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Rural Women in Leadership: Positive Factors in Leadership Development

Lori Ann McVay

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The book examines an area that has received little attention in research. Over the years, research seems to emphasise the obstacles rural women face in food production and in making food available. Lori Ann McVay focuses on the positive factors that contribute to rural women's leadership development using Northern Ireland as the study site. The study set out to understand how they overcome barriers on their journey to leadership at all levels, from the home to international levels by identifying internal and external factors that account for leadership development.

The study uses a qualitative feminist approach, by means of in-depth interviews and participant observations, to examine the personal and community identities, family and community relationships, and leadership role models for rural women leaders. The focus on women's experiences formed the foundation of the study, requiring a methodology with feminist viewpoint, and to promote researcher-researched relationship, and attempt to make visible women's hidden contributions, looking at it from a localized perspective. She wanted to appreciate their lived reality including their religion and church involvement, educational experience, extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities. In addition to twenty-two women who participated in the study and had unique narratives of their path to becoming a leader, she chose two women as case studies, who were at different extremes of the leadership spectrum – Alice and Doreen - to provide in-depth accounts of their leadership journeys. The author recognizes the impossibility of generalizing rural women's experience to women elsewhere.

Women's narratives revealed that leadership skills were often present and in use in some way prior to their appointment or election to a leadership role. Many of these women excelled in their leadership roles though they seem to downplay their own effectiveness and success stories; an attitude of minimization. For some women, the term leader refers to a position or a title. A participant said that the concept of leadership has changed with time but needs personal power, self confidence, openness and humility (p. 34). Many of the women saw leadership and responsibility as closely linked.

The literature review seems to focus on feminist views without mention of successes of women in leadership and the change dynamics of work-life balance where women can succeed in both professional and family life. The issue is that rural and farm women are not powerless, they have been successful agents of rural development despite all forms of opposition. The book further noted that most men and women continue to function in socially prescribed patterns but that women are primarily concerned about their relations and family

commitments. Underpinning the relations and family commitments are several external and internal factors.

The external factors include interactions with people, experience with organizations, connectedness with mentors who model leadership, and encouragement from other people. Marriage as an event and the family into which a person marries affect their leadership journey. Other events noted are exposure through international travels, and leadership training. The 'Troubles' of Northern Ireland or the 'Northern Ireland Conflict' which occurred in the 1960s and ended with the Belfast Good Friday Agreement has shaped leadership development in the rural sector. Communities that once had 'Troubles' seem to produce people who work for change and who create political awareness. Participation in leadership position in church was important in leadership development as the church provided a framework from which they analysed gender roles. The way the church sees women was important in shaping their leadership perspectives. At school, attitudes of teachers and administrators towards developing leadership in students became a significant factor in leadership formation at an early age.

The internal factors include the make-up of a person and attitude towards life in general. These factors can enhance or limit leadership, define leadership journeys, leadership style, and success in leadership. The courage to break free from family and cultural norms and transform the negative attitudes of others into motivation to increase personal effectiveness were noted as enhancing the ability to lead effectively. Self confidence is needed to challenge the status quo in organizations including political party decisions. People who take initiative stepped into situations to get things done. The 'quietly confident' (p. 107) were able to take charge though they are not interested in public view. Although religion has the potential of producing barriers and insecurity, religious faith serves as a tool to break through negative religious ideologies. This hope for others that stem from faith in God can enhance leadership potentials. Belief in oneself is key. A factor such as internal drive is traced to family of origin, upbringing, rural identity and self-characterisation as a worker. Personal responsibility for success and the desire to succeed on own merit were also mentioned.

The book is fascinating to read for two reasons. One, this book comes at a time when the world is focusing on empowering women to ensure that they feature at all levels of leadership. Two, the way it outlines the concept of leadership as being important in all social organizations and relationships, from the household unit, to small firms (farms), to communities, nations, and international levels. The narratives, however, seem rather repetitive and somewhat overly detailed. Questions of objectivity can be raised about how the author seemed quite eager to find a feminist voice in the responses of the participants. The description of feminist ideals as the ability to break free from family and cultural norms are debatable in narrating stories of a person like Doreen who has high educational achievements and rich life

experiences. Important dimensions that could have been incorporated are the basis for comparing the positive factors that enhance the leadership for both men and women. But again, the focus was feminist methodology and the author came out as a strong support for feminism. Her understanding and conclusions of who is a leader is seen in her affirmations of specific qualities in the participants. An analysis of the stories in the context of leadership concepts and existing models would have been desirable. However, the author asserted that their own voices were given precedence in the analysis of data.

I noted that the internal and external factors discussed in this book work together in shaping the leadership path of the women studied and can apply to other women elsewhere. The internal factors were reinforced by the presence of external factors, making the two aspects to interact in defining the leadership paths of individuals. The discussion on internal factors brought out certain

issues in leadership that can help the reader to appreciate the findings in the context of leadership concepts. For example, the discussion on self confidence, which brought out the importance of giving and receiving feedback as contributing to a person's leadership development, is consistent with the leadership literature.

The book provides insights into how rural women perceive leadership and their leadership journeys. The study will be a very important resource for leadership consultants in understanding and nurturing specific leadership skills in rural women. Leadership practitioners can build their models and work with the findings of this research.

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