

VIGNETTES OF THE SEXUALLY MARGINALIZED: THE EXPERIENCES OF OPENLY GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS IN COLEGIO DE SAN JUAN DE LETRAN, MANILA

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ABSTRACT

As a safe space for learning and personal development, the school must be open and accommodating to every student regardless of their personal life decisions. However, the institution cannot control the student-student and professor-student dynamics that are happening every day, especially when viewed from the perspective of the marginalized gender, primarily the LGBT students. Cases such as bullying of heterosexual students and unconsciously exposing the student to double standards of faculty members were reported by openly gay and lesbian students, therefore affecting their academic performance. Furthermore, the experiences of the LGBT students may serve as a clue as to how improvement in instruction can be attained in the Colegio de San Juan de Letran, Manila. Through a case study/life history methodology, vignettes of the sexually marginalized in the Colegio will be put into focus and will be a useful tool for analysis of student development, both academically and emotionally.

Keywords: gender, gender studies, gender sensitivity, LGBT, school

INTRODUCTION

The school serves as the next primary socializing agent next to the family. It is in school that children acquire knowledge that will be useful in their future career. Since students are spending majority of their waking hours inside a particular social institution, their dynamics between each other are imperative. These dynamics may be seen in various perspectives—academic performance, emotional stability, projected financial capabilities (of parents, since students rarely have money on their own), race, and even gender.

Gender is relatively new topic in social sciences. Usually, gender is tackled under the subject of gender identity or the awareness of the maleness or femaleness as a concept in the development of a self-concept (Papalia and Martotell, 2015) The whole concept of gender roles and gender typing/stereotyping now hinges on the fact that gender and gender identity is a matter of awareness of the child, therefore placing the burden on the social experiences of the student that contributes to his or her own gender awareness. Gender, though relatively new in the field, now becomes a very important force that may affect a students' performance inside the academic institution.

Recently, a memorandum released by the Commission on Higher Education underscored the importance of gender mainstreaming in the academe. Entitled Establishing the Policies and Guidelines on Gender and Development in the Commission on Higher Education and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), it reiterates the fundamental equality of men and women enshrined in the Philippine Constitution and the destruction of gender bias in Republic Act 7192 or the Women in Development and Nation Building Act (CHED, 2015) This further emphasized the need of gender mainstreaming not just in lawmaking and business but also in the cognitive development of a child.

However, challenges continued to plague gender studies even in the academic world. A very important study of Dr. Robert Liebert had stated an issue of gender and school facilities catering to the marginalized (i.e., lesbian and gay students) that the school administrators themselves were contesting, leading to an oppression of a specific gender group in Columbia University, back in 1971 (Liebert, 1971). Aside from this, several common concern of students also took centerstage in the analysis of gender in the academe, such as bullying, unequal opportunities, exclusion in social events, and even sexual harassment by heterosexual students.

Combining these together, this paper critically analyses the experiences of openly gay and lesbian students of Colegio de San Juan de Letran, Manila and how the academic institution answers to the need not just of heterosexual students but of students belonging to the sexually marginalized. It is important for an academic institution to monitor the gender disparities present in the school vicinity for everyone to have an equal opportunity to be educated. Since education is a basic human right regardless of gender, an unsafe space for the sexually marginalized will definitely have an adverse effect in their development and education.

Furthermore, after analyzing the responses of the sexually marginalized students in the Colegio, this paper will also explore the idea of a gender framework in Letran to be even more accessible to everybody, as well as a developed safe space for the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) students. This gender framework serves not only the LGBT students but also the heterosexual students for their gender sensitivity development, as per accordance to existing laws and memoranda protecting gender and the sexually marginalized.

Literature Review

This paper recognized the following themes as of significant importance to the analysis and generalization of the experiences of the sexually marginalized in the Colegio de San Juan de Letran.

Gender

The usual dichotomy between ‘gender’ as a social construct and ‘sex’ being the biological basis of gender was re-explained by R. W. Connell in his book entitled *Gender*. Instead of separating them into two mutually exclusive fields, he then defined gender as “[...] a structure of social relations that centers on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes” (Connell, 2002). This erased the false dichotomy between the body and the social world by simply defining gender as socially constructed based on the crossing over of sexual differences in to the social experience of an individual. This means that gender is culturally based, is socially reproduced with the aid of its biological part, and may have an end, when the dichotomy between genders is no longer necessary as dictated by society. (Connell, 2002).

The CHED memorandum on the establishment of Gender and Development in HEIs has their own definition of gender, having adapted them from UNESCO. Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the family, society, and culture as well as their behaviors as such (CHED, 2015). They also recognized the fluidity of gender and expectations

as well as the factors that may change them (i.e., politics, social classes, etc.) The CHED memorandum reechoed Connell’s definition by stating that gender is not biologically predetermined and may change depending on the existing social order (CHED, 2015).

Gender is often treated in the private sphere and people may seek invisibility as a form of protection to issues that are considered taboo by society when it comes to gender (Abelgas, 2015). In seeking for comfort, gender may be construed in modes that may not be reflected on the definitions of Connell and the UNESCO. Invisibility and the idea that one cannot pinpoint a particular person gives the idea of safety at the expense of a working definition of what gender is.

Wendy Harrison also reiterated the definitions of gender mentioned above in her article entitled *The Shadow and the Substance: The Sex/Gender Debate*. The unity of the biological underpinnings of gender as well as the psychological and social engagement of an individual make his/her idea of gender identity. (Harrison, 2006) It means that gender is more than just the division of what is male and what is female—it is a complex set of both biological and social processes that makes a human being masculine, feminine, both, or none at all.

Pilcher and Whelehan (2004) defined gender as a ‘free play’ for an individual, making gender a performance based on both the body and the social world. The result is that individuals have the potential to create ‘gender trouble’ and challenge the way discourse establishes and reinforces certain meanings and ‘institutions’, such as that of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004) Therefore, an environment in which gender is oppressed may be adopted by the child, making him/her a victim of oppression even without the performance of other children in the oppression per se.

The gender ‘free play’ is also advocated by Papalia and Martorell (2015), saying that gender and gender identity develops as to how an individual may identify him- or herself based on societal norms and social experiences. This analysis is not overstating the contribution of society in gender identification, rather, it emphasizes biology in serving as the primary basis of parents in classifying their children into male and female but it is the social self that reinforces that gender assignment.

Therefore, a working definition of gender is both the contribution of the biological origins of the individual, their hormones that defines who they are, as well as the social experiences that will definitely have an effect as to how people assign themselves in the gender spectrum.

LGBT (Lesbian, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgenders)

In the strata of the LGBT people themselves, identity talks—who is gay and who is not—were vague and oftentimes confusing. (Abelgas, 2014) The movement in itself is unsure of which belongs to which category, making the LGBT identity very fluid. It is only through self-affirmation that someone can identify him or herself as a member of the LGBT sector. Self-affirmation in itself is a problem in the LGBT sector, especially in the Philippine setting.

The Philippine 60s was the conceptual beginning of the history of Filipino gays. It gave birth to organized inquiries about male homosexuality, also similar to the start of the gender movements in the US. The 70s revolved around the maxim-rotate, vibrate, collide or a scientific view of homosexuals (positivism). This is where the term-third sex and -sward were used.

When the 80s came, the Filipino gays were more rampant and fabulous. In fact, gay films like *Tubog sa Ginto* (1973) and *Tatay Kong Nanay* (1978), as well as gay theatre like *Hanggang Dito Na Lamang* at Maraming Salamat of Orlando Nadres (1974) populated the turn of the new decade (Perez, 1992). They paved the way in covering the gays in magazines for the world to realize that they indeed exist. As the years go by, the 90s saw a decline in celebrating LGBT people and rights for they became marginals in society—only defined as □ inverted males (Garcia, 1996). Up to this period, these marginalizations of LGBT people is present, hence the need to create a civil society organization focusing on these rights and inequalities. (Abelgas, 2014)

Stereotypes were never gone, only muted for a while. These *Ang bakla ay kailangan ideretso* or *Napapagaling ang mga bakla ng tamang babae* or a more derogatory *Ang pagkabakla ay pulos kalandian, kakirian, katarayan, at kadalalan* reflects ignorance and lack of understanding of people (Perez, 1992) Stereotypes are the LGBT sector's most powerful adversary, making inclusion into the general society difficult for them. Being termed as 'abnormal and unnatural', it simultaneously glorifies heteronormativity and discriminates those who cannot fit in the mold.

The adoption of the term 'queer' suggests a blurring of boundaries between straight and gay sex and validates those who would in the past have been considered sexual 'outlaws'. 'Queer' has come to be associated with a new militancy in gay and lesbian politics – a determined push for visibility and a celebration of the transgressive. (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004) This shows that the LGBT sector is indeed doing something to celebrate their existence and to justify it to society.

Tied with the clamor for human rights is the emergence of the concept of homosexuality.

Discussions about homosexuality and the rights of the Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgenders (LGBT) sector were not the norm of scholarly articles before. It was only during the 19th to the 20th century that studies regarding the "third sex" are being done because of the decriminalization of homosexuality (Nadal, 2013) Henceforth, the appeal for homosexual studies has intensified, giving more focus on other realms of homosexuality that were not touched before.

Christopher Hewitt's *The Socioeconomic Position of Gay Men: A Review of the Evidence* (1995) also had the same analysis—that the distinction using gender as a fulcrum is more problematic because of the existence of sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual behavior.¹¹ For example, a heterosexual male in identity may have sexual relations with another heterosexual male yet they identify themselves as heterosexual males. The sexual activity between heterosexual males may just be because of a hypermasculine environment where shortage of females is observed, such as in prisons, in the firefighting scene, and in the military. (Buchanan, 2010) This makes the arena of sexual and LGBT rights difficult, as what is also explored above. (Abelgas, 2015)

The idea of analyzing the LGBT sector is very broad and complicated, with various ins and outs that will have an impact in any study done inside their area of concern. What is necessary is the intent of the study done—that is, to reflect their struggle inside a society that forces them to be 'normal' instead of supporting them in the decisions that they make.

Gender in School

Gender portrayal in schools is discussed in Connell's Gender, using it as a case study in gender relationships. The school, next to the family, perpetuated the dichotomy of gender in socialization. Meaning, children are socialized based on only two options: boys and girls. (Connell, 2002) As a result, children are forced to follow the strict codes promulgated by the academic institution, especially when it comes to gender (i.e., separate lines for boys and girls)

In instruction, teachers are only fond of separating males from females when activities are done. Teachers are not particular in gender differences when it comes to teaching the lesson per se (Connell, 2002) The division in a classroom set-up is based on a teacher-student dyad, which is not gendered (Connell, 2002). However, it does not mean that gender differences end in the classroom. In the symbolic sphere, boys are found to be more aggressive than girls, which are seen as contamination and should be avoided by the former (Connell, 2002)

In a nutshell, Connell is projecting that gender roles and norms are not passively taught and learned in school—they are a result of the

individual's own processing aided by the school's nourishment. People should be dynamic in analyzing gender and not fall into fixed categories that reduce their existence to mere puppets of the social and biological world (Connell, 2002)

In 1971 Columbia University, the administration faced serious repercussions in banning a gay lounge, which is approved by the University Dormitory Council. The school administration did not explicitly say their reason behind the opposition but they had been free to consider court orders and even the city police to prevent the gay lounge from opening. This became an issue in the oppression of gay rights in the said university. (Liebert, 1971)

This led to the secrecy of the gay community in their gender identity and expression. They regarded themselves as abnormal and it led to feelings of devaluation, degradation that they constructed around their identity. (Liebert, 1971) Even when it comes to course offerings, Columbia University that time had been following a gender divide, suggesting science, engineering, law, and business to males and suggesting social sciences, humanities, and theater arts to females. This dichotomous gender division makes gays and lesbians unsure of which course to take, therefore feeling unwelcome in either. (Liebert, 1971)

Two major arguments in not recognizing the need for gay people to have a lounge in 1971 are (1) reactions of alumni, parents, and prospective applicants in choosing Columbia University and (2) the domino effect, that if you grant gays the right to a lounge, other deviant groups will decide to push for their right to their own lounge as well. (Liebert, 1971) This is ultimately rooted in the fact that private educational institutions, since they do not get government funding, need to rely in private money for their operational costs. A serious depletion of enrollees because of scandals might affect their capability to operate, so they must be very careful in the image they portray.

In the end, educational institutions must also give the student the capability to decide, whether in gender issues or topics concerning their welfare as students. This attitude includes creation of a safe space not just for both homo- and heterosexual students but for ethnic minorities and deviant students as well. (Liebert, 1971)

These literatures about gender play in school suggests that the gender development of a child ultimately starts in the family and is only continued in school, terming it as the child's 'second home'. Since it can contribute as to how a student will see life after this phase, it is imperative that the educational institution makes gender development as a impending focus.

METHOD

As a qualitative, phenomenological study, this research will utilize an interview intensive approach. In an effort to help build a rapport with participants and develop a level of trust in which participants can honestly share their experiences with the researcher, a type of episodic interviewing will form the main structure of the methodology. Embedded within this structure are two activities designed to help the participant explore and make meaning of their experiences and the power and privilege that impact their identity/identities.

This study utilized a descriptive approach and highly interpretive because it will try to explain the phenomena for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people, realizing their sexual orientation or gender identity and sharing that information with family and friends is often a gradual process that can unfold over a series of years. This section looks at the process of coming out when and how it happens, how difficult it is, and what impact it has on relationships.

Sampling Procedure

In pursuit of acquiring firsthand information regarding the topic inquiry, it involves the use of interview method and at the same time, interview questions were utilized to gather the necessary information from the openly gays and lesbians who can be interviewed given the limited time. Interview method was rendered to twenty (20) members of the LGBT community who are concentrated in Colegio de San Juan de Letran, Manila. Since the respondents are concentrated on the said Colegio, more or less, their life history and case studies experiences do vary significantly.

Data Gathering Procedures

The researchers will set an interview at the time where both the researcher and the respondents have convenience and is not conflict with other schedules in order for the interview to be conducted in a smooth and orderly manner. Other data gathering procedures may also be employed, like the focus group discussions. The aim of this focus group research was to identify the common themes regarding the needs, concerns, and issues affecting a select group of LGBT persons. It was believed that the identification of common themes would provide insights into focus group participants' attitudes, perceptions, and opinions within the LGBT community and their utilization of academic services.

The Research Objectives

The researchers are concerned with how gender and gender development play a role in the holistic development of students in Colegio de San Juan de Letran, Manila. This encompasses the experiences and life histories of openly gay and lesbian students of the said Colegio as well as their challenges in all aspects of their life. With a focus on how the

educational institution like Letran treats homosexual students, the researchers aim to attain the following:

1. To discover, in a grassroots approach, the different stories and challenges that an LGBT Letranite is going through
2. To analyze the cases of these students to come up with an integrative solution reflective of gender sensitivity, equality, and social justice
3. To come up with institutional proposals for the marginalized genders to diminish the number of gender-related offenses for both students and faculty members.
4. To develop new perspectives in college instruction through fusing gender sensitivity and academic development for every student in the Colegio.

Interview Questions

To capture the totality of the research agenda stated above, the following questions will be asked to the respondents. Since this is a semi-structured interview, questioning may be varied from one respondent to the other, depending on how open they are in answering the questions and on the quality of their answers.

1. Based on a textbook/societal labeling methodology, how would you recognize yourself? Are you gay/lesbian, bisexual, etc.?
2. How did you accept that fact? How did your immediate family and friends accept that fact?
3. Did you experience any kind of discrimination or unfair treatment because of your gender even before you enrolled in the Colegio? How did you deal with that?
4. Did your gender identity/expression play a significant role in your entrance to the Colegio?
5. Did you experience any kind of discrimination or unfair treatment from the heterosexual students, faculty, and/or administrators of the Colegio because of your gender? Were there actions done to investigate/solve it?
6. How are your dynamics with the professor and your classmates inside the classroom? Is there any gender discrimination present?
7. Overall, how are you going to describe your life and gender development inside the Colegio?

Theoretical Framework

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Approach/Social Cognitive Theory is used as a theoretical basis of this paper. According to the social cognitive theory, observation entails children to learn much about gender typed behaviors even before performing them. (Papalia and Martorell, 2015) Instead of taking the social environment as a given, it is a factor—along with the child's own analysis of his/her social world—for his/her development, especially in gender. He/she both

transforms the social environment as well as the social environment changes the individual, therefore affecting that individual's behavior and gender manifestation. (Papalia and Martorell, 2015)

Figure 1 is a theoretical diagram of the Social Cognitive Theory, slightly modified to suit the demands of this paper.

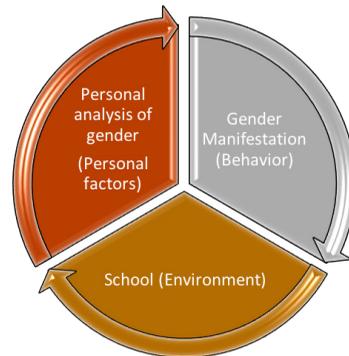


Figure 1. Social Cognitive Theory

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Upon data gathering and analysis, the respondents had given information that is crucial for the study, especially in exploring their gender and its participation in their daily affairs. With a varied mix of bisexuals, gays, and lesbians, the data had reflected their various views, reflections, and challenges.

The corresponding differences and the influences of societal and environmental factors lead to wide variations in gender. As mentioned, composition is almost equally varied in terms of identification with being a bisexual male or female, lesbian, or gay. These distinctions provide us with the idea that people have different views of themselves and different preferences regarding their attraction with other people.

While majority are accepted in their families, presence of homophobia is still a force to contend with. Gender acceptance of the respondents depends on the perceived benefit of the concerned parties. Pe-Pua and Marcelino (2000), and Enriquez define this phenomenon in Filipinos as *pakikipagkapwa*. This is defined as having a relationship with a person whom one “shares identity with”. Contradictions in beliefs of the people towards people of different genders and their significant others lead to aversion and repugnance. These are hereby contributing to the development of homophobia.

When it comes to direct contacts with the faculty, employees, and school administrators, religion is the prime reason for the enmity to LGBT students. Being a Catholic school, Catholicism plays a major role in the acceptance of these students.

This is evident in the homophobic jokes and opinions in various classes held, issues on freedom of expression, hostile view of homosexual relationships, and cases of forcibly ‘outing’ someone’s gender and sexual orientation, especially during classes.

As narrated by the respondents coming from the LGBT community, the general life in the institution is classified as slowly developing to be more accepting of them. Despite of the varied experiences of homophobia and unthought of gender-based jokes, they had described the institution as tolerable regarding their gender. Development of resilience to the aforementioned challenges proved useful to almost all of them, especially those who are flamboyant in their gender expression. Gender equality needs to be forwarded in order for their confidence to be boosted. As a marginalized sector, the LGBT community’s experiences in the institution is bittersweet—a combination of bad and good experiences that shaped them into what they are at the time of the data gathering for this paper.

Myers and Twenge (2017) describe discrimination as a result of prejudice against a person or a group of persons and that this prejudice stems from the person’s perceived threat to integrity. Carl Word, Mark Zanna, and Joel Cooper (1974) term this discrimination as self-confirming social beliefs. By acting out his/her superiority or divisive anguish, it confirms the significant others’ (SO’s) “correctness” in belief. As such, when these LGBT students are present, discrimination, physical and verbal violence, suppression of freedom of expression, forcibly “outing” someone, jokes directed against their gender and other negative acts by SOs are directed to them. To maintain a certain level of civility and “pakikitungo” towards these SOs, students are forced to ‘keep silent about it’ and not fight back.

When it comes to acceptance of their gender before and during their enrolment, majority said that stigma and double standards were the usual thoughts, but they were watered down upon having a supportive peer group. Furthermore, awareness in bullying and gender-based discrimination is also high, making them more resilient in facing such.

Finally, in education, the respondents underlined the presence of LGBT professors that they can relate to in some courses. However, this did not hinder the appearance of homophobic jokes from their classmates and even from their homophobic professors. Some of the professors even use these LGBT pupils as examples in their classes while discussing gender sensitive topics such as intimacy among homosexuals and gender discrimination. This may lead into alienation of the LGBT from the learning process.

In an institutional perspective, some of the courses are not appreciated by these students because of its very

nature—that is, being heteronormative. Because of this, they cannot relate directly to the lessons and may lead into poor performance in that course. While it is quite impossible to make every course gender inclusive, especially in a catholic point of view, the students hope for more efforts to realize their existence and not to shun them aside for the benefit of heteronormativity.

In order to avoid these forms of aggression towards them, LGBT students adapt ways that may or may not be directed against their own personas. Lesbians tend to demonstrate pakikiisa, the highest form of pakikipagkapwa (Pe-Pua & Marcelino, 2000) with other male students. They tend to help other bullied LGBT students because they somewhat feel that “others must not experience the way I experienced these things”. As such, there is increased awareness in bullying and other forms of aggression. All of these fully support Myers’s and Twenge’s recommendation of prevention of aggression before it happens. These are all forms of conflict-resolution strategies which prevents aggression and unrest from happening. There is increased inhibition of committing such acts from the aggressors, and promotion of assertiveness from the victims themselves. Not only are SOs capable of performing such discrimination, but also professors may insinuate such violent acts. Lessons may be directed towards only heteronormative direction, non-inclusion of LGBT students in classroom discussion and somehow “demonizing” homosexual or gender non-conforming relationships. These are all forms of passive aggression, or non-verbal aggression that manifests in negative behaviour towards someone (Long, Long, & Whitson, 2009)

SUMMARY

Using Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, the LGBT sector in the institution in focus both used their environment and their personal analysis in expressing their gender. They have an idea of who they are and what they want, and through their varied experiences in their environment, their notion of social justice, education, and the social world changes. By invoking all three—school environment, gender manifestation, and their personal experiences/analysis about their gender, the respondents developed a sense of resilience in portraying their gender that stemming from their past experiences and their experiences in the new environment. This becomes a cycle of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors that have a direct link in how the LGBT view the educational system.

This is evident in the diagram below:

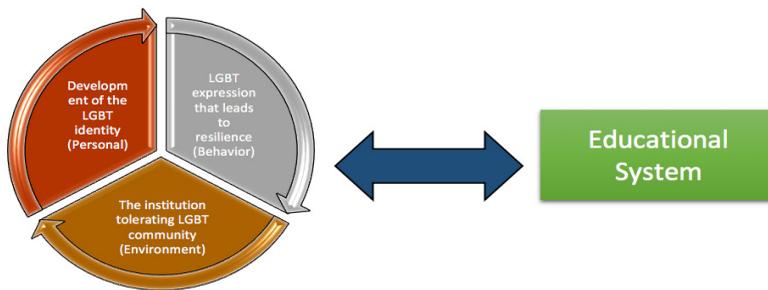


Figure 2: Framework of Analysis

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper explored the experiences of the openly gay and lesbian students of Colegio de San Juan de Letran. Through a case study/life history methodology, the researchers had found out that these students are experiencing discrimination, bullying, homophobic approaches, teasing, and forced exposure of their gender by the heterosexual students. This has been happening to them even before they enrolled in this academic institution.

Upon entry, some of the mentioned prior experiences were still happening to the LGBT community but a higher level of tolerance is observed. The environment of this academic institution had forced these people to be more resilient in the challenges they face and to be more creative in order to express their flamboyance. In addition, the religiosity of the institution made acceptance of the LGBT community harder, yet they did not falter one bit. They continued their studies because of their inherent strength of character and resilience.

When it comes to the education system, LGBT professors are one reason why the LGBT students understand the lessons. However, homophobic instructors are also prevalent and are using the LGBT students as negative examples for the class. This results to publicly outing the person's gender against his or her will. Homophobic jokes and remarks inside the classroom are also present despite of the institutions apparent toleration of the LGBT community.

The highly heteronormative curriculum was also mentioned by the respondents, saying that some of the lessons are not understood well by the LGBT students because of its heteronormative leaning. This is a possible avenue for further research on gender inclusion in curriculum design and development, aside from being an issue that must be dealt with by the institution.

Overall, the experiences of the sexually marginalized in Colegio de San Juan de Letran can be described as "bittersweet", as one respondent phrased

it. Efforts must still be done in order to make the institution more gender responsive and sensitive, yet the gender thrusts of this school must not be taken for granted. The institution generally accepts the LGBT community and is giving them space to grow and develop into their full potential. This capacity development is very important to students regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. Through efforts to develop the institution into a safer space for the LGBT, more students shall be welcome to enroll and shall benefit from this kind of change.

Upon doing the entire study, the following recommendations came from the researchers in order to aid the institution to be more gender inclusive:

- Inculcate a greater sense of respect and acceptance to the students of the academic institution to avoid stigmatization of the LGBT.
- Development of safe spaces for LGBT members that is built upon on mutual respect and acceptance regardless of gender.
- Heavier sanctions for both student and employees when it comes to discriminatory acts, bullying, and violent actions.
- Increase the relationship of the LGBT community to spiritual and religious affairs so that they cannot feel alienated from the general society.
- Provide avenues for the LGBT students to express their creativity and also to properly express their gender inside the institution.
- Train faculty members, staff members, and the administration to treat students equally, regardless of gender, especially in classrooms and other public places. This is to prevent the LGBT students to feel that they do not have any support from those who are above them.
- Investigation, revision, and development of curricula and courses to be more gender inclusive not only for LGBTs but also for women.

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