# Big, small wins for women

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Filipino women have come a long way from the 1800s when their rights were suppressed to earning educational degrees, climbing professional ladders, and breaking glass ceilings today.

One notable progress in women’s development, as announced by Supreme Court Chief Justice Alexander Gesmundo earlier this week, is that they now make up more than half or 56 percent of sitting judges in trial courts. This is further broken down to 77 percent of the Court of Tax Appeals, 45 percent of the Court of Appeals, and 35 percent of the Sandiganbayan.

Gesmundo added that women have a “growing presence” across the judiciary serving as lawyers, judicial officers, and administrative personnel, as well as in other fields. “Women are indispensable to the progress of our nation … (They) are present in every sector, every space, and every field—building business(es), leading institutions, shaping policies, and strengthening families and communities,” he said.

He, however, pointed out that true empowerment is not only increasing representation but also building a system where women’s leadership, insight, and expertise are fully valued and integrated into shaping the country’s institutional and cultural fabric.

## Pivotal roles

And rightly so. Throughout Philippine history, women have played significant, if not, pivotal roles in the country’s development—even during the era when they faced so many barriers such as getting an education.

This, however, was never a hindrance to their achieving great things. There is Melchora Aquino, better known as Tandang Sora, who despite not having any formal education could read and write at an early age. She later played a crucial role in the Philippine revolution by providing shelter, medical care, and moral support to the Katipunan revolutionaries.

In the late 1800s, Tandang Sora operated a store in Barrio Banlat, Caloocan—now Barangay Tandang Sora, Quezon City—that served as a safe place for sick and wounded revolutionaries. Today, “sari-sari” stores like what she managed are an important source of empowerment for women.

Last month, the Quezon City government inaugurated the country’s first-ever women’s museum named after Tandang Sora as a tribute “to the countless women who have shaped the nation through courage, resilience and leadership.”

## Improved social status

A new study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, in collaboration with tech start-up Packworks, found that managing or owning “sari-sari” or convenience stores has become a platform for women to foster their individuality and social well-being. This also gave them a deeper sense of purpose and provided a sense of independence, confidence, and fulfillment.

The study, “Gender, Microentrepreneurship, Human Flourishing: Exploring the Experiences of Women Sari-sari Store Owners toward Inclusive Growth,” quoted one participant as saying that it helped her find an identity separate from the traditional role of women in the family as a “housewife,” an important yet largely uncompensated work.

“In terms of social empowerment, the women were observed to have improved social status within their communities … The same insights are also reflected in the human flourishing indices which suggested that these women embody transformational leadership by fostering self-reliance and a sense of agency, which enables them to take on influential roles within their communities,” the study stated.

Despite these advancements in policies and mindsets, however, there remain barriers to women’s development. For one, they still face issues securing capital to sustain their small enterprises such as “sari-sari” stores, compared to men who get more opportunities as business owners and entrepreneurs.

## Labor participation

Looking at the bigger picture, women still face more challenges finding employment opportunities despite completing college and secondary education.

The Commission on Population and Development (CPD) cited the 2021 labor force survey of the Philippine Statistics Authority which showed that labor participation for women was lower at 51.2 percent compared to 75.4 percent for men. CPD added that the unemployment rate was higher for women at 8.2 percent compared to 7.5 percent for men.

This was despite the same survey showing that 14.5 percent of women completed college compared to 10.5 percent of men. In addition, 84.8 percent of women completed secondary education compared to 81.4 percent of men.

“We have come a long way, but we still have more work to do,” said CPD executive director Lisa Grace Bersales.

These wins, big and small, are a timely reminder during this National Women’s Month, that women’s empowerment did not end when doors were opened for women so they could earn degrees or vote for their leaders. It is a continuing process as the world changes, advances, and evolves—hopefully into a place where women are assured not only of equal rights but also of the same opportunities as men.