

The Lived Experience of First-Generation International Lasallian Women Leaders

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Introduction

Realizing our 300-year-old Lasallian global network, originated by men for the education of boys, is now predominantly made up of women is profound. According to recent statistics, 56% of our Lasallian network is composed entirely of laywomen. Laymen make up 41%, Brothers 2%, and the remaining 1% make up individuals of other religious orders.³ More importantly, while women dominate in our ministries, they are drastically underrepresented in leadership roles throughout our Lasallian world. Acutely aware of the disproportionate representation of women leaders, Brother Superior Robert Schieler, FSC, has been actively encouraging Lasallians to find new ways to promote the advancement of women into leadership roles. During his opening remarks at the 2017 Lasallian Global Women's Symposium, in New Zealand, Brother Superior invited attendees to think about how to "create structures and opportunities that will affirm the role of young and gifted professional women . . . to our mission" and identify ways "to incorporate more women into the mission-related governmental structures at the local, District, and Institute levels for transformational leadership."⁴

Inspired by this need and the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies' research practicum, I investigated the lived experience of seven Lasallian women among the first to rise to international leadership roles within the Institute. The purpose was to discover the experience of these pioneering women leaders so our Lasallian network could learn from their journey and advance Brother Superior's call for more Lasallian women leaders. This paper will share literature findings on today's women leadership experiences as well as the study's design, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Today's Women Leadership Experience

According to the U.S. Department of Education, women make up over 55% of all principals at private schools.⁵ They have consistently outnumbered male principals for over 30 years. Similarly, women make up 52% of public school principals, outnumbering their male counterparts for the past 10 years. However, fewer numbers of women leaders are present in higher education. According to the 2017 American College President Study,⁶ only 30% of college and university presidents represent women with the majority being at public 2-year colleges. Given the role of president is often filled by those emerging from senior faculty administrative positions, the prediction for more women presidents, globally, is grim. According to the Catalyst, senior women university faculty in Japan, India, and Europe hover around 15 to 24% with Canada and Australia ranging from 40 to 44%.⁷

When considering the Lasallian network, the numbers decline even more. In the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN), women represent only 8% of middle and postsecondary school presidents. Of the seven colleges, only one has a female president—a recent hire in 2015.⁸ A website search of universities in the Pacific Asia Regional Conference (PARC) and the Lasallian Region of Latin America (RELAL) revealed only one female university president in each Region. Similarly, when looking at secondary schools in Australia and New Zealand there were only two female principals. At the Institute, only one of the five 2018 councils were led by a woman.

The need to develop a more proportionate representation of Lasallian women leaders is clearly evident. A review of contemporary women's leadership literature provides a foundation for understanding relevant factors unique to the lived experience of successful women leaders. A synthesis of women leadership literature revealed three common themes: 1) women leadership behaviors, 2) barriers to becoming a female leader, and 3) support for the emergence of women leaders. The literature selected for this discussion represents general women leadership studies in business and education, given the lack of literature on Lasallian women leaders.

Women Leadership Behaviors

A review of contemporary studies on successful women leaders revealed several commonalities in regards to leadership behaviors. These commonalities fell into three categories: style, performance, and support networks. These will be discussed in the following sections.

Leadership Style

Leadership behavioral studies have found that women commonly favor a more participative and democratic approach, often referred to as communal leadership behavior. This has been found to be evident in both Western and Eastern cultures. For example, studies have found that women leaders in China and the United States often focus on empowering others, seeking group consensus, promoting communication, and being respectful and considerate to their staff.⁹ This communal behavior has frequently been referred to as a transformational leadership style. Conversely, men were found to prefer a more task-oriented and autocratic approach, often referred to as agentic leadership behavior which is most commonly associated with a transactional leadership style.¹⁰

Given the choice between transactional and transformational leadership, both women and men tend to prefer their organizational leaders to be transformational suggesting that women should have a competitive advantage.¹¹ Unfortunately, the opposite has occurred. Women have reported significant resistance among senior male administrators when embracing a transformational style. This has been attributed to their male counterpart's natural tendency and appreciation for agentic behaviors.¹² When faced with this resistance, women leaders tend to squelch the tension by adopting a more male-dominant, task-oriented, autocratic approach. Moreover, women who have done so have reported increased stress, burn out, and poor health as a result of needing to behave in a manner incongruent with who they are. Experts suggest this has also led to a misconception among some women leaders where they begin to believe that men are better leaders given their ability to be decisive, logical, and practical.¹³ Beliefs such as these were

found to significantly undermine women's confidence and self-efficacy as a leader, thus resulting in departures or positional changes.

Leadership Performance

Organizational leadership studies have shown that women typically outperform their male counterparts.¹⁴ Women reportedly feel the need to meet a higher standard, while men reportedly have less pressure to do so. For example, studies show that men exceed women in laissez-faire leadership and passive management and have more leeway to do so.¹⁵ When exhibiting male leadership traits, such as being directive and autocratic, women leaders are typically devalued. Male leaders, on the other hand, are valued for exhibiting these behaviors. Much of the women leadership literature refer to this as a “double bind”.¹⁶ Women need to work hard, perform well, and lead effectively but do so without displaying “take charge” behaviors. This is especially true when having a leadership role traditionally occupied by men. Women who have successfully navigated this double bind reportedly did so by using collaborative and cooperative techniques such as ensuring input from others, creating cooperative environments, and focusing on others beyond self.¹⁷ Experts suggest this may partially explain the prevalence of democratic and participative behaviors among women leaders; where effective leadership becomes about the success of the group and not about obtaining personal power and status.¹⁸

Leadership Support Networks

To further combat the double bind experience and similar challenges, women have found success by increasing their social capital through supportive networks. Research has found, support networks, at home and at work, are extremely beneficial for established and emerging women leaders. Mentorships and supportive women's communities have been found to provide the gender-specific professional support needed to succeed. For example, Liu's 2013 women's study of corporate women leaders found support networks to be essential for gaining guidance in life-work balance.¹⁹ The author contends this is critical given that women have often reported having to work harder, smarter, and outperform their male counterpart in order to gain recognition and legitimacy. Similarly, research shows that 70% of women leaders have children and spend more daily hours on household duties than their male counterpart.²⁰ Given this additional social role, successful women leaders have reported that family and spousal support significantly contributed to their professional success. Additionally, these women often redefined norms for being a good mother and good leader. Doing so resulted in feeling “dually successful” as well as being able to establish a more egalitarian attitude within the household.²¹ Duevel, Nashman-Smith, and Stern's research echoed these findings, while suggesting that networks may also perpetuate a reduction in the recruitment of women leaders given the tendency for women to social network outside the dominant population of male leaders.²²

Barriers to be Becoming a Women Leader.

While democratic and participative traits help women leaders negotiate the double bind, these traits are not enough to succeed. Research suggests that the biggest obstacle for women leaders has been and continues to be gender bias. Lui explored the factors in the literature which led to

gender bias and placed them into three categories: social, organizational, and individual, and added an additional factor—invisible forces.²³

Social Factors

Social factors emanate from gender role stereotypes where women adopt feminine behaviors representative of society's determination of what a woman should be—nurturing, quiet, unassuming, and cooperative. These behaviors often undermine a woman's ability to be recognized as a leader, both by others and oneself. These stereotypes influence women's perceptions of their capacity to lead believing that they are better suited for jobs involving nurturing and serving others while leading should be left to men.²⁴

Organizational Factors

Organizational factors include practices and social structures that marginalize women. A common example is the “Good Old Boys” culture in male-dominated organizations where women are excluded and need an invitation to join. These organizations typically perpetuate the belief that men's roles are more congruent with leadership compared to women's roles. Organizational practices and policies regarding hiring, performance appraisals, and professional development work against women and in favor of men. Without equal opportunities for training and development, recruitment, and promotion, women are at a significant disadvantage for advancement.²⁵

Individual Factors

Individual factors mainly focus on women's desires to ascend to higher positions of responsibility suggesting women and men have different aspirations.²⁶ Women have been found to create career and life goals based on values, social contributions, and family. For example, Duevel, Nashman-Smith, and Stern found women rejected becoming a superintendent fearing it would interfere with family life and lead to relocation, resulting in a belief that they were better suited to be a classroom teacher.²⁷ Similarly, Soklaris et al's study found CEOs in small hospitals chose to opt out of large hospital CEO positions indicating a strong displeasure for “that type of setting” given the possible demands. While preferences appear to be self-determined it also suggests that there is a choice.²⁸ Most scholars agree that choice is not as real as the invisible forces that prevent women from attaining leadership positions.

Invisible Forces

Ever since the Women's Movement in the 1970s, the term glass ceiling has been used to describe the invisible forces inhibiting women from advancing to higher decision-making positions. Eagly and Carli suggest this metaphor is no longer applicable and is misleading given that women do not travel a straight path upward until they hit an impenetrable ceiling.²⁹ Instead, women travel a labyrinth that consists of complicated circuitous routes to become leaders, unlike the relatively direct path taken by men. The authors argue that women need to put forth more effort, be more patient, and negotiate more carefully to overcome obstacles set up by social and organizational gender bias. In essence, women need to meet the high bar that is set for them by proving they are

strong and capable leaders through a combination of male and female approaches. Eagly and Carli remind us that this is not an absolute recipe for success and women cannot do this alone. Structures need to exist to support the leadership journey of women.³⁰

Support for the Emergence of Women Leaders.

Much can be done within an organization to support the advancement of women leaders. While the literature provides a variety of specific recommendations for change, the following suggestions from Soklaridis et al's study of women CEOs sums it up best:

- Recognize that gender bias does exist
- Encourage women in privileged leadership positions to promote other aspiring women leaders
- Mentor, promote, and encourage other women
- Create social and systematic change within organizations to make it possible for women to succeed
- Break the cycle of "the more things change the more they stay the same"
- Better understand the notion of equity versus equality in policy changes.³¹

Study Design

This qualitative, phenomenological, Research Review Board (RRB) approved study was conducted using one-on-one interviews to answer the following research question: What has been the lived experience of women, as the first to lead at the international level, in the modern Lasallian Institute? Using a purposive sampling technique, seven Lasallian women were identified and formally consented to participate in a 45-minute one-on-one interview. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1) served at the District, Regional, and International level of the Institute; 2) been part of the Lasallian ministry for 25 years or more, and 3) well respected by De La Salle Brothers and international leaders within the Institute. Participants were selected from three different Regions: PARC, RELAN, and RELAL, in order to gather a global perspective. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants and their demographics. Each woman provided permission to be identified by name.

Table 1. Study Participants and Demographics

| Participant's name | Region | Ministry | Position | International Role(s) |
|---|--------|---|--|--|
| Joan Landeros; Affiliated FSC, PhD | RELAL | La Salle University in Mexico City, Mexico | Retired Director and Founder of the Center for International Education | Served as a member of the Standing Committee for the Lasallian Educational Mission at the Institute of the Christian Brothers; Serves on the Executive Committee of the International Associate of Lasallian Universities. |
| Carmelita Quebengco; Affiliated FSC, PhD | PARC | De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines | Retired Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Presently Chancellor Emeritus; Consultant to the President | Served as Co-Secretary of the Lasallian Education Mission Office of the Institute of the Christian Brothers; Served on the International Committee on Lasallian Association |
| Trish Carroll; Affiliated FSC | PARC | District office of ANZPPNG in Melbourne, Australia | Former Director of Lasallian Education Services | Member of the International Council for Research & Resources, and International Council for Partnership and Identity; Steering Committee Chair for the 2017 Lasallian Global Women's Symposium |
| Tracy Adams; Affiliated FSC | PARC | yourtown in Australia | CEO | Keynote Speaker at the last International Mission Assembly in Rome (2011), and the Women's Symposium in Auckland (2017) |
| Mary Fox; Affiliated FSC, PhD | RELAN | Saint Mary's University of Minnesota in Winona, Minnesota, USA | Professor Emeritus, Interdisciplinary Studies | Staff and Faculty, International Association of Lasallian Universities in Rome; Delegate to the International Assembly on Association (2006) |
| Carole Swain; FSC, PhD | RELAN | Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California, USA | Retired Vice President for Mission | Delegate to the First International Assembly in Rome; CIL "Associated for Mission" Participant |
| Roxanne Eubank, EdD | RELAN | Saint Mary's University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA | Director for the Institute for Lasallian Studies; Professor in the EdD in Leadership Program | Delegate at the 2013 International Assembly in Rome; Director of IALU Leadership in Higher Education Program in Rome |

The recorded interviews occurred in person, through telephone, or with videoconferencing software. A sharing of their lived experience as women leaders was gained through a series of open-ended interview questions and prompts. Questions probed into each woman's leadership experiences at the local, District, Regional, and International level. The women were also encouraged to identify the unique qualities of their journey, including changes witnessed over time and advice for emerging women leaders.

All recorded interviews were transcribed, and then member checked by sharing the transcript with the respective participant along with a request to review and provide any necessary changes. All member checked transcripts were read several times to gather an overall understanding, then coded into representative meaning units, which were then grouped into categories based on recurring patterns. The categorizations were then used to determine the emerging themes and analyzed to determine the essence of the women's leadership experience. This inductive qualitative approach provided an effective method to make meaning out of the vast amount of rich descriptions gleaned from the seven interviews.

Findings

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the seven Lasallian women leader's interview transcripts were as follows:

- Deep Commitment Led to Invitation to Lead
- Unanticipated Climb into Leadership Roles
- The Newcomer Treatment
- Experiencing Gender Differences
- Communal Leadership Behaviors and Characteristics
- Advice for Emerging Women Leaders and the Lasallian Organization

Each theme will be described and illustrated with representative quotes in the following sections.

Deep Commitment Led to Invitation to Lead

All seven women worked at their Lasallian ministry for the majority of their career and dedicated a significant amount of time and energy serving the mission at the local, District, Regional, and eventually the Institute level. Each moved into administrative leadership roles within their ministry. Five of the seven women worked at universities with one, Carmelita Quebengco, eventually becoming a university president. Tracy Adams became the CEO of a large non-profit social services organization. Each reported, after at least 10 years of service in the early 2000s, being invited by De La Salle Christian Brothers into various roles within their District and Region, and eventually the Institute in Rome within five years later or less. The invitation typically came from an influential De La Salle Brother seeking out representation of laywomen. Brothers Louis DeThomasis, FSC, William Mann, FSC, and Craig Franz, FSC, played key roles in advancing the women in this study from the RELAN and RELAL Region while Brothers Robert Schieler, FSC, and David Hawke, FSC, influenced the rise of women in the PARC Region.

All of the women expressed a deep commitment to, and sincere love for, the mission and charism. This statement by Mary Fox captured their collective feeling well, “I can say that all of us involved in this are really in love with the mission no matter what level we’re working at. There just seems to be this foundation of understanding and commitment to the mission. . . .” Trish Carroll echoed this stating, “The Lasallian family has been such a significant part of my life and not just my working life, my spirituality and everything. . . .” When speaking of her career move to another religious organization, Trish noted, “I really liked [the organization] and career-wise it was really a fantastic leadership opportunity, but at heart I felt like I was a married person having an affair on the side. I really belong to De La Salle.” When Tracy Adams reflected on the time she was considering applying for the CEO position at her ministry yourtown (formerly known as Boys Town) she said, “I thought to myself, ‘You know you do love the place, so let’s take it on. If I don’t get the job I have permission to leave.’ It’s silly to think you need permission to leave the organization because you can leave anytime you want. But it’s the depth of feeling that I had.” Carole Swain indicated she “fell in love with the charism when [she] was sent after [her] fourth year [at the college] to the Philippines, and spent a month living with the De La Salle Christian Brothers with a colleague. . . .” She went on to say, “. . . that was my defining time of falling in love with the charism and the work that we do. And so from there, there were other opportunities.” It is significant to see the genuine affection the women expressed for the mission and charism, as if it was a deep personal relationship with another person. As Carole noted, this expression of deep commitment and love for the mission became tied to future invitations and opportunities from the De La Salle Christian Brothers to lead.

Unanticipated Climb into Leadership Roles

When asked whether their path to becoming involved in the mission and obtaining their various leadership roles was expected, they all exclaimed “No,” often followed by laughter. Several related their experience to De La Salle’s life as captured in Mary’s comment, “I always say the mission is invitational. You’re not going to be forced into it. You are invited into it. Sort of like De La Salle, step-by-step, imperceptibly, and then suddenly it’s like Whoa! I’m in it lock stock and barrel.”

Often, the women would attribute their career advancement to circumstance or luck. For example, when Joan Landeros reflected on her career advancement from educator to department chair of the language department to founder of the Mexican Association of International Education and then invited to be one of the first organizers of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) she commented, “I think it just came along with what I was doing professionally here at the University. I just came into this at the right time and the right place. . . . So I don’t think it was anything in particular or any great talent. It’s just been an evolution. The signs of the times. Lots of things paralleled to what I was doing and what was happening. And I think I was lucky enough to be in one of the first international offices.”

Some of the women responded to their invitation to lead with disbelief and even resistance. For example, when Carmelita conveyed her story of her gradual invitational rise through the ranks from faculty to department chair to Assistant Dean to Academic Vice President to Executive Vice President, then Chancellor, and eventually to becoming the first lay university president, she responded each time with an emphatic “No!” along with expressions of resistance combined

with self-doubt often asking “Can you not find somebody else?” When recalling the voiced nomination to be the chair of the International Assembly in Rome she responded similarly saying, “You’ve got to be kidding. No, not me. No . . . It’s such a big job for a tiny lady.” After much insistence and bargaining, Carmelita finally accepted a compromised offer to share the role as a co-chair. It is interesting to see that while the potential for leadership was evident to others, it was not self-evident for the women themselves. It seemed to have been completely unexpected as illustrated in the comment by Trish, “It’s always been a surprise to be asked to lead.”

The Newcomer Treatment

Common among the women were stories of feeling welcomed by the De La Salle Christian Brothers when entering into their invited international roles at the Generalate. Several expressed gratitude for the hospitality provided by the De La Salle Christian Brothers during their stay. For example, Joan relayed this story about her trepidation during her first invitation to the Generalate as a representative on the Lasallian Mission Education (MEL) Commission, “I think what made me the most uncomfortable was that I never had worked at the institutional level of the Institute. So, there I was on the MEL Commission representing women in universities. I was the only woman at that time and [everyone] was very kind to me . . . I remember there was one Brother director . . . in Rome. Every morning I would come in and he would have a flower at my place. Who can say that I was mistreated or not taken into consideration?” Mary recalled similar respectful experiences, “I will tell you with all of my encounters with the Brothers, the one thing that has always been the most surprising and the most interesting to me is that I have been far more welcomed as someone who is not just a guest, but someone who really brings something to the table.”

When reflecting upon their ability to contribute to discussions and decisions during these early male-dominated committees, the women indicated, they took their responsibility very seriously and made their voice heard. Trish captured this well stating, “It was not always easy to have a voice in those conversations but that’s why you were there, that was the job you were there to do, was to provide whatever alternative perspective you could. That was the responsibility of taking on the role.” Tracy commented similarly saying, “I am very respectful of the Brothers and respect their traditions. But at the same time, I think that because we respect them it requires us to be very open and transparent and if something isn’t right we need to raise it. And I always felt that I could do that and I continue to do that today.”

While each woman felt their service was invited and welcomed, there were occasions when some experienced notable defiance in response to their presence. Mary shared this recurring experience, “There is a Brother in Rome who, as many times as I have seen him and as many times as I have run into him, has never said hello to me. He will look me straight in the eyes and walk right by me. Apparently, he is known for this. He does this to other women as well.” Trish recalled these serious incidents during her first stint on an international council, “I can remember the first day of the first meeting one of the Brothers got up and walked out just because of my presence in the room. It was quite shocking to many. I think about the second or third time, one of the Brothers in the group said to me; and I will never forget this because I can remember it verbatim, ‘The reason we are losing the Brothers’ vocations is because of people like you who are taking all of the good jobs. So, what is there for a young Brother to aspire to?’” She noticed

that many De La Salle Christian Brothers were experiencing a sense of loss in regards to the declining numbers of Brothers, which manifested in these types of comments. Trish was also quick to provide a balanced view indicating she had experienced great support by many De La Salle Christian Brothers such as Brothers William Mann and Gerard Rummery who “were great champions” for her cause.

However, Trish also shared this story regarding Regional meetings saying, “I have experienced in meetings where women were told to sit down and be quiet. Literally told to be quiet. I can remember one Brother, who was the head of one of the countries in PARC, being really angry about the symposium saying, ‘We don’t need this, I speak for the women in my District.’” Trish tempered this story by emphasizing the need to understand that cultural differences exist within our global society, which is reflected in the geographic context of the De La Salle Christian Brothers in the PARC Region. “The Brothers’ organization is a reflection of the wider society and the wider culture. And the reality is women are not equal to men in those cultures, in many of those Asian cultures. They do not have a voice. The pecking order would be the Brother, male lay partner, and the woman would be very far below.” While these hierarchical differences were in the context of Asian cultures, other distinctions among Brothers, Laymen, and Laywomen emerged from the women’s stories.

Experiencing Gender Differences

Common among these women leaders’ District, Regional, and International reported experiences were descriptions of characteristic behaviors of De La Salle Christian Brothers, Laymen, and Laywomen. When looking at the behavioral descriptions collectively, distinct patterns emerged. De La Salle Brothers were generally characterized as highly relational, forward-thinking, and somewhat gender biased. All seven women were quick to remark on the relational behaviors of the De La Salle Christian Brothers they encountered noting their kindness, warmth, openness, person-centeredness, and inclusive nature; similar to what the literature refers to as the communal behavior of women leaders. Several attributed this behavior to the De La Salle Christian Brothers’ vocation and community lifestyle. For example, Carole noted, “. . . the Brothers are more configured like and live like women’s orders. The idea of them being in association with one another and living in community [is] more on the gender spectrum towards the female side than the male orders of priests and others that I’ve known.” Mary corroborated this stating, “Relationship is at the core and center of who they are and it’s just natural.” This was notably evident by all the women leaders along with an appreciation for the Brothers’ intentional efforts to include more women in Lasallian leadership roles.

Several commented on the De La Salle Christian Brothers’ progressive forward thinking in regards to advancing the Lasallian mission through the recruitment of lay partners given the reality of the declining number of Brothers. This can be seen in Mary’s comment when remembering being invited along with other laywomen who, in 1999, were being included for the first time to participate in the International Lasallian Center (CIL) program in Rome, “I’ve always said the Brothers are not leading edge, they are bleeding edge. They are willing to push the envelope certainly more than any other Catholic orders that I have ever been involved with.” Tracy reinforced this sentiment observing that the De La Salle Christian Brothers’ came to realize that in order “To keep this mission alive and vibrant you need to have people with

different skills.” While appreciating the concerted efforts to bring more laywomen into key Lasallian roles it also became evident that the Brothers tended to be somewhat gender biased.

Several of the women leaders commented on the stereotypic assumptions held by the De La Salle Christian Brothers’ regarding women’s roles. Roxanne Eubank observed that, “Single women [were] assumed to have more available time and energy than a mother with children” along with a “general belief that women [should] not be invited into leadership roles if they have small children to take care of.” Similarly, Joan noted, “there are Brothers, [and] other Religious men or women, that are out of context or out of touch with the realities of modern families and modern relationships.” Then countered this saying, “But this is not unique to just us. It is happening in any organization now.” Mary noticed what she called “subtle sexism” where Laymen “[were] treated with more deference by the Brothers than laywomen.” Several of the women referred to these Laymen as “Brothers’ Boys.”

When describing Laymen or “Brothers’ Boys,” the characteristics that emerged from the interviews were similar to what the leadership literature refers to as “agentic” male behavior – highly confident, competitive, dominant, and dismissive of women. These behaviors were reported to be frustrating yet often curbed with understanding as exemplified in Roxanne’s comment, “When I have frustrations it tends to be with the Laymen who are being dismissive; not welcoming to women; who are not inclusive. And I don’t think it is on purpose. It’s just the way I think they see the world, especially if they’ve come up through the Lasallian ranks, they are not used to seeing women involved because they’re ‘Brothers’ Boys’ and for them this will always be a ‘Brothers’ Boys’ and a Brothers’ enterprise. They don’t see the women who have really done so much for their school, and the District, and the Region, and the Institute.” Mary reported similar behavior adding, “Men seem to need to assert who they are, why they’re there, or just because they’re there they have natural authority.” Joan also noticed social inequalities where men were seen as the “breadwinners” and women were considered an “add-on” while recognizing that this is not unique to her context, but instead a cultural phenomenon all over the world including higher education.

When describing Laywomen, the characteristics that emerged aligned with communal behaviors similar to those reportedly displayed by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Words such as supportive, non-competitive, collaborative were often used such as this comment by Mary, “. . . women compete in the corporate world that I came from all the time, you know. I just have never seen that here. I can say that all of us [women] involved in this are really in love with the mission no matter what level we’re working at. There just seems to be this foundation of understanding and commitment to the mission that kind of takes away all that nonsense. It’s just so different. It is even different when I go to professional conferences that are not Lasallian. There is still that ‘Oh, I’m so-and-so and I do such-and-such’. But I can work with Lasallian women for a month before I know what their job title is. It doesn’t seem to matter.” Roxanne commented on this supportive nature stating, “I have found the international community of women to be really supportive and caring about each other and opening doors for each other” and credited this community to her rise to international leadership.

Laywomen with children, including three participants in this study, were seen as family-centered. The role of mother was at the forefront. It was the primary decision-making factor in

their professional life. Joan remarked, “In my evolution for those first 20 years, I took care of my kids. I arrived with no kids but then I started my family. I had three kids and I was a full-time mom, so I taught my classes. I was close to the university and I could be a mom. I think that was really a privilege.” Carmelita recounted, “Though offered leadership positions earlier in my career as educator, I did not accept a few of them fearing it would mean paying less attention to my son. It was only when he was in high school and beginning to assert his independence that I accepted requests to be in university leadership positions.” Tracy recalled her 28-year rise from mailroom clerk to CEO noting, “I think I got here through a lot of really hard work. I reflect on it now; I had two children while I’ve been in the organization [and] there were times that I made trade-offs to work hard and to keep balancing family and peripheral other duties.”

Work-family balancing efforts were also seen as a contributing factor to the low number of young women leaders. For example, Roxanne observed the Chair of a Regional Council would always leave the meetings early to fly home and pick up her children from daycare resulting in unfinished business. While this behavior was considered acceptable by the Brother Visitor, it was reportedly found to be a grave concern by other Laywomen given that women with families may not be invited into Lasallian leadership roles. Roxanne further commented “We need to continually educate people on the concept that, if a woman’s name [comes] up people will say, ‘Oh yeah, but she has small kids.’ That is not our job to make that decision. It is our job to invite and let her decide if she needs to stay at home because of small children or if she’s going to help.”

Communal Leadership Behaviors and Characteristics

When describing themselves in their leadership roles, all seven women described behaviors congruent with communal behaviors. They were motivated by purpose, not power. Priority was placed on cultivating relationships, not self. Decision-making was a collective process, not individual. For example, Carmelita described herself as having “a track record of working very hard and working harmoniously with others.” She elaborated saying, “I will work hard, period. And not work to be able to stay in a leadership position. There is a very big difference between those versions of why one works hard. One is others-centered while the latter is more focused on the self.” Similarly, when Tracy reflected on when she was considering an organizational name change she told people, ““We are *exploring* the opportunity of a name change’. I never went into it with the definitive outcome in mind. I think that’s the best way to go about such a thing. Because you allow then for people to contribute.” Likewise, when Roxanne spoke of her leadership influence she noted, “As I have gotten older, I have really focused on being part of this community, and how can I open doors for other women? How can I help other women get engaged? How do we recognize their talents and abilities and get them to places where they can have influence? Not power, influence.” Similarly, when Trish spoke of the realization of her dream to give women in the PARC Region a voice through an International Women’s Symposium she remarked, “I believe that the voice of women in the organization is critical. That’s why for me . . . it’s so critical to do whatever we can to get the involvement of women and the engagement women at every level . . . particularly for countries where women do not have a voice.”

Advice for Emerging Women Leaders and the Lasallian Organization

At the conclusion of the interviews, the women provided advice and recommendations for the Lasallian Institute and emerging Lasallian women leaders based on their experience. Advice for the Institute boiled down to four main areas. First, *heighten the awareness of our Institute's current realities*. Trish exclaims, "In every culture, including ours that is supposedly equal, there are all sorts of subliminal and subtle messages about gender; right through to places in our Institute where they are not subtle at all. They are quite blatant. At an international level, women still get paid less. Gender issues are universal issues for women. And I think our organization exists within those broader gender issues. If we, as Lasallians, really take those messages about justice and dignity of the person, then we need to advocate for people in our own organizations. I don't think there's a great deal of awareness in our organization, and the first step to change is awareness." Tracy echoed these thoughts adding, "We need to keep the story alive in ways that relate to the people we are working with today. And accept that we need to be using different tools and different methods to do that. Contributions being made by individuals who are not Brothers is significant. It's valuable and it's really enhancing the ministry."

Secondly, *change organizational structures to allow more women to enter into leadership roles*. Trish's comment exemplifies this stating, "I think that the organization we have is a treasure, but I think it's a flawed treasure . . . in governance and the role of women – who's sitting at the table, whose voices are heard, and who's making decisions. I think if the organization is not ready to tackle these issues and prepared to crack open some of [the] old hierarchical structures, then it's really hard to see how the Institute will flourish into the future." Tracy augments this sentiment stating, "I think that we've got to, firstly, free up positions that allow women to have experiences that can showcase their great capacity for this mission and skills that they bring."

Thirdly, *advocate for and invite more women into all levels of leadership within the Institute*. As Roxanne suggested, "Continually advocate for the presence of women at the table. I think it's important that we continually talk about the statistical presence of women who are faculty, administrators, and students and how important it is that that exists." Carole added, "Being gender inclusive must continue being an intentional Lasallian priority in appointing board members, hiring committees, etc. It seems like we had a surge in the number of women appointed to leadership roles, and currently I have witnessed some regression to predominately male leadership in many areas." Tracy concurred adding, "My recommendation is to seek out diversity, celebrate diversity, and welcome differing opinions to the table. Don't set your councils up to be people who are very similar to each other who come from similar backgrounds who have come from similar experiences. Group-think won't do this mission any good. We know that women are feeling slightly disenfranchised or feel that there are roadblocks in place. Let's work hard to establish a mechanism to start to break through some of that. Let's respect and value and look for ways of elevating women's voices into the decision-making and future direction of the mission." Trish finalizes this sentiment when she stated, "We have to do better than young women constantly putting her hand up saying, 'What about me? What about me? What can I do? Where can I go?' We have to do better than that because they are our future."

Fourthly, *create and sustain a supportive community for women throughout the Institute*. Tracy suggested support for mentorships, stating, "What I would love to see happen for the Institute,

nationally and internationally, is that we use the skills of women who have gone before to be mentors, to be available, to be sounding boards, to be coaches. If we could create a network that would enable young women to have the security and safety and confidence of raising matters to discuss with somebody that will be there as a coach, then I think we would add tremendous value.” Roxanne also believed in the importance of mentorships stating, “I think it is important to help young women and help them see the bigger world and help them hone their skills.” In addition to mentoring, Trish adamantly believed there is a continued need to create structures for women to have a collective voice, stating, “Unless we have a collective voice and an ongoing voice, where do we have the opportunity to have our voice heard? If there is no structure for it, it won’t happen. And if there’s no structure for women who [are] disempowered in countries with no voice . . . it’s not going to happen. There’s a necessity for structure of some sort to support that, whatever that may look like.”

There were four themes that also emerged regarding advice for upcoming Lasallian women leaders. Firstly, *work hard while striving to maintain a healthy work-life balance*. Tracy, Joan, and Carmelita (all mothers) provided this advice. Joan’s comment captured this best: “Be healthy. The work can’t go on if you have to sacrifice your personal health and the health of your family. That comes first.” Joan added, “Be clear what you want to do. Be forthright. If you are passionate about it, know where to put your limits . . . Know where you are going and how much you are willing to give to that.” She then concluded, “Preserve your own personal integrity. And I can say personally, I am unconditional to the Institute. But unconditional doesn’t mean to the detriment of my person or my beliefs or whatever. I am of better use to the Institute being coherent, being clear in what they can give and how much I can give. If I exceed that, then something has to suffer and if something is suffering then you don’t do justice to one side or the other or to oneself.”

Secondly, *seek a supportive female community*. Similar to their Institutional recommendation to create social structures for mentorships, many felt emerging women leaders needed to seek out a supportive female leadership network. This could best be seen in Roxanne’s comment, “It’s important to recognize the role burnout plays in [women’s] lives and that having a supportive female community around helps with that – where you can blow off steam and no one is going to hold that against you. And in the Lasallian world that becomes especially important since the majority of the work you do is with men.” Roxanne further added, “[And] not just within your own ministry but across the District, across the Region, across the world . . . developing those networks is really important.”

Thirdly, *learn Lasallian leadership through open-minded involvement in and love for the mission*. This was best represented in Carole’s advice to “be flexible, adaptable, and persistent; love the charism of providing a human and Christian education for all – especially for the poor, believe that education leads to salvation for humans now and beyond, be student-centered and do all in your power to accompany, inspire, motivate, support students; consider serving as a Lasallian Volunteer, and become active in a Lasallian school culture.” Mary echoed this advice by stating, “The most important thing is, learn first and get exposed as much as you can to who we are and what we do on all levels.”

Fourthly, *strive to lead in a way that is integral to yourself and the Lasallian mission*. While this emerged as a theme, each expressed it in their own way. For example, Carole advised, “Make no distinction between your professional life and spiritual journey, as your cultural context allows.” Carmelita provided this leadership advice to emerging women leaders, “Work hard and develop work competence and a track record, [maintain] personal integrity; genuinely care for others which includes being objective in decision making and fair to all others; and consistently move towards excellence.” Carmelita further added, “I don’t think leadership is an ambition; neither is it a title, authority, and power. I see leadership more as an earned respect so genuine that others willingly allow themselves to be influenced.” Tracy finalized it with these words of advice, “I would say to young women coming into the mission and moving through and potentially ending up in leadership, ‘Be bold. Be courageous. Back yourself in. Don’t underestimate the genuine and valuable contribution that you can make. You will reach road blocks, but so does everyone. If you carry around the doubt that will be your barrier.’”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of pioneering international Lasallian women leaders representing the RELAL, PARC, and RELAN Regions in order to learn from their journey and advance Brother Superior’s call for more Lasallian women leaders worldwide. The collective results tell a story of seven highly experienced women deeply committed to the Lasallian mission who eventually become international Lasallian leaders via invitation by an influential De La Salle Christian Brother intentionally seeking the representation of dedicated, mission-driven, capable women leaders. Interestingly, while the women were selected for their Lasallian leadership attributes, each felt their leadership roles came as a surprise attributing their success to extraneous factors such as luck, circumstance, or hard work. Conversely, laymen were perceived to possess natural authority able to become leaders by rising up through the Lasallian ranks.

Once in their leadership roles, their experiences closely aligned with the literature findings where the women portrayed communal leadership behaviors within an environment of unconscious and conscious bias. Their communal leadership was evident in their tendency towards collaboration, cooperation, and maintaining healthy working relationships. It was apparent in their tendency to temper judgmental observations with words of understanding. It was also seen in their recommendation to create and sustain a supportive community for emerging and current Lasallian women leaders. The women in this study felt comfortable with their communal leadership style, unlike the reported struggles and feelings of incongruence noted in the literature. This might be explained by the De La Salle Christian Brothers’ tendency to be communal leaders as well, given their community living style and Lasallian human-centered charisma.

Similar to past women leadership studies, the reported difficulties appear to be more related to the existence of gender bias. Gender bias related to organizational, social, and individual factors were apparent in the women’s descriptions of gender differences. For example, organizationally, male lay partners were referred to as “Brothers’ Boys” working within a “Brothers’ enterprise” resulting in male deference and higher numbers of Lasallian male representatives. Socially, women lay partners with families were assumed to be unavailable for leadership roles opposed to

the availability of single women – reducing the perceived number of recruitable women leaders. Similarly, on an individual level, career decisions made by mothers in this study were significantly influenced by their family responsibilities. The general belief was that family came first, resulting in the need to choose between taking a high responsibility leadership role or fulfilling family obligations. Episodes of blatant bias were reported as well. Such as stories of avoidance behaviors displayed by a De La Salle Christian Brother walking out of a meeting and another passing by with defiant indifference due to the presence of a laywoman, or dominating behaviors where a Brother at a PARC Regional meeting tried to shut down the voice of the attending women and another declaring he represented the voice of his Region’s laywomen.

When examining the collective lived experience of these seven pioneering Lasallian women leaders, the essence of the findings suggest that these women became international leaders by navigating a leadership labyrinth shaped by invisible forces of the Lasallian network. They began their leadership journey with at least 10 years of service at the local, District, and Regional level. Invitation and encouragement by influential De La Salle Christian Brothers unexpectedly steered them into executive and international leadership roles. Family obligations caused some to move on a different timeline or modify their route. Several bumped into walls of conscious or unconscious bias, but navigated around them with tolerance and understanding. All were surrounded by walls structured by a male-oriented “Brothers’ enterprise” but continued to traverse their path powered by respect for and support by the De La Salle Christian Brothers, love for the mission, and a focus on the greater good. Moreover, these women have navigated the leadership labyrinth for over 25 years, in partnership with other Lasallian women, and continue to do so today.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Based on a synthesis of this study’s findings and recommendations by the participants and contemporary women leadership research, a list of five recommendations is provided for consideration to advance Brother Superior’s call for more Lasallian women leaders.

1. Critically examine and recognize the pervasive existence of unconscious and conscious gender bias in order to transform how we lead and serve our Lasallian mission.
2. Create systems to enable the recruitment of emerging Lasallian women leaders that extend beyond “invitations to serve.”
3. Develop and sustain organizational structures that engender supportive networks and communities for established and emerging women leaders.
4. Recraft how we, as an Institute, tell our 300-year-old Lasallian story to include the historical presence and role of women.
5. Leverage the strengths and opportunities of the innate communal leadership qualities shared by Lasallian laywomen and De La Salle Christian Brothers.

The findings from this study suggest these pioneering Lasallian women became international leaders by navigating a leadership labyrinth shaped by invisible forces within the Lasallian network. In order to advance Brother Superior's call to incorporate more women into the mission-related governmental structures this circuitous labyrinth path needs reshaping to allow for a more linear rise through the ranks. These five recommendations are aimed at accomplishing this by reducing gender bias barriers, developing systems and structures that engender the inclusion and success of women leaders, and leveraging the person-centered Lasallian leadership qualities innately present in women lay partners.

The 2013 Report from the Young Brothers notes, "We dream that our association for the educational service of the poor will continue to integrate the treasured gift that is our lay partners and affirm their identity and role within the mission."³² Lasallian laywomen, who comprise the majority of the Lasallian family, have the same dream. Applying the lessons learned from the experiences of these pioneering Lasallian women leaders can transform this dream into a reality.

Endnotes

1. The author would like to thank the seven distinguished Lasallian women leaders who graciously and generously participated in this study. Their insightful stories and personal quotes are testimony to their courage, strength, leadership, and boundless dedication to our Lasallian mission. Together and by association, we dedicate this article to the advancement of women leaders throughout our Lasallian Institute.

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