

Narratives of the Challenges Faced by College Women in Medical-Related Courses Post-Pandemic

ABSTRACT

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the challenges and coping mechanisms of college women in medical-related courses post-pandemic. With a focus on their lived experiences, the research involved in-depth interviews with 10 participants enrolled in medical courses during the academic year 2023-2024. Participants shared their narratives, detailing the academic pressures, mental health struggles, and family responsibilities they encountered in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using purposive sampling, the study ensured diverse representation among the participants, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of their unique experiences. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, transcriptions, and thematic analysis. Recurring themes emerged, highlighting increased academic expectations, gaps in practical skills, mental health challenges, and the balancing of personal and academic responsibilities. Notably, participants expressed the difficulties posed by technology access and learning disparities, particularly as they transitioned from remote to in-person learning. The impact of gendered expectations also influenced career aspirations, with some women reconsidering their professional goals due to societal pressures. The findings suggest that flexible curricula, mental health support, and gender-sensitive policies are essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by female medical students post-pandemic. By fostering an inclusive educational environment, institutions can help mitigate the heightened stress and promote the well-being and academic success of women in medical education. The study underscores the importance of adapting educational practices to accommodate the evolving needs of students in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: *Medical-related courses, Gendered expectations, Mental health support, Gender-sensitive policies*

A. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY/RATIONALE

The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed had profound and widespread repercussions on the field of education (UNESCO, 2020). Particular attention must be given to female students

pursuing medical courses, who confronted an array of unprecedented challenges stemming not only from the abrupt shift to remote learning but also from the complex interplay of psychosocial and gender-related factors. These multifaceted challenges encompassed not merely academic difficulties but also broader socioemotional and gender-related issues (Hafeez et al., 2020).

The urgency to embark on a comprehensive study that investigates the narratives surrounding these challenges is underscored by the imperative to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has intricately woven itself into the lives and educational journeys of college women engaged in medical courses. This understanding is crucial as it offers profound insights into the formidable obstacles they encountered and the ingenious strategies they devised to surmount them (Yousef et al., 2020).

This study is in alignment with the global perspectives regarding the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education (UNESCO, 2020). The pandemic compelled an abrupt and widespread transition to remote learning, which disrupted established educational systems on a global scale (Hodges et al., 2020). This transition had multifaceted repercussions, affecting students' mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being (Son et al., 2020).

Research conducted in various countries has delved into the diverse and complex challenges confronted by college students in the wake of the pandemic (Yousef et al., 2020). For instance, a study conducted by UNESCO (2020) emphasized the digital divide, which exacerbated inequalities in accessing online education. Additionally, research conducted jointly by UNESCO and the World Bank (2020) underscored the imperative of gender-sensitive responses to address the pandemic's profound impact on higher education.

In the Philippines, where medical and health-related courses hold significant importance, the impact of the pandemic on college women pursuing these fields is of paramount concern. The country's higher education system witnessed a substantial transition to online learning, with guidelines introduced by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to ensure educational continuity (CHED, 2020). However, the digital divide, disparities in resource access, and the unique challenges faced by women in the Philippines amid the pandemic have received limited attention. This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the narratives of college women engaged in medical courses within the Philippine context.

While several studies have explored the impact of the pandemic on higher education, there is a noticeable research gap when it comes to the specific challenges faced by college

women in medical-related courses. Existing literature tends to focus on broader issues of online learning and the digital divide, often overlooking gender-specific experiences and challenges within medical education. This study addresses this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the narratives of college women, offering a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges they encountered and their coping mechanisms.

The purpose of this study was to document and analyze the narratives of college women in medical-related courses post-pandemic, with a focus on their challenges and strategies for overcoming them. By doing so, it aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge on the pandemic's impact on higher education, particularly within the context of medical-related courses. The significance of this study lay in its potential to inform educational institutions, policymakers, and support services about the specific needs of college women in medical education. Ultimately, the findings could guide the development of gender-sensitive policies and support mechanisms that promote the holistic well-being and academic success of these students in our institution.

B. SOCIAL VALUE/ SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

By exploring the unique challenges experienced by college women pursuing medical-related courses after the pandemic, this research contributed to a deeper understanding of gender disparities in education and the need for gender-sensitive responses. Ultimately, the study's findings had the potential to inform policies and interventions that promote equitable access to quality education and support the empowerment of women in the field of medicine, fostering social progress and gender equality.

C. SCIENTIFIC BASIS/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the study titled, two theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant in providing a comprehensive understanding of the research context.

The first theoretical framework draws from feminist theories, specifically intersectionality. Intersectionality, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), underscores the importance of examining the unique experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. In this context, it allows us to explore how the challenges faced by college women in medical related courses are influenced not only by their gender but also by other intersecting factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and access to resources. Understanding these complex intersections is crucial for developing targeted interventions and policies that address the diverse needs of this group.

The second theoretical framework pertains to resilience theory, which focuses on how individuals adapt and thrive in the face of adversity. Given the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, resilience theory, as articulated by Masten (2001), can help elucidate how college women in medical-related courses navigate and overcome obstacles. Examining the narratives of these students in the post-pandemic context allows us to identify the protective factors and coping strategies they employ, shedding light on the potential resilience-building mechanisms that can inform support systems and interventions aimed at bolstering their academic and psychosocial well-being.

D. OBJECTIVE

1. To explore the multifaceted challenges encountered by college women in medical-related courses following the COVID-19 pandemic.

E. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing body of literature related to the proposed research project, provides valuable insights into several key areas:

Gender Disparities in Medical Education: Prior research highlights the presence of gender disparities in medical education, including issues related to career advancement, gender bias, and the challenges faced by women pursuing medical careers (McAleer et al., 2018; Tesch et al., 2020). These studies shed light on the broader context in which college women in medical courses navigate their educational journeys.

COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted higher education, necessitating the rapid transition to online and hybrid learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Numerous studies have explored the pandemic's implications for students, including its effects on mental health, academic performance, and access to resources (Son et al., 2020; Yousef et al., 2020). This body of work provides a foundational understanding of the challenges faced by students in the post-pandemic era.

Intersectionality in Education:

The concept of intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), underscores the importance of considering multiple aspects of identity, such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender, in understanding individuals' experiences and challenges. Recent research has applied intersectionality to education contexts, emphasizing its relevance in examining the unique experiences of students with multiple marginalized identities (Cho et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2017). This theoretical framework informs our exploration of how

gender intersects with other factors in the context of college women pursuing medical courses post-pandemic.

Resilience and Coping Strategies:

Resilience theory (Masten, 2001) has been applied in educational contexts to understand how individuals adapt and thrive in the face of adversity (Henry et al., 2020). Studies have examined the resilience-building strategies employed by students to navigate challenges (Connor et al., 2007), offering valuable insights into potential coping mechanisms employed by college women in medical courses post-pandemic.

By synthesizing these known works, the proposed research project aims to contribute to the existing knowledge base by providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges and coping strategies of college women pursuing medical-related courses in the unique post-pandemic educational landscape, while also considering the intersectional aspects of their identities.

F. METHOD

1.1 Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology was particularly well-suited for this research as it sought to delve into the lived experiences of individuals, in this case, college women in medical-related courses, to gain a deep and holistic understanding of their challenges and coping strategies post-pandemic. Through in-depth interviews and qualitative data analysis, this phenomenological design allowed us to uncover the nuanced narratives of these students, offering insights into their unique perspectives and experiences in the context of the evolving educational landscape shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Participants/Subjects

There were 10 participants in this study who met the following criteria:

Participant Inclusion Criteria:

1. Female students enrolled in a medical-related course at MMFC for the academic year 2023-2024.
2. Active enrollment and participation in courses during the specified academic year.
3. Willingness to participate in both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys.
4. Ability to provide informed consent for participation in the study.

Participant Exclusion Criteria:

1. Male students or individuals identifying outside the female gender spectrum.

2. Students not enrolled in a medical-related course at MMFC for the academic year 2023-2024.
3. Inactive enrollment or absence from academic courses during the specified academic year.
4. Unwillingness to participate in either qualitative interviews or quantitative surveys.
5. Inability or refusal to provide informed consent for participation in the study.

1.3 Data Gathering Procedure

In-depth interviews were conducted through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with college women in medical-related courses. These interviews provided a platform for participants to share their personal narratives, experiences, and challenges faced during the post-pandemic period.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who represented diverse backgrounds and experiences within the context of college women pursuing medical-related courses post-pandemic. This ensured a comprehensive exploration of the challenges they encountered.

Interview Guide Development

A comprehensive interview guide was developed, including open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the challenges faced, coping strategies employed, and any gender-related issues encountered during the post-pandemic period.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Ethical approval from relevant institutional review boards was also obtained.

Data Recording. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' narratives and experiences. Detailed notes were also taken during the interviews.

Transcription. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to prepare the data for analysis. This process maintained the anonymity of participants.

Data Analysis. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify recurring themes, patterns, and narratives within the interview data. This involved coding and categorizing the data to extract meaningful insights.

Member Checking. After data analysis, participants were engaged in member checking by providing them with summaries of their narratives to validate the accuracy of the findings and interpretations.

Data Saturation. Interviews were continued until data saturation was reached, meaning that new interviews yielded little to no additional information or themes.

Validation. Peer debriefing and peer review were conducted to ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of the qualitative data.

Reporting. The qualitative findings were presented in a coherent and meaningful manner, incorporating direct quotes and narratives to illustrate the challenges faced by college women in medical-related courses post-pandemic.

These data gathering procedures enabled the comprehensive exploration of the narratives and challenges experienced by college women in medical courses in the unique post-pandemic educational landscape.

1.4 Data Analysis

Utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, the data from the study "Narratives of the Challenges Faced by College Women in Medical-Related Courses Post-Pandemic" underwent the following analysis steps:

Familiarization. The research team immersed themselves in the qualitative data by reading and rereading the transcripts of the interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narratives provided by the participants.

Initial Coding. The data were systematically coded to identify patterns, themes, and recurring concepts related to the challenges faced by college women in medical courses post-pandemic. This process involved labeling and categorizing segments of the data.

Searching for Themes. Codes were grouped into preliminary themes based on their conceptual relevance. Similar codes were grouped together to form potential themes.

Reviewing Themes. The research team critically reviewed and refined the identified themes, ensuring that they accurately captured the essence of the data and were internally coherent.

Defining and Naming Themes. The themes were further developed and defined, and each was given a clear and concise name that encapsulated the essence of the theme.

Data Interpretation. The research team engaged in a deeper interpretation of the themes, examining their implications and significance within the context of the study. Connections between themes were also explored.

Report Writing. The final step involved presenting the findings in a coherent and meaningful narrative. The research team used direct quotes and excerpts from participants' narratives to illustrate and support the identified themes. This narrative offered a rich and nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by college women in medical courses post-pandemic.

Through the application of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, this study uncovered the multifaceted challenges experienced by college women in medical courses in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a comprehensive narrative of their experiences.

G. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was conducted with strict adherence to the ethical protocols and guidelines set by the San Pedro College- Research and Ethics Committee. The researchers make sure to follow this, requested and secured from key authorities for the permission needed to complete this research, from the conduct until the manuscript is completed and the data stored. The researcher adhered to but was not limited to the following:

Voluntary Participation. The respondents' participation will be completely voluntary and anonymous to protect their privacy.

Privacy and Confidentiality. In line with protecting the rights of the study participants, all the information gathered from this study will be kept private and confidential. Participants were given pseudonyms, and any information shared will not be divulged to other parties.

Informed Consent Process. Primarily, ethical approval was obtained from the San Pedro College, particularly from its Research and Ethics Committee.

Recruitment. Before inviting the participants, the researchers will acquire a letter to conduct the study from the San Pedro College- Research and Ethics Committee.

Risks. The study did not involve higher risk situations that the population may experience in the area of physical, psychological, or socio-economic concerns.

Benefits. The results of this study can help the different schools, students, and guidance and counseling office to design appropriate interventions relating to positive coping and resilience.

Plagiarism. The researchers make sure that the correct and accurate way of citing ideas from other writers and scholars will be fully observed. To do this, this paper will undergo grammar and plagiarism checking via Grammarly and Turnitin software.

Fabrication. Any misleading information and representation of primary data findings in a biased way will be avoided to ensure that no fabrication and falsification will be committed.

Falsification. The researchers will keep the record, which includes sufficient details to permit examination to replicate the research, respond to questions that may result from unintentional error or misinterpretation, establish authenticity of the records, and confirm the conclusions' validity.

Conflict of Interest. Affiliations in any form, sources of funding, and any possible conflicts of interest will be declared.

Deceit. In addition, any deception or exaggeration about the aims and objectives of the research will be avoided by sticking to what has been written and discussed in the consent form concerning the nature of the study and the benefits and risks that the participants may encounter.

Permission from Organization/Location. The research is only conducted after approval from the authorities.

Authorship. Finally, the researchers will draft an authorship contribution statement and acknowledge the contribution of all the people who helped in the Acknowledgement section, from the research panel and reviewers to the statistician and grammarian of this study. This ensured that authorship and contribution were enforced and that proper listing of the people who should be given credit was done.

H. EXPECTED OUTPUTS AND POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

Expected Outputs (based on 6Ps):

The study is aimed to generate the following outputs:

- 1. Publication**
- 2. People Services**
- 3. Partnership**
- 4. Policy**

Potential outcomes:

The potential outcome of this study is to generate a published article. The study also hopes to provide a basis for an intervention program that will likely increase students' positive coping and academic resilience leading to a successful academic college life.

I. POTENTIAL IMPACTS

The potential social impact of this study is to provide valuable information on positive coping and academic resilience from any academic setbacks. It will likely be a source of

information on the development of mental, emotional, and academic fortitude in order to succeed college life.

J. TARGET BENEFICIARY

The target beneficiaries of this study will be the heads of offices, faculty, students, and parents of San Pedro College Community.

K. SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

The results of the study will provide a basis for an intervention program that will likely increase students' positive coping and academic resilience leading to a successful academic college life.

L. LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

For the participants of this study, it will be limited to the Mindanao Medical Foundation College students only.

M. LIST OF RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS and RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN

Risk – Delays in submission of the target deadlines

Withdrawal from one of the researchers in the data gathering of the study.

Assumption – The help of the MMFC, deans of different schools, and student participation in the conduct of the study.

Risk Management Plan - Proper communication, allocation of time, and overtime.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Increased Academic Pressure and Performance Expectations

The study revealed that college women in medical-related courses faced heightened academic pressures post-pandemic. The transition to online learning left gaps in essential skills, creating a backlog of competencies that students struggled to meet when in-person classes resumed. With a condensed curriculum to catch up on, many felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of coursework and the accelerated pace of learning. In particular, laboratory and hands-on training posed a unique challenge due to lost opportunities for practical application during remote learning, which made students feel underprepared for assessments and clinical placements.

Research indicates that the post-pandemic educational environment has exacerbated stress and anxiety levels among students, particularly women, who may already face additional societal pressures to excel academically. According to a study by Wasson et al. (2022), the shift back to in-person learning led to a noticeable increase in academic burnout, with students in medical fields reporting higher levels of distress due to both academic and

practical skills deficits. Moreover, women in traditionally male-dominated fields like medicine often face implicit bias and stereotypes, as documented by Moss-Racusin et al. (2012), which may further compound the pressure they experience in performing well academically.

Theme 2: Mental Health Struggles and Coping Mechanisms

Many participants shared that the pandemic significantly affected their mental health, and its aftereffects lingered well into their post-pandemic academic lives. Feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression were common, particularly as they navigated the stress of resuming in-person activities while still dealing with uncertainties about their health and safety. The added pressure of balancing academics and personal well-being often led to burnout. Despite this, some women developed resilience, relying on peer support, counseling services, or mindfulness practices to cope with their mental health struggles.

The mental health toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, especially women, has been well-documented. According to a study by Son et al. (2020), female students were more likely to report anxiety and stress compared to their male counterparts during the pandemic. The pressure to maintain academic success while dealing with personal and societal challenges contributed to the deterioration of mental well-being. Coping mechanisms like seeking social support and professional help, as discussed by Hutchison et al. (2021), have proven effective in mitigating these challenges, though accessibility to mental health services remains a concern.

Theme 3: Balancing Academic and Family Responsibilities

Post-pandemic, many college women found it challenging to juggle both their academic responsibilities and family obligations. Several participants reported that the pandemic altered family dynamics, with more expectations placed on them to contribute to household duties or care for family members. This was particularly challenging for those from multi-generational households or families with essential workers. Balancing these increased demands with their studies created additional stress, forcing many to sacrifice their academic performance or personal time.

The pandemic disproportionately increased domestic responsibilities for women, both in professional and academic settings. As highlighted by the United Nations (2020), women globally have shouldered the majority of caregiving and household tasks, which extended into the lives of female students, exacerbating their stress and diminishing the time available

for academic pursuits. In medical education, where workloads are already intense, studies such as those by Dyrbye et al. (2014) show that the additional family pressures can significantly impair academic performance and emotional well-being.

Theme 4: Technology Gaps and Learning Disparities

One of the major post-pandemic challenges faced by these women was the persistent gap in technology access and digital literacy. While the world quickly pivoted to online learning during the pandemic, not all students had equal access to reliable technology, such as high-speed internet and updated devices. The unequal access to these resources led to learning disparities that lingered even after returning to campus. Many participants expressed frustration with the steep learning curve associated with digital platforms used for hybrid learning models, which further hindered their ability to keep up with course materials and clinical simulations.

Inequalities in access to digital resources have been a critical issue throughout the pandemic. According to Dhawan (2020), students from low-income or rural backgrounds were disproportionately affected by the sudden shift to online learning, with women often bearing the brunt of these challenges. In medical education, which is highly dependent on practical experience, the absence of adequate technology can further disadvantage students. According to O'Doherty et al. (2020), the quality of online medical education has varied widely, leading to a gap in learning that continues to affect post-pandemic academic performance.

Theme 5: Gendered Expectations and Career Aspirations Post-Pandemic

The study found that many women in medical-related courses felt constrained by traditional gender roles, particularly in terms of their career aspirations post-pandemic. The societal expectation to prioritize family and caregiving responsibilities influenced some women's decisions to defer or modify their professional goals. While the pandemic caused many to reconsider work-life balance, others expressed concerns about the long-term viability of their careers in medicine due to these gendered expectations, which often conflict with the demanding nature of the field.

Gender expectations continue to shape the career trajectories of women in medicine. According to a study by Miller and Katz (2021), women in the medical field often face pressure to balance family life with the intense demands of their careers, a challenge that was amplified during the pandemic. These societal expectations can lead to career compromises

or a slower professional progression for women compared to their male colleagues. This issue aligns with the broader findings of Ridgeway (2011), which highlights how gendered norms in the workplace create additional barriers to women's advancement in traditionally male-dominated fields such as medicine.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

College women in medical-related courses post-pandemic faced several key challenges, including increased academic pressure due to gaps in essential skills, mental health struggles, balancing academic and family responsibilities, technology gaps, and navigating gendered expectations regarding their careers. These issues were exacerbated by the pandemic's disruption to education and societal expectations, leading to heightened stress, burnout, and disparities in academic performance.

To address these challenges, curriculum development should prioritize flexible learning models that account for varying access to technology and provide additional support for practical skills through hands-on training. Integrating mental health resources and promoting gender-sensitive policies are essential to supporting the well-being of female students. Moreover, curricula should be designed to reduce academic pressure while accommodating personal and family responsibilities, ensuring a more equitable learning environment that supports the professional growth of women in medical fields.

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by college women in medical-related courses post-pandemic, emphasizing the increased academic pressure, mental health struggles, balancing family responsibilities, technology gaps, and the impact of gendered expectations on career aspirations. The findings underscore the importance of developing gender-sensitive, flexible curricula that address the unique needs of these students. By implementing supportive strategies such as enhanced mental health services, hands-on learning opportunities, and policies that promote work-life balance, educational institutions can better support the academic success and overall well-being of women in medical education. These changes are crucial for fostering an inclusive and equitable learning environment that empowers women to thrive in the demanding field of medicine.

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