

Community Assistantship Program

Rural Women's Leadership in Minnesota: Present Status and the Need for Increased Involvement

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With the current state of the economy and Minnesota facing the largest deficit in state history, organizations, corporations, families, as well as the government have been forced to make major adjustments. Individuals who reside in the Greater Minnesota regions, whose lives center around agriculture and farming, often take a back seat to the city- focused demands of the more heavily populated Metro Area residents. Now, more than ever, leaders are needed throughout the state to work together to ensure that rural communities maintain their quality standard of health, education, and living. Rural women are becoming increasingly involved in all aspects of farming and agriculture, yet the majority of powerful leadership positions seem to be held by men. This project analyzes the gender composition of a sampling of Minnesota rural leadership positions; moreover, it explores the contributions and advancement of women in this area.

Why is it critical that women participate to an equal extent in rural organizations' leadership as men? The notion that because men are the primary owners and operators on farms means that they know more about rural life than rural women, and should therefore serve hold leadership positions in agricultural organizations, is a terrible misnomer. Although the 1997 U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that women operated only 8.6% of all farms, this statistic can be misleading. First of all, only one operator per farm is counted in the census, generally the male farmer. Females can be overlooked, and thus have often been deemed the "silent partner" although they may be actively involved and knowledgeable about farming. As Sharon Danes, Associate Professor of Family Social Science Department of the University of Minnesota discovered in her MN Farm Women's Survey of 513 farm women, "MN farm women are

highly involved in farm management decisions. In many cases, that involvement has increased, particularly for those farm women not employed off the farm.”

While women were once often confined by the physical demands of farming, technology and has helped them to become more actively involved in production (Mayes, 2001). Moreover, changing gender roles and educational opportunities have contributed to the increase in financial input, manual labor, and management decisions made by females. More and more females are even starting to own their own farms. In the United States, they are becoming the fastest growing group of small farm owners (Pittsfield, 2002).

Some states and organizations have started their own women's groups and conferences to promote women in agriculture. Former President Bill Clinton even declared October 15, 1997 as International Rural Women's Day. As noted at the third annual women in agriculture conference, women in Kentucky (like women in Minnesota) are still underrepresented in important decision-making groups. “While women have gained equal authority on the farm, they have yet to take many prominent leadership positions in the state's agricultural community” (Mayse, 2001).

Once in positions of influence, women farmers still are often overlooked and their opinions are dismissed. Bonnie Tanner, Women Agricultural Leaders conference co-chairwoman, noted that since women are often the minority on agriculture development boards, “their voices are often not heard” or “not given as much consideration as by men” (Mayse, 2001).

Boards that limited to males may inadvertently ignore areas of agricultural life and gender inequalities. One prominent issue of concern is that females who work in

agribusiness are paid less than their male counterparts (Mayse, 2001). Women leaders are needed to address these issues. They offer a unique perspective childcare / family care, health, education, and environmental concerns. Historian and photographer Peter Miller expressed women farmers “don’t like what is happening to our culture as it grows corporate and global” and that they offer “a sense of individuality and integrity” (Dollarhide, 2002). These qualities are needed in order to make the decisions best for rural communities.

Some organizations include all women membership. For example, in Minnesota there is the MN Agri-Women, Minnesota Rural Futures, MN Cattle women, and Women involved in Farm Economics. While this certainly allows females more opportunities to get involved and make a difference in their rural communities, it does not compensate for the lack of females in co-gender associations.

In the first study, organizations that past MRF winners have been in are surveyed to answer the questions: What percentage of these leadership positions are held by women? Is there gender composition difference between staff and higher positions (such as boards of directors, officers, etc)? The first hypothesis is that females will hold fewer leadership positions. The second hypothesis is that this difference will be more women in staff positions than board positions.

The second study uses the contacts listed on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture website to determine: What percentage of agricultural organizations contact members are female? Contacts members’ listed positions generally include the organization’s president, manager, director, coordinator, secretary, etc. Is their a difference between contact members’ roles between males and females, specifically is

there a difference between the percentage of male and female secretary members listed as the primary contact for the listed agricultural groups? For this study, the first hypothesis is that there will be fewer females listed as contact members. Moreover, the second hypothesis is that, of the people listed as contacts, there will be at least a greater percentage of female secretaries out of the total number of female contacts, than male secretaries out of the total number of male contacts. This would suggest that females in leadership positions in these organizations may still commonly hold stereotypical roles.

*I use the term "leader" to refer to individuals singled out in an organization (on their website) for holding a position. This is in no way intended to negate the contributions of other members' hard work and ideas. They too are leaders in the broader sense of the term, but will not be included in the analysis.

Study 1

Method

Over the past 15 years Minnesota Rural Futures has been recognizing rural women and women in agriculture for having a leadership role and significant contribution to agriculture. Since 1991, approximately six women have been recognized on a yearly basis (with the exception of 1993 and 1997). The biographies, dated at the time of their recognition, of the 64 MRF winners were organized and reviewed for their involvement. The organizations, boards, commissions, committees, etc of all of the women were compiled. Only those organizations that involved rural issues and were from the state of Minnesota were included in the analysis. For example, while the board of directors from the National Farm Bureau was not analyzed, the Minnesota division organization was.

Organizations that are limited to only members of one sex, such as the Minnesota Agri-women were also excluded.

The most recent leaders, according to each organization's internet sites, were then coded. The current leaders do not necessarily include the MRF winners. Although a MRF winner has been/ is a member of organization used in the survey, it does not mean that she is considered a "leader" as operationally defined within the text of this study. She may be just a member/volunteer or she may no longer be serving in a "leadership" position in the group.

Those organizations without internet sites or without evident leadership membership listings were omitted from the list. The total number of leaders as well as the gender composition of each group was recorded. Some leadership groups were composed of staff and board of directors. This was also noted. Thirty nine organizations total were included. Thirteen of these had a clear division of staff and directors/officers.

Results

Of the sample, thirty-six percent of leaders on Minnesota rural organizations were women (225 out of 624 leaders). Using a chi-squared analysis, there was significant difference between the number of males and females in the organizations $X^2(1) = 48.52$, $p < .001$. Females made fifty percent or more of 22 of the 39 organizations. Seven organizations did not have any women leaders.

Of the 13 organizations with both a clearly defined Board of Directors and Staff, the Boards of Directors were composed of 32% female leaders, while their staff counterparts were 38% female leaders. Whereas, only two out of the 13 Board of Directors had fifty or more percent female leaders, 8 out of the 13 of the staffs were

mostly females. Using a chi-squared analysis, there was a significant difference $X^2(1)=14.88$, $p<.001$ between the number of female directors and females staff in these organizations. There were significantly more women on the staffs.

Compared to the number of males on boards, there were significantly less females ($df=1$, $F= 20.04$) $p<.001$. The difference was not as pronounced for staff, but was still significant: $X^2(1)=9.72$, $p<.005$.

Discussion

While more than 50% of residents of Minnesota are females, only around one third of rural leaders are. Moreover, even when women are in leadership positions, they are more commonly staff members rather than in the higher leadership positions in those organizations.

While this study does not investigate the reasons behind the gender composition difference in rural leadership positions, it does seem to follow the trend of corporate America that many refer to as the "glass ceiling."

Study 2

Study one showed there to be a difference between male and female leadership in rural organizations that the MRF winners participated in; the second study investigates whether this holds true in the broader scheme of the organizations listed by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Method

All of the organizations listed on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture website were included in the initial data. Then organizations without a person's contact name, only the first name, only first initial, or only email were omitted (since gender could not be coded for without this information). The contact information was generally limited to only one person per organization. The contact name for each organization was then counted as either male or female. The one exception, that had two contact names listed, a male and female couple, was counted once in the survey for each gender.

Next, groups whom listed the leadership position of the contact person were analyzed. High position leaders were presidents, office managers, managers, directors, executive directors, and coordinators. Secretaries were considered in a separate category. The total number of female secretary contacts was then divided by the total number of female contacts. The same process was applied for the males.

Results

There were a total of 161 organizations with unambiguous contact information names. Forty-two were females and 119 male leaders, 26% and 74% respectively. This was statistically significant $\chi^2(1) = 36.83, p < .001$.

The percentage of female contacts that are a secretary is 17% and 11% of men contacts hold this position. Using chi-squared analysis, $\chi^2(1) = .82, p < .001$ there was no significant difference.

Discussion

The first hypothesis was correct. Females made up around only a quarter of the total number of leaders listed as contacts for agricultural organizations in Minnesota. This sample, a non-biased evaluation of rural leadership groups in the state, indicates that

female leadership is lacking. The reason for the lack of females was not specifically researched in this study. It may be a lack of interest by females in these organizations or a lack of acceptance/recruitment of females by these organizations. On the other hand, females may actively be involved in these groups, but just not hold leadership positions by their choice or because of sexist attitudes of members or for a combination of these and other factors. Further research in this area is needed.

The second prediction was not as clearly upheld. Although there was a higher percentage of female contacts that were secretaries than men that were, it was not a significant difference. While a conclusive answer is not justified by the results, it suggests that women, once they advance to leadership roles in an agricultural organization in Minnesota, specifically as officers, have the opportunities to enter even the highest leadership positions (not just secretarial roles). Getting in a leadership position, whether by election or taking initiative, seems to be the biggest challenge/obstacle facing rural women.

Conclusion

Rural female are an integral part of organizations throughout Minnesota. Both studies indicate they are outnumbered by men. However, their leadership continues to help to strengthen each group. MRF winners' contributions to rural Minnesota demonstrate the power and necessity of female leaders in this area.

In terms of leadership position advancement, rural women still face male-dominated boards, but are not necessarily restricted in their office leadership positions. Study one, part two, suggests that for females, it may be more common to be on a staff than the board of directors within an organization. While study two, part two, is more

optimistic, indicating that female leaders in agricultural organizations are not limited to the stereotypical role of a secretary.

It is crucial that the needs, opinions, and experiences of rural women be represented and expressed. These studies implicate that for equality purposes, as well as the betterment of rural Minnesota, their needs to be a tool to increase the number of rural women in leadership positions, especially on boards of directors.

The MRF survey of past award winners as well as an updated database will help to match individuals with organizations to increase the number of rural women leaders and raise awareness of leadership and advancement opportunities across the state. In addition to specifically targeting each woman's strengths, interests, and experiences, the MRF survey will research how rural women leaders come to hold their positions and what types of leadership roles they prefer. The knowledge and leadership abilities are out there; it is often just a matter of seeking it out.

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