Exploring the Life and Experiences of Women in a VUCA Environment

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, this study explores women's lived experiences, highlighting their key challenges, coping skills, and overall perceived impact amidst the unpredictable terrain of the 21st-century workplace. Through qualitative research design incorporating interviews, this research aims to uncover the intersectionality of women's experiences within VUCA conditions. Results of the study show that women face critical challenges in decision-making under uncertainty, gendered role expectations, job security and multiple roles, mental health issues, and work adjustments. To cope with these challenges, participants focused on adaptation and flexibility, communication and collaboration, continuous learning and development, strategic planning and time management, and wellness and self-care strategies. Lastly, most of the impact of VUCA conditions among women highlighted the need to acknowledge and embrace VUCA as an emergent phenomenon and develop a culture of growth mindset as a form of resilience. This research recommends tailor-fit organizational strategies prioritizing flexibility and supportive environments to empower women amidst current VUCA conditions.

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing and globalized world, Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, or VUCA, has become increasingly relevant across various sectors and industries. Tracing back to its origin, VUCA aptly portrays any environmental situations that are complex, fluctuating, and difficult to predict (Ikmal *et al.*, 2023). Its concept is much more evident in the present time because today's world has become uncertain and turbulent, and daily, constant change happens (Dhillon & Nguyen, 2021). Because environments defined by VUCA are marked by rapid changes and unpredictability that challenge traditional management, leadership practices, and operations control, navigating these dynamics requires adaptive strategies and high resilience and flexibility.

Within this context, women's experiences present unique insights and perspectives crucial for understanding and addressing the multifaceted nature of VUCA environments. Studying women as they work in VUCA environments can shed light on the challenges they usually face concerning their gender roles and expectations. While it is true that several studies have been done extensively on women's experiences in the 21st-century workplace, most of these studies still call for concerted efforts to create a more equitable, inclusive, and gender-fair environment for them. To illustrate, women's roles in the workplace have significantly evolved over the past few decades (Adongo *et al.*, 2023; Baker, 2014; Brue, 2018), yet they continue to encounter distinct obstacles, especially within VUCA contexts. These studies exacerbate existing gender disparities and present new challenges that affect both their professional and personal lives.

VUCA can amplify the existing experiences of women with systemic oppression in various challenging work conditions. This is because barriers to work-life balance fueled by uncertainty and volatility can increase workload and stress among them, and the complexity and ambiguity of work operations can magnify biases and stereotypes directed toward them. These challenges can be found in organizations that already struggle with problems of gender diversity and inclusivity (Rajesh *et al.*, 2019). As organizations and individuals try to navigate these turbulent situations, the unique experiences and challenges women face in such settings present a dire need for a study that intersects both women's experiences and the emerging VUCA phenomenon.

In this context, the intersectionality between women and VUCA environments can illuminate the key challenges they face, the coping strategies they actively employ, and the overall impact of the VUCA phenomenon in their professional and personal lives. By exploring these research questions, this study can contribute to the broader discourse on gender studies and development as contextualized during turbulent times. Additionally, risks and opportunities faced by women during these situations can also be highlighted, for which necessary calls for action can be crafted for institution-based recommendations and even for policy planning and strategies, especially since Sharma and Chhibber (2023) highlighted that women are gradually holding leadership and managerial positions. Anchored on the Muted Group Theory introduced by Kramarae (1981) and Taskan *et al.* (2022) conceptual map on VUCA, this study explores the intersectionality of women's lived experiences and the emerging VUCA phenomenon in the context of the fast-paced 21st century work organizations.

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Objectives
The primary goal of this study is to explore women's experiences in the VUCA environment. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key challenges faced by women in a VUCA environment?

2. What are the coping strategies of women in a VUCA environment? And

3. What is the perceived impact of VUCA conditions on women's personal and professional lives?

MATERIALS AND METHODS
This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore women's experiences in VUCA environments. A purposive sampling technique was used to select four (4) participants who qualify for the following selection criteria: (1) they identified as women, and (2) they worked in an organization for more than ten (10) years.

The researchers collected the data via the key informant interview method, which allowed for a more extensive exploration of the research questions. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, for which informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were discussed, secured, and maintained.

After the data-gathering process, the transcription process commenced, and thematic analysis was employed as the primary qualitative data analysis tool. The researchers used the web-based software Dedoose to facilitate coding, organization, and exploration of the qualitative data. The researchers also used the software to visualize coded patterns and themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
The emergent themes generated from the data analysis are derived from the participants' responses. The critical challenges that the participants mostly felt were job security and the multiple roles that they had to play. For the coping strategies, participants claimed that communication and collaboration is a strategy that helps face VUCA-related challenges. Lastly, developing a growth mindset is one of the profound impacts of VUCA in their professional development and professional life.

Specifically, the following sub-themes per research question are comprehensively presented in the discussion below.

Key Challenges Faced by Women in a VUCA Environment
The study uncovered a range of unique challenges women encounter while navigating VUCA environments, significantly affecting the participants' personal and professional lives. Participants reported experiencing heightened pressure, balancing multiple roles, and confronting gender-related biases, which complicated decision-making among them in a fast-paced environment. Based on their verbal responses, the following themes were extracted:

Mental Health Challenges
Most of the participants reported that they experienced feeling stressed, anxious, and burnt out due to the VUCA conditions of their work environment. The pressure to adapt quickly and manage multiple tasks without clear guidelines has taken a toll on their mental health. For instance, Jem (not her real name), who has been in the organization, shared that:

"Well, there was a year when I was burned out because of the VUCA conditions; the institution was fast-paced, and it went on to the point when I felt down, and often got sick - this was one of my manifestations of stress - those physical manifestations of stress like pimple breakouts, occasional sickness, stomachaches, weight loss - they were all physical [manifestations]. In the end, I just overcame those negative physical manifestations".

In the excerpt above, the participant made mention of the physical manifestations of work stress and other related mental health concerns while working in a fast-paced VUCA environment. Such experience was also validated in the study of ALobaid *et al.* (2020), who mentioned that female professionals tend to experience mental health challenges primarily due to obligations from their families, pressures from their workplace environment and the prevailing gender stereotypes, leading to increased stress and burnout. Moreover, a research study conducted by Cangrejo, *et al.* (2023) validated that female employees had the highest level of COVID-19 stressors, which affected their mental health.

Gendered Role Expectations
This was another key challenge that emerged from the analysis. It highlighted that most participants felt pressured to balance professional responsibilities with societal expectations. These expectations often conflicted with their careers' demands, leading to stress, guilt, and burnout. One example of this was shared by one of the participants, who shared that:

"Another challenge is that sometimes, in an organization, there are people who would welcome the idea that a semi-admin position, the middle management position, should be taken by someone who is masculine or by a male. So that means that we tend to have "gendered expectations" like, "Ah, the more fitting head [of office] there should be a male because [it requires] decision-making." I think I have encountered that at some point in my life".

The above excerpt's participant shared her experience with gendered expectations. This is especially true for women who are in leadership roles, and they are also prone to experiencing gender biases and stereotypes. To illustrate, Olaya (2023) validated that women experienced sexist and discrimanotry practices in the workplace. Rajesh *et al.* (2019) supported this claim in their study, showing that women in leadership positions may struggle more with visibility and recognition in the VUCA environment. Kuncoro and Thaha (2023) also found that adaptive and collaborative leadership in VUCA settings often requires women to develop unique strategies to overcome these

biases and prove their leadership capabilities.

Additionally, Ikmal *et al.* (2023) contended that women are only perceived to perform household tasks and that many are still stuck with this traditional mindset. Rajesh *et al.* (2019) also added that gender inclusion impacts how women adapt and thrive in these VUCA environments.

Job Security and Multiple Roles
This theme was prevalent among participants. Most of them shared that they are worried about the uncertainties in their jobs, and juggling multiple responsibilities beyond the job description and roles outside the workplace has been challenging for them. Maya (not her real name) revealed that:

"It's the uncertainty concerning my tenure with my stay in this industry, how long that will be, and when [can I stay] as program head and as a teacher or instructor here." The excerpt above shows that job security in the context of VUCA conditions can be problematic for participants. Added to this dilemma is the idea that employee retention is crucial in a VUCA environment due to high mobility and competitive job markets. Organizations must focus on employee satisfaction, engagement, and work-life balance to retain talented employees (Nayak & Ben, 2019). Job security in the context of VUCA conditions can be problematic for participants. Added to this dilemma is the idea that employee retention is crucial in a VUCA environment due to high mobility and competitive job markets. Organizations must focus on employee satisfaction, engagement, and work-life balance to retain talented employees (Bandana Nayak, 2019). Such a claim also validated the triple burden of women (McLaren *et al.*, 2020; Moser, 2003), which posits that women cannot contribute significantly to society because they perform time-consuming tasks and possibly multiple roles. In the excerpt below:

"So, the common challenge is updating the documents; apart from that, I have to face student concerns. Of course, as a program head, I had to listen to their concern of various natures, and that's part of the challenge in handling [the multiple roles]".

The excerpt above shows that multiple roles in VUCA conditions can conflict and add stress for participants. Women often juggle numerous professional and personal roles, which can lead to role conflict and increased anxiety. This is exacerbated in a VUCA environment with unpredictable and ever-changing job demands. Role stressors, such as role ambiguity, conflict, and role overload, significantly contribute to job-related stress and burnout (Nasirpouri Shadbad & Biros, 2021).

Decision-Making Under Uncertainty
Most participants described difficulty navigating unforeseen circumstances and making decisions without clear information. Just like what Kate (not her real name) revealed that:

"The idea of complexity [only occurs] when something new is being introduced in an organization, and

sometimes you need more information on how to solve [the problem]. So that's very complex because we need to capacitate ourselves so that these changes, what we call hurdles - but then we cannot go away with these changes, and we have to adapt to the changes. Only when there is a lack of information, a lack of training, and when there is not enough information to help you come up with an informed decision… well, it leads to consequences that I may have to solve later".

In the excerpt above, the participant noted that a lack of information during uncertain times that require decision-making can be pretty challenging. This situation is validated by the study of Minciu *et al.* (2020), which highlighted that organizations need to update their decision-making processes to adapt to the VUCA environment's evolving nature. Information, communication, and training are necessary for an organization's informed decision.

Work Adjustment
Adjusting to the frequent changes in work roles and responsibilities was another common challenge among participants. They described this challenge using the lens of their diverse experiences coming from a different nature of the job and their environment to performing their current job, including its present environment. This can be traced through one of the participant's words. The participant shared that:

"I could have gone for travel, but I delayed it because I always think there are tasks to do in the office. Instead of going on vacation for five days, I would opt for two or three days because I'm a responsible employee, and there are just tasks left to do in the office. Of course, if I didn't submit [and do my tasks], in the end, I would still face the consequences. So we need to compromise one thing for the other because some functions need to be done because my job requires it".

Chakraborty (2019) validated the participant above by claiming that in a world of constant change, adapting is vital to address new and emerging concerns. This includes having many skills and applying them effectively in different situations. For Chen (2024), there is no doubt that we live in a VUCA world, so we need to be more adaptable in how we handle these work situations.

Coping Strategies of Women in a VUCA Environment
Despite the challenges, the participants shared different coping strategies for handling their VUCA environments. They emphasize the importance of adaptability and staying flexible in uncertain situations. Additionally, participants highlighted their personal resilience and wellness practices. Other coping strategies enabled the participants to remain proactive rather than reactive, which is essential for preparedness in VUCA working environments. The following are some of the themes generated for this research question.

Continuous Learning and Development
One of the critical strategies that the participants

employed was their commitment to constant learning and development. Most participants emphasized the importance of pursuing educational advancements and having skill development training to stay functional and adaptable to their roles. According to Jane (not her real name):

"It's essential to continue learning, to lean on my support system, my fellow employees, my family, and my co-guidance counselors outside, and to know that every time there are challenges in counseling, I can consult with someone more knowledgeable than I am".

What the participant shared in the above excerpt is also aligned with the design thinking as espoused by Seevaratnam *et al.* (2023), which refers to an approach that must be prioritized for VUCA organizations mainly because it promotes lifelong learning and helps foster critical and creative problem-solving skills. Additionally, Nagalingam *et al.* (2022) also noted that organizations need to invest in development-related training and programs to ensure that employees are sharpened with the necessary skills to navigate the challenges VUCA brings.

Communication and Collaboration
This emerged as another key coping strategy. Most of these women participants stressed the importance of effective communication and teamwork, which are necessary for managing VUCA conditions. A participant validated this result by saying:

"Communication with your co-workers is essential because they are the ones who will help you; you need to ask questions of other employees who are already experienced so that they can help you. It's a massive help for me during my transition - the communication [with them] - and [maintaining] personal relationships with others because you cannot do everything on your own.

Lin *et al.* (2019) in their study highlighted that women are effective communicators and team players because they tend to be more impactful, responsive, and collaborative in group settings, which validates this excerpt above".

Adaptation and Flexibility
The women participants agreed that being adaptable and flexible was a key strategy, and they also stressed the importance of cultivating a culture of open-mindedness because it is only through this that they can adjust effectively to their VUCA environments. Kate (not her real name) mentioned the importance of adaptation and flexibility in the context of the pandemic:

"We have to adapt to so many changes, and right now, there are just so many changes brought about by the pandemic. So, when the pandemic came, everything changed".

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the VUCA situation that changed the workplace organization, and in such an environment, it demands a specific set of skills to flourish. Shet (2024) emphasizes the importance of cognitive flexibility, emotional resilience, and an adaptive mindset. Similarly, Logan *et al.* (2023) highlighted the significance

of having behavioral flexibility, which allows people to adjust their approach and solve problems creatively, especially in new situations.

Strategic Planning and Time Management
Their coping strategies also involve effective planning and time management. These women developed strategic plans to manage their time and perform their tasks. These become their edge in staying relevant and efficient in their respective roles.

"Because of the VUCA events, you are now more familiar with contingency planning. What are you going to do if this does not work out? You should know what you should prioritize".

For Hamid (2019), thriving in today's unpredictable world, such as in VUCA, requires a strategic approach that should be initiated by Human Resource Management (HRM), for which they must create sustainable competitive advantages in a VUCA world. Strategies include promoting diversity, recruiting innovative talents, and performance management. Achoki (2023) also emphasized that continuous upskilling and reskilling are essential for sustainability in a VUCA world. Organizations should focus on developing technological, self-management, social, cognitive, and entrepreneurial skills among their employees.

Wellness and Self-Care
All participants stressed the importance of prioritizing self-care and wellness to maintain physical and mental health. Going on a vacation is one of their common examples of this.

"When I feel so stressed, I go on vacation. I would use my vacation leave credits. It depends on the person on how they deal with stress, and it depends on you on how you should react to it. When faced with stress, I deal with it with vacation leave".

Taking time for leisure and self-care activities is crucial for overall wellbeing and managing health conditions. Studies by Petty and Trussell (2021) show that activities like yoga, stretching, and exercise can improve physical and mental health. Another study by Murina *et al.* (2021) explored self-care practices across cultures, finding that intimate care is vital for women's overall wellness and health. Leisure self-care is essential for promoting wellbeing and managing health deviations. Yoga, stretching, and physical exercise can contribute significantly to mental and physical health (Petty & Trussell, 2021).

Impact of VUCA Conditions on the Personal and Professional Lives of Women
This study also explored the impacts of VUCA conditions on women's lives, influencing their personal wellbeing and professional careers. The participants shared how the unpredictability and complexity of these VUCA environments create unique stressors impacting their mental health and work-life balance. However, analysis of their responses also revealed that recognizing

the reality of VUCA environments and learning to adapt rather than resist uncertainty is what matters for survival. Additionally, cultivating a growth mindset empowers the participants to view the challenges as stepping stones for personal and professional development. Both of these themes below are comprehensively discussed below.

Acknowledging and Embracing VUCA
Most participants acknowledged the pervasive nature of VUCA conditions and the necessity of accepting the inherent challenges of this environment because the more they resist, the greater their suffering. So, rather than being reactive, they should be proactive to grow and work effectively. Jane (not her real name) said:

"Acceptance and acknowledging the uncertainties that come in and embracing them, no matter how painful or surprising the situation may be. If I can accept, acknowledge, and embrace the change, I will be able to balance my work and my struggles".

The excerpt shows how important it is to acknowledge that VUCA as a phenomenon exists in the current workplace. In this context, Holley *et al.* (2022) emphasize the VUCA approach, which requires leaders to navigate uncertainties and develop resilience in themselves and their teams.

Developing Growth Mindset
Developing a growth mindset in a VUCA environment requires a combination of resilience, adaptability, and continuous learning, and most participants feel such a claim. For instance, one participant shared that:

"I think it created a powerful growth mindset in me. It's like us processing things independently and saying, "ahh, I think I need to do this." That growth mindset is really important. The culture of resilience is also very important. The idea that we need to adapt very well to situations like this and not to reach right away to something that is changing because… it's very cliché, but we have to adapt to the changes".

Ganimian (2020) claimed that implementing growth mindset interventions at scale, especially in diverse cultural contexts, can present challenges. However, Burnette *et al.* (2020) shared that a growth mindset intervention has improved entrepreneurial self-efficacy and task persistence. This suggests that fostering a growth mindset can be beneficial for career development.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, this study explored women's experiences navigating a VUCA environment. The researcher identified the key challenges, the coping strategies, and the impact of this VUCA phenomenon on their personal and professional lives. Critical difficulties include decision-making under uncertainty, navigating gendered role expectations, managing job security and multiple responsibilities, and addressing mental health concerns. Despite these challenges, women in VUCA environments have demonstrated resilience through various coping

mechanisms such as adaptation, communication, collaboration, continuous learning, and self-care. Additionally, findings highlight the need for individual and organizational adaptation and that women can benefit from developing cognitive flexibility and an adaptable mindset. These strategies enable them to manage the demands of a dynamic workplace and maintain a level of personal and professional balance.

Implications
The implications of these findings suggest that organizations must adopt tailored strategies that prioritize flexibility and create supportive environments to empower women in VUCA conditions. Organizations can support their female workforce by fostering a culture of continuous learning and development, promoting work-life balance, and acknowledging the unique challenges women face in a VUCA world. Women often face societal pressures to excel in both their careers and associated roles, and this can exacerbate stress and feeling overwhelmed in a VUCA working environment. By understanding women's unique pressures, organizations can empower women to survive and thrive in this era of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

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