly within localized contexts. This gap highlights the need to examine how educators negotiate the emotional, cultural, and pedagogical demands of teaching Gender and Society in

higher education institutions.

Recent literature highlights that gender education in higher education has evolved from a curriculum-centered initiative into a transformative and socially responsive practice that challenges both educators and students. Globally, universities are increasingly recognized as agents of social change in advancing gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5, which emphasizes inclusive and transformative education (El-Jardali et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2017). In the Philippines, this mandate is institutionalized through Republic Act 9710 and CHED Memorandum Order No. 01, s. 2015, which mainstreamed Gender and Society within the General Education Curriculum. However, studies reveal a persistent gap between institutional compliance and actual classroom implementation, as educators continue to struggle with insufficient training, limited pedagogical resources, and the complexities of facilitating gender-related discussions (Tagaza & Manalansan, 2025; Gericke et al., 2018). Literature further emphasizes that teaching Gender and Society requires transformative pedagogies rooted in Freire's critical pedagogy and Hooks' engaged pedagogy, where educators facilitate critical dialogue, emotional engagement, and reflexive learning rather than passive content delivery (Hooks, 1994; Morell, 2021). Scholars also note that educators handling gender-related subjects frequently navigate controversial discussions, student trauma disclosures, and tensions between progressive gender discourse and conservative cultural or religious beliefs, particularly within the Philippine context (Batalla & Baring, 2019; Cornelio, 2016). These experiences often expose educators to emotional labor, compassion fatigue, and professional uncertainty, requiring them to negotiate the boundaries between academic facilitation and emotional support (Flanagan et al., 2025; Lindecker & Cramer, 2021).

This study was anchored on the theories of Engaged Pedagogy by Bell Hooks and Transformative Learning Theory by Jack Mezirow. Engaged Pedagogy views education as a practice of freedom that values the holistic well-being of both teachers and students and encourages collaborative, reflective, and humanizing classroom experiences (Hooks, 1994). This theory provided a lens for understanding how educators facilitate sensitive discussions on gender, identity, and inequality while creating inclusive learning environments. Meanwhile, Transformative Learning Theory explains how individuals undergo perspective transformation through critical reflection and disorienting dilemmas that challenge their established beliefs and assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). In the context of this study, teaching Gender and Society may serve as a transformative experience for educators themselves as they negotiate conflicts between personal beliefs, professional responsibilities, and evolving gender discourses. Together, these theories guided the analysis of how educators interpret their experiences, reconstruct their professional identities, and adapt their pedagogical approaches in handling gender-related discussions.

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of educators handling the Gender and Society course in a selected higher education institution in Tacloban City, Leyte during the School Year 2025–2026. It specifically examined the lived experiences of educators in facilitating Gender and Society discussions in higher education institutions, their responses to students' gender-related disclosures during class discussions, and how these experiences shape the professional identity and teaching pedagogies of the educators handling the Gender and Society course.

The findings of this study may provide valuable insights to various stakeholders in higher education. For educators, the study may serve as a source of validation and professional reflection by highlighting the emotional and pedagogical realities of teaching Gender and Society. For school administrators and institutional policymakers, the findings may contribute to the development of more responsive faculty training programs, psychosocial support systems, and gender-responsive institutional policies. Students may indirectly benefit from improved classroom environments where discussions on gender issues are facilitated with greater sensitivity, inclusivity, and academic rigor. Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender education in the Philippines by addressing the gap in phenomenological research focused on educators' lived experiences. Future researchers may also utilize the findings as a foundation for further investigations on inclusive pedagogy, teacher identity, and transformative education in higher education.

settings.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study used a transcendental phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of educators handling the Gender and Society course in higher education institutions. This approach was chosen because it aims to describe the essence of participants' experiences while requiring the researcher to practice Epoche or bracketing to minimize bias (Moustakas, 1994). By suspending prior assumptions, the study allowed meanings to emerge from participants' narratives. This design helped identify both the textural and structural aspects of educators' experiences in facilitating gender discussions and managing classroom challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.2. Research Locale

The study was conducted in a selected higher education institution in Tacloban City, Leyte, within the College of Education. Tacloban City was chosen as a regional center of education where gender discourse intersects with traditional cultural and religious values (City Government of Tacloban, 2023; NEDA, 2024). The institution was selected for its implementation of the Gender and Society course under the General Education Curriculum in line with CHED Memorandum No. 01, s. 2015. As a teacher-education institution in Eastern Visayas, it provided an appropriate setting for examining educators' experiences in handling gender-related instruction.

2.3. Research Participants

The participants of this study consisted of college educators who had direct experience teaching the Gender and Society course in the selected university. Using purposive sampling, the study targeted five to ten participants who had handled the course for at least two semesters, ensuring that they possessed sufficient classroom experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The sample size was guided by the recommendations for phenomenological studies, which emphasize depth of experience over numerical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Final participant selection was determined through data saturation, which occurred when no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

2.4. Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions aligned with the study's objectives. To ensure content validity and appropriateness for phenomenological inquiry, the interview guide underwent expert validation by specialists in Social Science, Gender Studies, and qualitative research. The instrument allowed participants to freely narrate their lived experiences while keeping discussions aligned with the research problem (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure the richness and accuracy of the responses, the researcher also used a digital voice recorder and field notes to document non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and contextual observations during the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.5. Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering procedure followed a systematic and ethical process consisting of ethical clearance, participant recruitment, conduct of interviews, and transcription of data. Following approval from the Research Ethics Committee and university administrators, participants were recruited through formal invitation letters and informed consent procedures that emphasized confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were then conducted in private and convenient settings, allowing participants to openly discuss their lived

experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and supplemented with field notes to capture contextual details and non-verbal expressions relevant to phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

2.6. Data Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological procedure. After verbatim transcription, the researcher repeatedly reviewed the data to achieve immersion and maintain bracketing. Significant statements were identified through horizontalization and grouped into invariant themes reflecting shared meanings across participants. These were then developed into textural descriptions (what was experienced) and structural descriptions (how it was experienced within context). Finally, these were synthesized into a composite essence capturing the universal experience of teaching the Gender and Society course.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants under the supervision of the university's Research Ethics Committee. Participants were given informed consent forms explaining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Ethical principles of autonomy, confidentiality, justice, and cultural sensitivity were upheld throughout the research process. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and all data were securely stored in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and psychosocial support was made available in case of emotional distress during interviews, ensuring their protection and well-being.

2.8. Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through member checking, where participants verified transcripts and interpretations (Johnson et al., 2020). Transferability was ensured through thick description of the context and participants' narratives (Enworo, 2023). Dependability was supported by an audit trail of the research process, while confirmability was ensured through reflexivity and grounding of themes in participants' verbatim responses (Nowell et al., 2017).

2.9. Research Reflexivity

To maintain methodological rigor, the researcher practiced continuous reflexivity by bracketing personal assumptions, experiences, and biases related to gender discourse and education. As an educator and insider to the context, a reflexivity journal was used to document reflections, emotional responses, and evolving interpretations (Lemon, 2020). This helped manage subjectivity and ensured that findings remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than the researcher's perspectives (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Saldaña & Omasta, 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings from the lived experiences of educators handling the Gender and Society course in a selected higher education institution in Tacloban City. Guided by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology, the analysis focuses on the essential structures of experience by describing both what was experienced and how it was experienced. Themes are organized according to the research questions, highlighting classroom dynamics, student disclosures, and professional identity formation within a socio-cultural context shaped by both institutional gender mandates and local traditional norms.

Lived Experiences of Educators in Handling Gender and Society Course

Theme 1: Navigating the Classroom Atmosphere

Educators experience classroom environments characterized by tension, hesitation, and cautious participation when handling gender-related discussions, as students navigate topics that are personally and culturally sensitive. This requires educators to balance content delivery with emotional sensitivity and inclusive facilitation strategies that ensure students feel safe and respected while engaging in difficult conversations. This finding aligns with Arao and Clemens' (2013) concept of "Brave Spaces," where discomfort and silence are expected elements of meaningful dialogue. It also reflects Hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which emphasizes emotional awareness and relational care in teaching sensitive issues. Furthermore, it supports Reis and Scott (2021), who highlight the need for structured facilitation in controversial discussions, as well as Culshaw and Bodfield (2026), who suggest that student hesitation may reflect cognitive processing rather than disengagement.

Significant response 1: "The general atmosphere when discussing sensitive topics such as SOGIE, reproductive health, and patriarchy is often initially marked by tension, hesitation, and guarded participation..." (P₄, L₂₁₋₂₂)

Significant response 2: "The class usually find these topics relevant and relatable to discuss... I find hard to address due to it being sensitive in nature." (P₃, L₁₇₋₁₉)

Significant response 3: "It's usually a bit silent at first especially that I know students are really bound to their own perspectives and experiences..." (P₅, L₃₀₋₃₁)

Theme 2: Negotiating Religious Conviction and Lived Realities in Gender Discourse

The findings reveal that Gender and Society classrooms are shaped by tensions between religious beliefs and students' lived experiences. Students often resist discussions on divorce, contraception, and SOGIE because these topics conflict with their faith and family values, creating "fundamental identity clashes" (P₅). At the same time, students share experiences of discrimination, harassment, and gender inequality, such as household double standards and street harassment. These experiences encourage students to critically reflect on issues they once considered normal. This finding aligns with Cornelio (2016), who described Philippine gender education as existing within tensions between progressive curricula and conservative religious values. It also reflects Freirean pedagogy, which emphasizes critical reflection on lived realities (Morell, 2021). Furthermore, Hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy and Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort explain how emotional tension and personal experiences can promote meaningful learning and critical awareness. Together, these findings position the Gender and Society classroom as a space where belief systems and lived realities intersect, requiring educators to balance respect for students' beliefs with critical social engagement.

Significant response 1: "When discussing the legalization of divorce, a few students would resist because their religious upbringing views marriage as sacred bond." (P₂, L₆₂₋₆₃)

Significant response 2: "These aren't just academic disagreements; they are fundamental identity clashes where the student feels that accepting the syllabus means betraying their faith or their family." (P₅, L₇₈₋₈₀)

Significant response 3: "I have students that they don't agree with the different gender identities and sexual orientations, some also do not agree with the use of the contraceptives." (P₁, L₆₀₋₆₁)

Significant response 4: "The most frequent stories involve double standards in the household... and stories of street harassment [catcalling] that students previously thought were just a normal, unchangeable part of life." (P₅, L₁₃₆₋₁₃₈)

Educators' Response to Gender-Related Student Disclosures

Theme 1: Active Empathy and Emotional Validation

The findings reveal that educators handling Gender and Society courses consistently respond to student disclosures through empathy, validation, and emotional support, emphasizing listening, acknowledgment, and emotional containment as core classroom practices when dealing with sensitive personal narratives. By allowing students to “feel that they are being listened to” (P1), validating “the student’s courage in sharing” (P4), and expressing gratitude such as “thank you for trusting us with that” (P5), educators reinforce the legitimacy of students’ lived experiences while maintaining a safe and respectful learning environment. This aligns with Hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy, which highlights the inseparability of emotional awareness and teaching, particularly in spaces involving identity and lived experience. It also reflects Foundation House (2020), which underscores validation and acknowledgment as essential responses to disclosures, and Jennings and Greenberg’s (2009) social-emotional competence framework, which links teacher empathy to emotionally supportive classroom climates. Additionally, the findings resonate with Peregrina (2019), emphasizing compassion as a culturally grounded value in Filipino educational practice that shapes educator responsiveness to students’ emotional needs.

Significant response 1: “If a student voluntarily discloses a personal experience, I let the student talk and I let them feel that they are being listened to...” (P1, L141-142)

Significant response 2: “Respond with empathy, validate the student’s courage in sharing, and ensure that the classroom remains a safe and respectful space.” (P4, L151-152)

Significant response 3: ““I acknowledge their disclosure with a ‘thank you for trusting us with that,’ provide what I can advice especially if they are asking about it, or even acknowledge what they are feeling that it is valid.” (P5, L158-160)

Theme 2: Strategic Referral and Ethical Boundaries

The findings show that educators balance emotional support with clear professional boundaries, recognizing that while they can provide a “supportive ear” (P2), they are not trained to address deep psychological concerns, as reflected in “I am not equipped to provide the long-term navigation” (P5). Thus, they practice emotional containment by listening with care while avoiding over-involvement, consistent with Foundation House (2020). Their decision to “refer them to professional counselors when needed” (P2) reflects ethical responsibility and reflexivity in handling sensitive disclosures (Archer, 2012). This also aligns with Lindecker and Cramer (2021), who note the emotional labor expected of educators despite limited clinical training.

Significant response 1: “professional guidance should be sought from those with the specialized training... Listen with empathy and then refer them to professional counselors when needed.” (P2, L208-210)

Significant response 2: “I am very clear with students that I can listen to them, but I am not equipped to provide the long-term navigation they need for deep trauma and struggles.” (P5, L222-223)

Significant response 3: “I remain mindful not to assume the role of a trained counselor. I provide a safe space for students to express themselves but avoid offering psychological advice beyond my expertise. Instead, I guide them toward appropriate support systems...” (P4, L217-219)

Theme 3: De-personalizing Dialogue through Structured Neutrality

The findings show that educators manage heated discussions by shifting from personal opinions to “research-based discussions” (P2) and reinforcing classroom norms of respect and active listening. Through “neutral, analytical language” and structured facilitation (P4), they depersonalize conflict and help students

focus on understanding rather than confrontation. This aligns with Reis and Scott (2021), who emphasize structured handling of controversial topics, and Arao and Clemens' (2013) "Brave Spaces," where tension is managed rather than avoided. It also reflects Hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, as educators act as facilitators of dialogue that promote reflection and critical understanding rather than debate or domination.

Significant response 1: "To cool the heat, the discussion is moved away from personal opinions to research-based discussions" (P₂, L₁₈₅)

Significant response 2: "When discussions become heated, I intervene by calmly re-establishing classroom norms centered on respect, active listening, and non-personalization of arguments... I also use structured dialogue techniques, such as giving equal speaking time or reframing statements into neutral, analytical language, to shift the focus from confrontation to understanding." (P₄, L₁₉₁₋₁₉₅)

Theme 4: Bridging the Gap Between Training and Experience

The findings indicate that formal trainings are perceived as insufficient, with educators emphasizing that handling Gender and Society requires a "multifaceted view" (P1) that goes beyond brief seminars. As a result, competence is largely developed through "on-the-job experience" and continuous exposure to classroom realities (P4), highlighting experiential learning as the primary source of pedagogical skill development. This aligns with Gericke et al. (2018) and Alisic et al. (2012), who emphasize the role of practice-based learning in complex and emotionally sensitive teaching contexts. Overall, the results suggest the need for stronger institutional training to complement lived classroom experience and better prepare educators for the "complexities of handling sensitive discussions" (P4).

Significant response 1: "It is really not enough, discussing gender and society requires a multifaceted view of the concepts which this seminars or trainings do not cover, this course requires rigor in terms of knowledge acquisition within its different subtopic..." (P₁, L₂₃₄₋₂₃₆)

Significant response 2: "It's very important to undergo trainings prior handling this course as teachers' role in this kind of discussion is highly crucial due to topics being sensitive and personal." (P₃, L₂₄₀₋₂₄₁)

Significant response 3: "...it was not entirely sufficient in preparing me for the complexities of handling sensitive discussions and student disclosures in real classroom settings. Much of my competence in facilitating these topics has been developed through on-the-job experience..." (P₄, L₂₄₃₋₂₄₅)

Educators Experiences Shaping their Professional Identity and Teaching Pedagogies

Theme 1: As a Facilitator of Social Change

The findings reveal that educators increasingly view their role as transformative rather than purely instructional, positioning themselves as facilitators of critical consciousness and social awareness. Their emphasis on "changing the way they think" (P1) and "unlearning harmful stereotypes" (P2) reflects a shift toward emancipatory education, where teaching becomes a process of challenging oppressive norms rather than merely transmitting knowledge. This aligns with Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and Morell's (2021) notion of education as a practice of critical consciousness, where learners are encouraged to interrogate dominant social structures. It also reflects feminist pedagogical principles (Cannizzo, 2021), which frame the classroom as a space for empowerment and social transformation. Overall, the findings suggest that Gender and Society instruction contributes to a redefinition of professional identity among educators as "agents of change" (Pantić & Florian, 2015), grounded in advocacy, inclusivity, and social responsibility.

Significant response 1: "I want them to know that there's more to just being labelled as a male,

female, neither, or nor... most importantly that they need to change the hateful norms that the society is practicing." (P₁, L₃₀₁₋₃₀₄)

Significant response 2: "helping students unlearn harmful stereotypes and build a more inclusive society... Seeing a student change their perspective from judging others to understanding the importance of consent and human rights" (P₃, L_{305-306, 326-327})

Significant response 3: "as an advocate for inclusivity, critical awareness, and social justice within the classroom. The subject has expanded my role beyond content delivery to facilitating meaningful conversations that challenge inequities." (P₄, L₃₁₁₋₃₁₃)

Theme 2: Cultivating Gender-Responsive Pedagogy

The findings indicate that exposure to Gender and Society instruction fosters a reflexive shift in educators' pedagogical practice, leading to more intentional, inclusive, and learner-centered teaching. Changes in "language," "examples," and "classroom dynamics" (P₄) demonstrate heightened professional reflexivity (Archer, 2012), where educators critically evaluate and adjust their instructional behaviors to avoid reinforcing bias. This aligns with Mezirow's (1991, 2012) Transformative Learning Theory, which explains that exposure to disorienting or critical perspectives can reshape educators' frames of reference, resulting in sustained changes in practice. Similarly, Feucht et al. (2017) emphasize that such reflexivity translates into concrete pedagogical modifications that promote inclusivity and participation. Overall, the findings show that Gender and Society teaching extends beyond content delivery, functioning as a catalyst for sustained gender-responsive pedagogy grounded in critical consciousness and equitable classroom practice.

Significant response 1: "I become more conscious of using gender-neutral language and ensuring equal participation of all voices in every subject." (P₂, L₂₈₁₋₂₈₂)

Significant response 2: "I became more gender sensitive, and I often give them liberty to express themselves more in our activities." (P₁, L₂₇₉₋₂₈₀)

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the lived experiences of educators handling the Gender and Society course are shaped by emotional, cultural, and pedagogical complexities, reflected in the themes *navigating the classroom atmosphere* and *negotiating religious conviction and lived realities in gender discourse*, where classroom interactions are marked by tension and the negotiation of beliefs and lived experiences. Educators' responses to gender-related student disclosures, shown in the themes' *active empathy and emotional validation*, *strategic referral and ethical boundaries*, *de-personalizing dialogue through structured neutrality*, and *bridging the gap between training and experience*, highlight emotional labor, ethical boundaries, and reliance on experiential learning. Meanwhile, their professional identity and teaching pedagogies are shaped by their experiences are reflected in *as a facilitator of social change* and *cultivating gender-responsive pedagogy*, demonstrate a shift toward inclusive, reflexive, and transformative teaching practices. These outcomes are significant because they highlight how Gender and Society instruction becomes a transformative space where educators themselves undergo shifts in perspective and identity, reinforcing Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory through disorienting dilemmas and reflective practice, while also affirming Hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy. Overall, the study underscores that teaching Gender and Society in higher education is not merely instructional work but a deeply transformative process that reshapes educators' professional identities while positioning them as mediators of social, cultural, and ideological tensions in the classroom.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are offered. Higher education institutions should provide specialized training for educators handling Gender and Society courses, particularly on gender concepts, sensitive classroom discussions, emotional labor, and student disclosures. Institutions should also strengthen support systems through clear referral pathways, mental health services, and coordination with counseling offices to help educators manage student concerns ethically and sustainably. Academic administrators are encouraged to conduct workshops on Brave Spaces, reflexive teaching, and dialogic facilitation to support inclusive classroom discussions despite differing beliefs and perspectives. Curriculum developers should provide context-sensitive teaching guides and localized materials that reflect Filipino socio-cultural realities. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative and longitudinal studies across institutions to further examine gender-responsive pedagogy in higher education.

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About the Author

Allondra O. Rosales is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Arts in Education major in Social Studies. Her academic interests include gender studies, pedagogy, and qualitative research, with a particular focus on educators' lived experiences and gender-responsive education in higher education settings. She is especially interested in exploring how gender-related discourses are taught, negotiated, and experienced within culturally and socially diverse classroom environments in the Philippine context.

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