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## Women Ascending to Leadership Positions in Rural Nonprofit Organizations

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**Abstract.** This study investigates women's experiences as they ascended to leadership roles in nonprofit organizations in rural communities, primarily in East Texas. The aim of this study is to understand the lived experiences of women in top management as they ascend into leadership positions, as the characteristics and experiences of effective leaders in rural nonprofits may differ from those of urban nonprofit agencies. There is limited research regarding women's leadership experiences in rural nonprofit organizations. Using a phenomenological inquiry approach, we interviewed 32 women currently serving in leadership roles in rural nonprofit organizations. The research question guiding this phenomenological study was: What are female leaders' lived experiences as they ascend to leadership positions? The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data. A total of 155 emergent themes were extracted by triangulation. After the major themes were extracted, 17 selective themes were identified based on leadership. The selective themes were condensed to three themes: 1) Leadership ascension, with six sub-themes of experience, micro-aggression, support, mentoring, training, and networking; 2) Leadership attributes; and 3) Leadership longevity. Despite the small number of participants, this in-depth study highlights the lived experiences of women leaders, providing a platform for further exploration into these experiences, especially in rural settings. Women in this study did not have an intentional leadership trajectory but rather were promoted within the organization. We found that gender impacts women's leadership experiences. We also found that relational leadership styles in rural communities makes a difference for career longevity, and women consider honesty, compassion, integrity, self-awareness, and being a people person to be leadership attributes.

**Keywords:** gender, leadership, leadership style, rural, nonprofit, rural social work

Women comprise 47% of the U.S. workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), but males outnumber females in leadership positions within organizations, although the majority (73%) of nonprofit workers are female (The White House Project, 2009). In addition, only 18% of women hold leadership positions, of which 3% are CEOs in Fortune 500 companies and 45% are in nonprofits (The White House Project, 2009).

Therefore, understanding the potential opportunities and barriers women face is an important component, particularly regarding women in leadership roles in rural settings. Studies that focus on women ascending to leadership positions have not specifically addressed the experiences of women from non-metropolitan counties, populations between 2,500 and 19,000, as identified through the most recent U.S. rural-urban continuum codes (United States

Department of Agriculture, 2016). Rural communities differ from urban areas in terms of geography, population density, access to services, and community relations. Delivery of human services, aging physical infrastructure, aging population, and scarcity of dependable, well-paying jobs are just a few of the challenges in rural communities today (Scales et al., 2014; Sylvia et al., 2010). In addition, because rural populations tend to be self-sufficient, close-knit, and wary of outsiders, leaders of nonprofit agencies may face challenges unique to the community in which they are located (Ginsberg, 2005; Woods, 2011), especially if they are female. This may be attributed to gender bias and/or a belief system that is inherent in a rural community (Bourke & Luloff, 1997; Carbajal, 2018a; Kubu, 2018; Perdue, 2017; Ryan, 2017).

Studies indicate that many factors prevent women from obtaining top management positions regardless of their accomplishments and merits (Carbajal, 2018b; Haile et al., 2016). Thus, rural women face employment challenges despite education and qualifications (Bice-Wigington et al., 2015; Maume, 2006; Porterfield, 2001). However, there is limited research on the experiences and challenges women face as leaders in a rural community.

## **Literature Review**

### **Leadership Aspirations Among Women**

A crucial factor for women in leadership positions is their aspirations. Boatwright et al. (2003) investigated the attributes of women's leadership aspirations, developing and testing three aspects that were essential to these aspirations: "connectedness needs, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation" (p. 663). Fear of negative evaluation was not correlated with leadership aspiration, but connectedness needs, self-esteem, and gender roles were. They also found that women view fitting into feminine gender stereotypes as a hindrance to their leadership aspirations. However, the need for connectedness was the most influential factor in women's leadership aspirations.

Morals and ethics also contribute to leadership aspirations for women. Fine (2009) found that moral and ethical tenets were involved in all aspects of female leadership. In terms of motivation, two themes emerged: believing they have the necessary skills and characteristics to lead and wanting to make a positive contribution to the world. In Fine's (2009) study, leadership was not a primary goal for these women; rather, their desire to do something positive and meaningful was their main motivation. Moreover, the author found that teamwork and open communication were two themes that emerged when women described their leadership style. In their survey, Fritz and van Knippenberg (2017) found that identification with the organization can be an incentive for women to move into leadership positions. They asserted that women have a more communal orientation involving compassion, sensitivity, and relationships. The results indicated that women express higher leadership aspirations when they strongly identify with the organization.

Sylvia et al. (2010) conducted a study exploring determinants of leadership development in rural women. The women were identified as leaders in their community, though not necessarily in a business or nonprofit organization. The researchers identified six themes: lifelong learning, bias and discrimination, self-efficacy and overcoming barriers, community

influence and social capital, leadership mentors, and expression of leadership. Most of these women felt that their leadership potential was established when they were young, and they had mentors who guided and encouraged them both in childhood and in adulthood. The women viewed leadership as a process that continues as long as they lead, and they related it to their belief in life-long learning. While none of the women identified themselves as trailblazers, they did recommend that women “go beyond the boundary of traditional women’s roles” in order to lead successfully. These women possessed a confidence in their ability to succeed. They had a strong sense of self, believed they were good leaders, and believed they were in control of their futures. They felt accountable to the community and viewed it as family, believing that all members should be involved in the community. The women interviewed felt a strong sense of responsibility to the community and were able to overcome gender bias and discrimination to take on positions of leadership for its betterment.

Family development impacts women’s leadership ascension. Damman et al. (2014) noted that human capital theory posits that people are promoted to positions of leadership based on their knowledge and skills, and even though women may attain the same educational level as men, they still spend more time caring for the home and family. Status attainment theories also claim that women’s involvement with family may lead to their decreased desire to be in leadership positions. According to Rose and Hartmann (2004):

For many families, the quality of children’s care and education suffers from women’s low earnings throughout their child-rearing years. Even with increased time in the labor market after their children are grown, women cannot make up the loss in lifetime earnings. (p. 31)

Work schedules are designed in a way that do not allow for adequate family time or dual responsibilities. According to Stone and Lovejoy (2004), women leave their jobs because of “inflexible and highly demanding workplaces” (p. 80). Women must be out of work for child birthing (and often for child rearing). Thus, the cost of having a family and working surpasses possible lifetime earnings and possibilities to ascend to a leadership position. Moreover, women who have children can be hindered from obtaining a leadership position (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016).

### **Female Leaders and Nonprofit Organizations**

A majority of nonprofit employees are female, and the percentage of female leaders is higher than in for-profit organizations. For example, Claus et al. (2013) found that the presence of female leaders is greater in nonprofit organizations in the European Union. Branson et al. (2013) reviewed women in leadership positions in both nonprofit and Fortune 500 companies and found that nonprofit organizations were more likely to have females in upper management positions. In nonprofit organizations, 41% had more than one woman in a top leadership position, while only 1.6% of Fortune 500 companies had more than one female in top positions. Although only 18.8% of nonprofits had no female representation in top leadership positions, 80.4% of Fortune 500 companies had no women in their top leadership positions. Branson et al. attributed their findings to the notion that nonprofits pay less than for-profit organizations, thus making them less attractive to men and opening up more opportunities for women.

These findings are related to the feminization of occupations and compensation differentials, which are associated with devaluation (England et al., 2007; Niegel, 2015; Noonan et al., 2005). For example, traditional jobs in which women are the primary employees attest to the reality that their wages are lower (Magee, 2001). The social work profession is a perfect example of this. Women have been the primary workers in this field, and their numbers in the field have held steady: 82% are women (Center for Health Workforce Studies, 2006; Pease, 2011), and yet, 89% of female social workers are paid less than male social workers (Chernerky, 2003; Whitaker et al., 2006). The pay gap leads to a compensating differential; men earn more because men seek higher-paying jobs. However, women will not necessarily earn more by switching to male-dominated jobs (Karlin et al., 2002). The social work profession demonstrates the compensation-differential effect, with men earning more than women despite being the minority. Whitaker et al. (2006) found that male social workers were earning 14% more than female social workers, especially when controlling for other factors. Thus, even in traditionally female jobs, men earn more than women. Furthermore, men entering a female-dominated field do not affect the pay status of women (Karlin et al., 2002).

### **Leadership Theory**

Avant et al. (2013) examined different theories on leadership in their quest to find a leadership model appropriate for rural areas. They noted that in order to do this, the model must be “compatible with rural lifestyles” (p. 53). The researchers pointed out that rural residents have a connection to the land, have close relationships with one another, believe in being self-sufficient, and rely on informal helping networks when they do need help. After their review of trait theories, behavioral theories, situational theories, and transformational theories, they proposed that the transformational model is best suited to rural areas, primarily due to its connection between the leader and followers in promoting the group’s goals. This style of leadership stresses teamwork and encourages input in decision making. Transformational leadership encourages employees to take ownership of their work and become involved in the mission of the organization (Northouse, 2016). The leader is a role model who values employees and is inspiring and encouraging. In Vinkenburg et al.’s (2011) study, they found that women who used a transformational leadership style and contingent reward behavior were more likely to get promoted. However, the transformational approach is primarily only effective during birth, growth, and revitalization stages of an organization (Baglia & Hunt, 1988). The larger the corporation, the more difficult this leadership approach is to use.

A behavioral approach called the two-factor approach posits that leadership behaviors fall into two categories, either considerate-people oriented (feminine) or initiating structure-task oriented (masculine), and both types of behaviors are associated with leader effectiveness (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Other studies pointed to an androgynous style of leadership as most effective for leaders to possess (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Crites et al., 2015). Because androgynous leaders have both masculine and feminine leadership characteristics and are able to utilize either style when necessary, they are usually rated as more effective leaders. Furthermore, Appelbaum et al. (2003) noted that research shows that “feminine characteristics are more appropriate for transformational leadership and masculine characteristics more appropriate for transactional leadership” (p. 48). Women rate higher on people-oriented leadership skills, and men rate higher on business-oriented leadership skills (Ryan, 2017). According to Crites et al.

(2015), these skills can be labeled concern for people and concern for production. Leaders who are concerned for production (masculine) focus on the bottom line and getting work done. Efficiency is important, and employees are a means to an end. Leaders concerned for people (feminine) are focused on empowering their employees and creating a supportive, trusting environment in which to work. The belief is that if employees trust and respect their leader, they will be more productive.

Stereotypes drive the notion of effective leaders, especially in relation to female leaders (Kubu, 2018; Perdue, 2017). Understanding these stereotypes and barriers, how women overcome them, and what drives them to do so has been a focus in much of the literature. How this knowledge applies to female leadership in rural areas and in nonprofit agencies has also been examined, but in a more limited capacity. Damman et al. (2014) reviewed records of all non-management employees in a medical humanitarian aid organization from 2003 to 2008. Their focus was on how quickly employees moved into management positions and if there was a difference between genders. Their results suggested that overall, women transitioned to management more slowly than men in the organization. However, when occupation was considered, the researchers found that employees in female-dominated occupations (e.g., nurses) had lower promotion-to-management rates than those in male-dominated occupations (e.g., nonmedical employees such as financial officers), regardless of gender. Similarly, Crites et al. (2015) found that the stereotypes of male leaders closely matched the reported leadership style of those male leaders. For women, however, the stereotypes were not consistent with their reported leadership behaviors. In another study, Fischbach et al. (2015) found that women experience conflict in terms of how much expression of emotion is considered suitable for a leader. Their results indicated that male managers and male and female employees described women's emotional expression as vastly different from that of successful managers. However, female managers rated women as similar to successful leaders in emotional expression.

The effect of gender bias diminishes the quality of leadership for women because women's worth is perceived based on their gender rather than on their leadership qualities (Kubu, 2018; Sheridan et al., 2011; Tichenor, 2005; Yoder, 2001). Thus, the perceptions of women's leadership potential have been misconceived (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Muhr, 2011; Richards, 2011). The assumption for women is that to obtain top management careers and leadership positions, they must adopt male characteristics (Hekman, 1999; Kerfoot & Knights, 1998; Pini, 2005). Seo et al. (2017) found that gender alone is not a reliable predictor of leadership ability, but gender does influence its perception. Rhee and Sigler (2014) explored the relationship between leadership style and gender and the importance of each in deciding how a leader is rated and whether people want to work for that leader. They reported that the perception of women as nurturers and caregivers can be negative when it comes to leadership. Women may be seen as soft and weak, whereas men may be viewed as strong and decisive. Their research supported the notion that gender does influence perceptions of leader effectiveness as well as leader preference. When women assumed an authoritarian or masculine leadership style, they were viewed more negatively than men who assumed a participatory or feminine style. Male leaders were rated more effective than female leaders, and most study participants preferred to work for a male leader. When leadership styles were considered, participants preferred a leader with a participatory style, regardless of gender.

Therefore, leadership based on context is best (Nash et al., 2016; van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Some organizations might need more autocratic and traditional hierarchical leadership styles, whereas others may need more egalitarian and transformational styles. Thus, leadership encompasses a continuum (Yoder, 2001). The double standard on gender in the workplace has created the perception that one style is better than the other. Furthermore, the model of leadership has been traditionally consistent with masculine characteristics. Women might be more relational (democratic) in their approach and thereby dismissed because they are perceived as weak. However, a leadership style is based on persona and organizational needs. As Vinkenburg et al. (2011) found, women were not perceived as lacking effective leadership skills. Rather, the prescriptive nature of leadership, which is based on gender rather than leadership skills, was the problem. Thus, Goldman (2009) recommended that leadership training for women not compromise their femininity in the process of becoming leaders (i.e., to be an effective leader, male characteristics should not be necessary). The most important leadership quality is to be aware and lead others with a vision (McKee et al., 2008). A good leader is attuned to self and others: “Leaders who have developed emotional and social intelligence are effective because they act in ways that leave the people around them feeling stronger and more capable” (McKee et al., 2008, pp. 487–488). This type of leadership has nothing to do with gender characteristics; instead, it has to do with qualities of leadership, which are more important.

### **Method**

We sought to investigate the phenomenon of women advancing to leadership positions within rural nonprofit organizations. The goal of the study was to understand participants’ perceptions and to fully explore their ascension to leadership positions within rural settings as well as how the participants coped with and endured challenges and adversities in a rural context. We utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design, which focuses on the perception of a phenomenon and how it makes sense to the participant based on his or her lived experience (Englander, 2012; Gallagher, 2012; Giorgi, 2009; Lewis & Staehler, 2010). A phenomenological approach captures the deeper layers of the experience a person has had and ascertains the meaning of the phenomenon. Thus, guiding our study was the broad research question: What are female leaders’ experiences as they ascended to leadership positions? To explore this question, we utilized an interview protocol consisting of 10 questions related to leadership and career development.

### **Human Subjects**

We received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the principal investigator’s university (IRB # AY2017-1223). Participation in this research project was voluntary, and participants could drop out at any time. Participants were provided with a consent form to sign before starting the interviews, and we received permission before audio recording the interviews. All of the audio recorded interviews used an outline of questions and took place in the participant’s office for approximately 45 minutes. All the files, audio recordings, consent forms, and field notes were submitted to the principal investigator to safeguard and de-identify the data. The principal investigator submitted the audio recordings to a professional transcriber who also securely stored the files and returned both the audio recordings and transcriptions to the principal investigator.

## Recruitment and Sampling

For the purpose of our study, women in leadership positions were defined as people at the top management level, such as chief executive officer (CEO), chief financial officer, chief operations officer, executive director, or board president. In addition, participants had to be serving in their leadership role within a rural community. We only interviewed individuals who were identified as meeting the criteria (e.g., female CEO or director in a rural nonprofit setting). Women were defined as individuals who identified themselves as female within a gender-binary construct. Our criteria excluded all males as well as females in for-profit organizations, governmental and educational entities, and anyone from an urban setting.

We began by using a purposive sampling approach to recruit our participants. Purposive sampling is a deliberate identification of research participants (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). However, after the first five interviews, we decided to change our sampling approach to a snowball effect, whereby one person makes a referral to another one and so on (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). During the first five interviews, participants openly referred other women in leadership positions for this study. Therefore, we decided to change the sampling approach because it would increase our sample size. Participants were invited to participate either through a phone call or email. If the participant chose not to participate, the initial phone call or email served as a confirmation of declining to participate.

Thirty-two women agreed to participate in this study (Table 1). Two participants were interviewed via email, as they were not available for an in-person interview. All women were in leadership positions in rural nonprofit organizations, primarily in East Texas. One participant was from New Mexico. Their ages ranged from 26 to 67 years old ( $M = 52.06$ ,  $SD = 12.67$ ). Most participants were white (68.8%), married (75%) with children (over 56% had two or more children;  $M = 2.31$  children,  $SD = 1.28$  children), and had a bachelor's degree or higher (71.9%). Their years of experience ranged from one month to 31 years ( $M = 11.13$ ,  $SD = 10.25$ ).

## Data Collection

We used interviews as our data collection method. While conducting interviews, we captured rich non-verbal information including hesitation, smiling, looking down or away, or a pregnant pause. We documented non-verbal information during and after the interview process. Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

During the interview, the member of our research team who was conducting the interview read the consent form with the participant. Participants provided consent to participate by signing the consent form. If the participant chose not to participate, the initial phone call or email served as a confirmation of declining to participate.

Table 1

<i>Participant Demographics</i>		
Category	n (%)	Mean (SD)
Age		52.06 (12.67)
26-40	8 (25)	
41-50	3 (9.4)	
51-60	12 (37.5)	
61 or older	9 (28.1)	
Race/Ethnicity		
White	22 (68.8)	
Black	8 (25)	
Hispanic	1 (3.1)	
Asian Am.	1 (3.1)	
Marital Status		
Married	24 (75)	
Divorced	4 (12.5)	
Widow	2 (6.3)	
Single	2 (6.3)	
Children		2.31 (1.28)
Highest degree		
Some college	9 (28.1)	
Bachelor	8 (25.0)	
Master	14 (43.8)	
Doctoral	1 (3.1)	
Years as CEO		11.13 (10.25)

## Analysis

We used grounded theory to analyze the data and NVivo software to code it. The interviews were first analyzed individually. This provided the general emerging themes or open codes, which was the first layer of coding analysis. These codes included themes that emerged individually, which were then condensed into primary thematic codes (a second layer of coding analysis). These primary thematic codes came from all the interviews. Finally, in the third layer of coding analysis, the primary thematic codes were refined using the leadership framework (selective thematic) codes to analyze the data. Thus, the open coding process involved reading the transcripts and extrapolating general emerging themes. Each author coded separately to achieve data triangulation and credibility of the results. After each coding phase, we discussed and agreed upon the codes (known as consensus on coding), and then we moved on to the next phase and followed the same process. After the primary thematic code analysis, the next phase was selective thematic coding. During this phase, we refined the primary thematic codes from a leadership perspective. It was during selective thematic coding that a leadership framework was applied to examine these women's leadership experiences. The primary focus here was based on our research question.

## Results

The findings show that the participants rose to their current positions in a similar manner, with most of them being hired from within the agency. They all spoke about individuals and experiences that shaped their leadership styles and paths. Table 2 shows the primary and selective themes. We extrapolated 155 emerging themes and, after consensus, reduced the emerging themes to 105 themes. From the emerging themes, 10 themes were identified as primary. Then, we analyzed the data from a leadership framework and extrapolated 17 themes. After consensus, we reduced the selective themes to three, with one theme having six sub-themes.

Table 2

### *Thematic Codes*

Primary Themes	Selective Themes
Experience	Leadership Ascension
Training	Experience
Leadership Expectations	Micro-aggression
Motivation	Support
Gender	Mentoring
Discrimination	Networking
Micro-aggression	Training
Faith	Leadership Attributes
Support	Leadership Longevity
Family	

### **Primary Themes**

As previously discussed, the primary themes were extracted from all emerging themes. We condensed the emerging themes to 10 primary themes: experience, training, leadership expectations, motivation, gender, discrimination, micro-aggression, faith, support, and family. These themes were based on the women's reports regarding ascending to leadership positions in nonprofit organizations in a rural context. The data presented here are general, and the next section provides the data based on leadership.

**Experience.** Many of the women reported that their career experiences, especially in the helping field and volunteerism, led them to leadership positions. However, many of them were not seeking these leadership positions, and some were promoted within the organization. One participant reported: "In every position I was offered, the new position, every time, I never asked for it; I never sought it." Another participant stated, "The prior executive director asked me to take the position." Even though they were not seeking the position, their prior experiences proved beneficial for them in their leadership positions. For example, a participant stated:

In my previous life, from the medical field, I had dealt with lots of grants and corporate America, so to speak. I had friends on the board here; they asked me to come in as an interim director, and we looked for our new director for about six months. And

they actually just kept asking if I would consider it, and I said okay, and six years later I am still here.

This sentiment was echoed by all participants. Prior experiences contributed to their ascension, but as many stated, the positions were offered.

Even though their positions were offered, their experiences were not easy, especially in a rural setting. One participant stated, “I had my struggles for being young, and I have my struggles for being a female.” Also, if participants were not from that community or had not lived there long enough, they were considered outsiders. One participant who moved to East Texas stated, “They knew I was kind of the person from the outside that’s going to come in and not really know anything about the community.” The sentiment here is related to another statement, “If you don’t have a good reputation in a rural area, it’ll get you.” Many felt that they had to be extra careful with their professional presentation in all aspects of community life.

**Training.** Only a few female leaders received training related to nonprofit organizational management. Many of them reported they had little training related to their current position. “I spent that first week looking like a deer in the headlights. You didn’t get much training over there. They are, ‘welcome to your new job, here’s your staff’.” Another participant stated, “I didn’t get a lot of training; it was just, here you go, figure it out.” One participant mentioned how beneficial it would have been if there was specific training for nonprofit organizations. However, as many mentioned, they never received such training, but they agreed that it is crucial, stating: “I think particularly for women” and “very helpful, I’m sure.”

**Leadership expectations.** The expectations for leadership were two-fold. One expectation was for their performance, whereas the other was for their employees. These two expectations were divergent, meaning that they were expected to lead differently. A participant stated, “Women are still very much treated differently in leadership roles, and they have a higher expectation. They are held to a higher standard, and they are paid less.” A common thread among them was that they “didn’t know what to expect.” Since many reported that they were not looking for a leadership position and lacked training, they intuitively assumed the leadership role: “I don’t know what it looks like to be a boss.” Nevertheless, some came into their positions because the organization was failing, and it was expected of them to make the organization thrive again. A participant stated, “They were having some issues here, and there were a couple of commissioners that thought that I could come over here and make some changes.”

Another common thread was the leaders’ expectations for their employees to follow by example. One participant stated, “I won’t ask someone to do something that I’m not willing to do myself.” Participants also discussed what they learned from their mentors, especially on how not to lead their employees: “I wouldn’t do with my own staff what they did with their staff.” Furthermore, participants discussed that it was important to “set expectations, be consistent, [and] support” their staff. In this regard, participants reported on being selfless and the importance of supporting their employees.

**Motivation.** The motivation for many of them was based on proving to others that they could succeed. One participant stated:

It was the drive to succeed, personal drive to succeed, the personal drive to make a difference, the challenge to do it as a woman in a rural town where no one really thought I could. It was the driving force.

Another participant said, “it made me want to prove them wrong.” This motivation included obtaining higher levels of education, having strong work ethics, being a self-learner, learning to adapt and to be open to change, and being optimistic. Motivation was tied to wanting to be a good leader. One participant stated, “you know finding that motivation and trying to be a good leader is a struggle.” This type of motivation was also tied to motivating others to follow: “you have to walk alongside people, allow them to walk alongside you, and motivate them.”

**Gender.** Participants discussed how their gender played a role in ascending to a leadership position. A participant stated, “Here [East Texas] is a place where men are more dominant, and women are told to hush and sit down.” They also discussed how few women there are in those positions. One participant stated, “I was one of two Anglo female CEOs.” However, when comparing nonprofit versus for-profit organizations, one participant stated, “In the nonprofit world, it’s almost expected that a female would be leading the organizations.” One of the main threads regarding gender was equality: “I think it was just more of an equality thing; I have never thought about gender one way or the other.” However, the perception about performance was different. One participant stated, “There’s a lot of an assumption when I got in, that I was going to as a woman, as a young woman, not be able to handle the pressure.” Another participant said, “Because I was a woman, they were worried that I would always be more passionate and emotional, but they weren’t expecting that I would know that about myself.” Many of the participants were aware of how others would perceive them as emotional; they were attuned to that bias.

Overall, the role gender played in their leadership ascension differed across the interviews. This could be related to their perceptions, as one participant said, “I feel a lot of nonprofits are headed by women.” Another participant stated, “We’re all women. Our board is mostly men.” In a similar study (Carbajal, 2018b), gender was not perceived as an issue. However, similar to Carbajal’s findings, age was often mentioned: “I think I have had more of a reaction because of my age than my gender,” “I think it’s the age and gender combined,” and “Most of the reactions tend to be because of my age.” One participant who synthesized this well said, “They’re more nervous and apprehensive about supporting our organization because such a young female is running it.” Another participant said, “he was very apprehensive about having somebody so young as his boss.” Gender was a challenge, especially with male supervisors.

**Discrimination.** This theme overlapped with other themes, such as gender and experience. One participant stated, “I was asked if I was married and had children or plan on having children soon; all these questions were actually illegal to be asked during an interview.” A common approach was to expect these challenges. One participant stated, “I’ve been able to navigate my way around all that nonsense.”

Although the sample of women of color in this study was small regarding black ( $n = 8$ ), Hispanic ( $n = 1$ ), and Asian American ( $n = 1$ ) participants, they reported on how their race affected their leadership. One participant reported, “I faced sex discrimination being a woman

and I faced racial discrimination by me being black by my manager.” She specifically discussed an experience where her pregnancy came into question; the manager questioned the legitimacy of her pregnancy. As previously reported, many executives felt isolated and lonely since they were in the minority, not just as women but as members of ethnic groups as well. One participant reported, “I’m the only Hispanic female director...right now.” Another participant said, “I see a lot of negativism where I am; right now, at this particular place, at this time, being an African-American elderly woman, I am a threat to people in this area.” For women of color, their discriminatory experiences were compounded.

**Micro-aggression.** The theme of micro-aggression was expressed by all the participants. However, their interpretation varied, and often these micro-aggressions were treated as benign or dismissed as an *old system* or part of being in a rural setting. A participant stated, “They talk very locker-roomish in front of me. They talk very sailor-like in front of me.” The most resounding comment was on the misconception of female leaders. A participant synthesized this sentiment as follows:

I think the number one thing that female leaders get accused of, including myself, is being too emotional in your position, as a leader that you lead with your heart, not your brain, which can be very dangerous, especially in like a CEO position.

This participant’s comment resonated with other women as well, especially on the expectation of women in leadership. A participant captured the essence of this issue as she reported how others reacted to her; she said, “I have seen people’s mouth drop when I walk in.” Thus, the expectation is that she would not be in a leadership position, especially because she is from an ethnic minority group.

**Faith.** Many of the participants reported how faith played a role in their leadership ascension. This is different from previous studies and unique to this study. The participants discussed how God helped them through their leadership process. One participant stated, “my foundation is how God prevails in my life and provides me with the opportunity to concur all of my failures.” Another participant said, “I was at a place in my life where I was seeking how God could use my life experiences to help benefit others.” The previous experiences were attributed to God preparing them for the current role: “I can easily see it was all part of God’s plan to help me to be better equipped for this role.” Overall, they gave God credit for their current position. A participant stated, “God put me in the right place.” Another said, “I knew that the only reason I got this job was because God wanted me in this position.”

**Support.** Participants reported on the importance of having a support system at different levels. They discussed the importance of having professional support systems and especially seeking them out. One participant stated:

All the executive directors in Texas get together four times a year and have meetings on common issues...that group is really close. And in East Texas, there are 11 of us that sort of made our own little club, we set our network here...we built a lot of connectivity. Some mentioned how lonely it is at the top and why it is important to network. One participant stated, “I think as a leader, it’s very lonely at the top, very, very lonely.” Another participant said,

“I don’t go to lunch with anybody here; I don’t socialize after hours with anyone that works for the organization.” They felt that socializing with employees crossed boundaries, and it was important for them not to be perceived as biased. Many mentioned how “having mentors or other people in similar positions” was beneficial. One participant stated, “the biggest benefit that I have seen is being able to watch other leaders in their profession, what has gone right and what has gone wrong.” Vicariously learning from other leaders helped with their development as well.

**Family.** Most of the women had children. Their perception was that having children did not interfere with their leadership ascension. One participant stated:

This job actually affords me quite a bit of flexibility, to be able to attend, be it field trips, school functions, and be at home every night with them; I haven’t felt like I had to choose one or the other.

Another participant said, “It helped me to be able to lead and guide my daughter into different avenues [and] to have compassion for other people, and so I don’t think it...hindered, I think it kind of helped.” However, some female leaders reported that having children made a difference in terms of salary and relocation. A participant stated:

I had a pretty well-paying, salaried executive position where I was before, and when we decided to have kids, it was like, “Should I stay home?” And now that I am back to work, I feel like I have to take a different approach when I am working for things that I wanted to do in life because I have to think about my children and their schedule and their needs, and it’s not just about my career anymore. But in some ways I think it also has helped because I get to build different types of relationships that are beneficial in meeting people.

Some participants reported on how family affected them, especially with the idea that women can do it all (e.g., have children and a career) and not be affected. A participant said:

I think that we were brainwashed to think that we could do it all; we can have the perfect marriage, the perfect family, the perfect career, and I don’t think that’s possible, I don’t. I think that something has to give.

Nevertheless, their perception regarding having children was consistent across the participants; they felt that having children helped them with their careers.

### **Selective Themes**

The selective themes presented here are based on a leadership framework. These themes were selected by analyzing the data with a focus on leadership. These main themes are: Leadership ascension, which includes six sub-themes of experience, micro-aggression, support, mentoring, networking, and training; Leadership attributes; and Leadership longevity.

**Leadership ascension.** The sub-themes indicate what helped the participants ascend to their leadership positions. In some instances, the participants acquired the leadership positions by

working closely with the previous CEO/executive director/board members, and upon departure, the participants filled the position. This could have contributed to their lack of experience. One participant stated, “I became CEO of a nonprofit with no prior experience.” In addition, the sub-themes capture rural constraints and expectations for leaders: “I was a supervisor in that position, and I had other staff members that were much older than me and *did not* take well to my direction and my authority based on my age. That has really been my big struggle.” Despite perceptions of having more female leaders in rural nonprofit organizations, participants experienced adverse reactions as they ascended to these leadership positions, especially once they became the CEO.

**Experience.** Ascending to leadership positions in a rural setting was not easy. One participant stated, “Rural is harder than big city, much harder.” However, prior experiences in leadership contributed to their success. A participant said, “I’ve been in other leadership positions as a director, and then this position came open.” Another participant said, “I served as interim executive director for six months and then came on as the permanent director after that timeframe.” As for others, they were gradually promoted within the organization. A participant stated:

I started as a case manager, and I just kind of worked my way up and moved into development and recruitment and over all southern region. And then when our previous COO [chief operations officer] decided that it was time that she stepped down, they offered me the position.

Other participants reported that they were not searching for these positions. One participant stated, “I got the offer, and I decided that I would give it a shot.” Another participant said, “I don’t have any experience. I have never been an executive director; I have never been over any one person, so it was crazy.” Overall, their experiences varied, and most of them were in situations where the opportunity presented itself.

**Micro-aggression.** The tendency for dealing with micro-aggression was often to dismiss it. Women have been sensitized to accept micro-aggression as normal, even though they know that men are treated differently (Billing, & Alvesson, 2000; Coltrane, 2004; Ridgeway, 1997; Tichenor, 2005; Yodanis, 2000). The findings in this study reflect this notion. For women in leadership, especially as they ascended to their positions, common concerns included their age or their inadequacy. A board member told a participant, “I understand if you needed to step down or understand if this is too much [or] more than you expected.” Another participant directly experienced rejection; she was told, “I’m sorry, I don’t work with your kind.” The most common remark on being a woman was expressed as, “she’s emotional today or she’s, you know.” For another participant, she had to change her approach so as not to be perceived as emotional: “I have to make sure that my personal emotions, whatever they might be, don’t come through to the point where I’m the extreme.” In other words, instead of addressing the micro-aggression, these participants had to change their behavior.

**Support.** For many participants, family was a major source of support. However, the most significant support in terms of ascending to their leadership positions and successfully leading the organization was related to their peers. One participant stated, “I remember when I got the

job, those two women [CEOs from other nonprofits] called me and we had dinner.” This type of support was significant, and many participants reported how maintaining a support system was crucial to their leadership development.

**Mentoring.** Many of the women reported how important it was to have mentors. For some, learning from mentors and other people was more significant than professional development activities targeted at enhancing leadership. One crucial factor for these women was who the mentor was: “I’ll say this, when you’re mentored by a woman, it’s different than when you’re being mentored by a man.” She was referring to learning from other women on how to handle difficult situations, especially involving micro-aggression. Another participant discussed how her previous female CEO coached her as she transitioned to her leadership position. This was a common thread among those who were hired within the organization. Another crucial factor that resonated with all the participants was having great leaders to mentor them; as one participant put it, “It’s good to have mentors.” Overall, participants reported how they benefited from mentors’ knowledge, wisdom, and instruction as they assumed leadership roles.

**Networking.** Those who better understood their newly acquired position as executives established a network support system early on. These networks provided an opportunity to learn and grow. One participant stated, “I like the interaction in the network; the biggest benefit is being able to watch other leaders in their profession.” This type of networking also helped “women understand that piece of networking and mentoring.” This was especially important as one participant noted how men are socialized differently compared to women, especially as it relates to social networking; for this participant, networking started with women learning to give “a good solid handshake.” For many, networking was an area to grow: “going out to networking events and meeting people, public speaking was really big for me. I have a big fear of it, but now I make myself do it, and each time I get a little bit better.” The goal of some of the networks were to cultivate and encourage one another. One participant stated that she networked “to just talk collaboratively about what is happening in our agency.” Another goal was for the purpose of collaboratively acquiring funding. Overall, networking was an essential factor in ascending to and maintaining an executive position: “...networking is important because when you meet the people, that can help you with your weaknesses or bring up your strengths.” Networking helped the participants to grow and provided support as they became effective leaders.

**Training.** Even though many of the participants had no specific prior experience as executives, they all reported on the importance of training. Their perspective was that training is ongoing, not just a onetime event. One participant stated:

I still go to training. I feel that to be a good leader, you never learn everything you need to know and that you’re always going to have to be open to learning because things change, and you have to be able to know those things and know to change with time.

Also, some reported that because they had no prior executive experiences, they developed these skills as they developed their leadership styles. A participant stated, “going to the trainings and the opportunities that they provided me, it helped me to be much better equipped for this role here.” Moreover, because of their experiences, they saw a need within their rural communities to train other women and prepare them for nonprofit leadership. One participant stated, “I created

last year an executive director's forum." The purpose of this forum was to help nonprofit organizations discuss their challenges and encourage one another. Because of how successful the forum had been, "they want to create training for nonprofit executive directors so that all have the same type of training." In addition to training executives, the participants saw the need to train their board members.

**Leadership attributes.** The participants indicated that leadership attributes should include honesty, compassion, integrity, self-awareness, and being a people person. There were several factors that were crucial to the participants. Many discussed the importance of having a positive attitude and the ability to delegate, resolve conflicts, and inspire others. One participant stated:

I think that if you are committed to what you are doing and you can show them that you are committed, you can get a buy in from them. You can make people believe it by doing it yourself and being there for them.

Others discussed the importance of holding people accountable and setting organizational standards. The overarching narrative included empathy, praxis, servanthood, listening, education, humility, risk taking, communication skills, training employees, having a feedback loop, and being open-minded. One participant stated, "you have to be able to listen because sometimes other people's thoughts or suggestions are better than yours, or they may work better." This level of openness requires acceptance of both failure and success. One participant stated, "It goes back to not being afraid to change and not being afraid to admit when you might be wrong." Their leadership styles were different: authoritative, bureaucratic, charismatic, democratic, transactional, nurturing, servile, situational, and transformational. Even though these styles were different, they communicated the importance of "being comfortable with yourself and knowing what you can and cannot do." Another participant stated:

I think part of the issue for women is the emotional issue, so I have to be firm. I have to be nice but not to a point where they'll go, "Oh, she's just a woman." I can get past that, no big deal, and so being able to find a good balance between those, it's sometimes difficult, but it takes practice; it takes a lot of practice.

Also, it was important to "encourage and lift others up and help others to grow." Overall, their leadership attributes can be captured with the following statements: "a good leader values the people that they have [to] work with," and more importantly, a leader "pays very close attention to frontline staff... They're the ones that are meeting the people. They're the ones that are serving the people. They are *everything*."

**Leadership longevity.** Many of the women had been in their current positions for over a decade. Being promoted within the organization increased their longevity: "I promoted up within the organization; I stayed there, and that really is what instilled my passion for nonprofit work." Thus, the most common factor that contributed to their longevity at their organization was passion for the work they did and matching their passion to the organization's mission. Another factor that contributed to their longevity was the level of support they received, even from male CEOs at other nonprofit organizations. A participant stated, "the men I have encountered in this

role have been hugely supportive.” A key leadership attribute that contributed to their longevity was to “always be diplomatic and courteous in dealing with others in the community.” Diplomacy extends to “relationships with other leaders. The education is important, but I think it is the relationship that has helped me the most.” Another participant said, “[we’re] leaders working together, because we’re all working towards the same thing, and that is to serve people in the community.” Relationship building and education was also important; in fact, over half of the participants had a degree, with almost 50% of them having a master’s degree or higher.

In a rural setting, many of the leaders reported how crucial relationships and networking were to their success. Another factor for their leadership was creating a vision and strategy for the organization. A participant stated:

The viability of an organization’s success is based on having a good vision, having vital members to support the vision, and making sure that you look at your valuables...I wanted to always be about the team; it’s...about building the essentials to carry on the goodwill, and I think that they are the valuables for me.

Having an effective team was important to them; this required creating a shared culture and values. They primarily invested in people and used personal influence to inspire purpose and trust in others. As a participant stated, the goal was:

To have them be able to open up to me, to be able to feel that they can come in and meet with me and discuss things and that you know I’m willing to listen and to possibly make changes; it means that you have to be open to change.

This reflects an emotional connection with others, which requires self-awareness and being attuned to others. This also meant knowing their employees well: “You really get to know the people you are leading and you kind of anticipate how they are going to respond.” Thus, listening and empowering the staff to do their work was crucial.

Along with teamwork, a critical factor to their success and longevity was learning. A participant stated, “I learned more from the hardships and the failures than I did from the successes.” Learning from unpopular leaders, especially ineffective ones, helped as well. Learning also included hiring the right people for their organization (i.e., aligning the employee’s passion with the organization’s mission): “You got to have people that are really passionate about doing the work you need.” Also, equally important was dismissing those who were not fit for the organization.

## **Discussion**

Much of the literature on female leaders in nonprofit organizations indicates that a nonprofit setting is more conducive for women, as more females are employed in nonprofit organizations, and many nonprofit organizations are service-oriented and have a caring atmosphere (Branson et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2018; Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2016; Yoder, 2001). Our findings concur with the literature. Another finding that adds to the body of literature is the notion that women are motivated to lead for moral or ethical reasons (Fine, 2009). The

women we interviewed spoke about their passion for their agency and their clients and wanting to help others. This seemed to be the foundation for their desire to lead, which we confirmed with our findings. Their passion also influenced their longevity at these organizations.

Rural communities are geographically isolated, yet they are close-knit and people in those communities are reliant on each other for help in times of need. Our findings show how critical this is for the survival of the organization and the longevity of the leader in that position, as relationships in the community are highly valued. However, closeness in rural communities can be detrimental to an outsider who has not been established as part of that community. Some participants specifically discussed the difficulties they faced when they first arrived in their community. Our participants were very aware of how others perceived them. Therefore, their ability to communicate with diverse populations and their skills, both as administrators and working with staff, contributed to their success in leading their agencies (Kearns et al., 2015).

Rural communities thrive on relationships. This might be the reason many of our participants reported having a relational approach to their leadership style, even though there is no consistency in terms of a leadership model for women, as none can account for their diverse styles. The relational model is based on shared power among all employees, also known as the shared administrative model, which was developed by feminists (Arches, 1997). The aim of this model is to operationalize community within the social service agency, thus placing value on mutual support and shared power among employees. In rural settings, the principles of this model were important for our participants who ascended to leadership positions. This model encompasses mentors and colleagues as sources of support and information. Employees are valued for the knowledge and skills they bring to the organization. In addition, support from the community is necessary for the agency to be successful, and the motivations that inspired our participants to become leaders were the clientele they served, as many began their careers working directly with clients. Thus, our participants aligned their passions with the organizational missions.

Participants did not directly discuss age, ethnicity, and gender as barriers in their rise to leadership. However, stereotypes about female leaders were still prevalent (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012; Ridgeway, 2001; Vinkenburg et al., 2011), and women who stepped outside of expected behaviors to take on more masculine leadership traits were viewed negatively (Rhee & Sigler, 2014). Seo et al. (2017) found that gender influences perception of leadership ability, with people assuming women may not be as effective as men based on stereotypical beliefs. Our participants reported that the expectation for them to perform as a leader was higher, and their age, gender, and ethnicity posed challenges, especially in a rural context. Thus, stereotypical beliefs held by both employees and those in leadership positions can have a negative impact on women's abilities to earn promotions and successfully lead an organization. Vinkenburg et al. (2011) noted:

If those who make selection and promotion decisions believe that women's leadership styles are different from men's, or that women should not manifest certain particularly effective leadership styles, the path to leadership may become more difficult for women than for men. (p. 11)

Nevertheless, some participants discussed carrying the burden of these stereotypes at the beginning of their leadership positions. Some even dismissed these stereotypes as a normal part of the belief system within rural communities. Previous studies have focused primarily on for-profit organizations in urban areas. The application of leadership expectations might be different in a rural setting and for nonprofit organizations, especially since many participants were hired within their organization.

Previous research has shown that family development is a hindrance to leadership ascension. Hurley and Choudhary (2016) found that children are a deterrence to obtaining CEO positions. However, the participants in this study did not perceive family as a hindrance; instead, they felt that their families were a source of support. This source of support went along with their faith, which contributed to their beliefs regarding establishing families. They reported that God helped them through the process of acquiring and sustaining their leadership positions.

### Conclusion

This qualitative study was designed to gather data regarding women's ascension to leadership positions in rural nonprofit agencies. Because we interviewed only 32 women, the results are not generalizable, but they do add to the body of literature on women in leadership, particularly as it applies to nonprofit agencies in rural communities. A deeper and richer understanding of these women's rise to leadership in their agencies and in their communities was gained, and the differences and similarities between them were observed. In addition, seven authors independently coded the data for thematic agreement, and the number of participants was sufficient for a qualitative study's sample size to reach thematic saturation. However, the sample size should be increased (i.e., more women leading rural nonprofits need to be studied to determine if these experiences discussed here are similar for a larger group). It might also be illuminating to compare the leadership styles of male and female leaders of rural nonprofit agencies and to delve more deeply into the specifics of their leadership styles. This would allow for further investigation into the notion that a relational style of leadership may be the most effective style regardless of the gender of the leader. This would then provide support for establishing work environments and training programs that strive to be free from gender stereotypes (Yount et al., 2018). The participants in our study discussed how crucial it was to have other women mentor them and the difference this made to their leadership approach; previous studies support this finding (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Settles et al., 2007).

However, while there are many studies on leadership and gender, the feminine transformational style has been suggested to be effective in rural areas (Avant et al., 2013; Sylvia et al., 2010), Billing and Alvesson (2000) suggested that any gender-based approach to leadership should be used with caution. They argued that labeling leadership as masculine or feminine simply supports stereotyping and division of labor along gender lines. An androgynous style of leadership, which contains both masculine and feminine leadership characteristics, has been found to be successful (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Crites et al., 2015). This suggests that males and females both possess leadership qualities that are useful, and perhaps leadership should not be viewed through a gender lens. Emphasis should instead be on the ability to utilize both styles and know *when* to use which style to be most effective, rather than assuming one is better than the other based on preconceived notions.

It is important to further understand whether unintentional leadership is more prevalent among women, or if it is similar across gender lines in rural communities. Understanding the phenomena of unintentional leadership and promotion from within can provide more insights into the development of trainings and other support resources that are specifically targeted at rural nonprofit organizations. Nevertheless, many of our participants took advantage of the leadership opportunity once presented, and their age, support systems, prior agency experiences, selflessness, and receptivity helped them succeed in these leadership positions. They noted that leading by example and with integrity contributed to their leadership effectiveness.

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