

Women's Leadership Committees: Where do the leaders go?

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Introduction

American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) is a non-governmental organization representing farmers and ranchers in all 50 United States and Puerto Rico. The organization works nationally and internationally, as well as through affiliate organizations in the states and one territory, to build a sustainable, safe, and abundant supply of food, fuel, and fiber (AFBF, 2021). AFBF's Women's Leadership Committee (WLC) provides leadership development and communication training to build strong, effective leaders in agriculture. A national committee is comprised of ten women: a chairperson, vice chairperson, and two regional representatives from the southern, western, northeast, and midwest regions of the United States (Farm Bureau Women's Leadership, 2021). Thirty-one state Farm Bureau organizations (FBOs) have their own Women's Leadership Committees. Establishing a WLC allows FBOs to send delegates to the Annual Meeting of American Farm Bureau Women and members may be appointed to the AFBF Women's Leadership Committee. The national WLC conducts training at AFBF's annual convention, FUSION Conference, Women's Communication Boot Camp, conducts quarterly calls with state WLC committee leadership, and publishes a monthly newsletter. State programs are encouraged to conduct similar state-level events to empower and equip women with leadership skills to serve the organization (Farm Bureau Women's Leadership, 2021). The underrepresentation of female leadership in agriculture is well documented, including within agriculture management positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015) and faculty and administrative positions in colleges of agriculture (Griffeth, 2013). However, the American Farm Bureau's leadership program seeks to promote the growth and development of women involved in agriculture to build stronger leaders for the organization and communities. This exploratory research seeks to understand the correlation between WLCs and the number of women serving on state Farm Bureau boards of directors.

Theoretical framework

This research is guided by social role theory which suggests differences in gender roles within leadership is due to stereotypical social roles within society. Within agriculture, the social role theory takes shape in the *farmer* and the *farm wife* that perpetuates the traditional division of labor and may be seen as an obstacle for women seeking leadership roles in agriculture (Keller, 2014, Louder, 2020). These roles then predict actions or membership within societal groups (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Stereotypical social roles for women include nurturer and helper whereas men's roles are associated with power and strength (Louder, 2020). Additionally, the American Association for Agricultural Education's Research Priority Six: Vibrant, Resilient Communities addresses the need for effective leadership within the agricultural community as well as a need for volunteers and leaders to adapt as society's trends adapt (Roberts, et al., 2016)

Methods

This exploratory research study was designed to answer the following question: Do state FBOs with WLCs have more women serving on the state board of directors than states without WLCs? A content analysis of 51 state FBO websites was conducted in January and February 2021. The total number of board members and number of women serving on the board was recorded. Four state organizations did not provide board of director information on their website. Emails were sent to these four organizations' website contact forms to obtain the gender make-up of the

boards. The Farm Bureau Women's Leadership 2021 Directory and Program Guide provided the list of state organizations with active WLCs. Microsoft Excel was used to catalog the data and SPSS was used for the statistical calculations.

Results

The mean size of a state Farm Bureau board was 20 members, with a range of 9 to 58 members. The most frequently occurring state board size was 14 members with six states (12%) having a board of this size. The mean number of women serving on state boards of directors is four ($SD = 2.1$). Thirty-one state FBOs had WLCs and 20 state Farm Bureaus did not. The mean size of a state WLC was 11 members. Of the 31 states with WLCs, 30 had women serving on their state board of directors. When looking at only the state Farm Bureaus with WLCs, the mean size of the state boards was 22 people with a mean of four women (19%) serving ($SD = 2.3$).

The state Farm Bureaus without WLCs had a mean board size of 17 with a mean of 3 women (20%, $SD = 1.8$). A point-biserial correlation was used to correlate the number of women serving on the boards of directors with the presence of a WLCs. The five assumptions of a point-biserial correlation were met. Results from the Levene's test of equal variances ($F(1, 49) = 0.838, p = 0.36$) showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met. A point-biserial correlation was run to determine the relationship between WLCs and number of women on state Farm Bureau boards of directors. There was a small, positive correlation between WLCs and number of women on state boards of directors, which was not statistically significant ($r_{pb} = 0.15, n = 51, p = 0.293$).

Discussion

According to the 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture, females account for 36% of farmers in the United States with 9% of farms run solely by women (USDA NASS, 2017). In 2020, more than 50% of all postsecondary graduates in agricultural degree programs were female (Deloitte, n.d.). Farm Bureaus have a long history as a cornerstone to agricultural communities (Farm Bureau, 2022). While the number of females holding primary roles in agriculture is on the rise, the number of women holding state-level Farm Bureau leadership roles remains low. States with WLCs do see a very slight increase of women serving on their state boards, however this number is only one person greater than those boards without WLCs. When compared on a percent basis, the percent of women making up state Farm Bureau boards is slightly higher in states without WLCs ($n = 20\%$) than those with WLCs ($n = 19\%$). The mission and vision of WLCs indicates this program develops and empowers future female leaders in agriculture (Farm Bureau Women's Leadership, 2021). Social role theory suggests a stereotypical role of men being a stronger leader and females being a more nurturing influence could affect a woman's ability to rise in the ranks of leadership (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Louder (2020) found women in agriculture continue to experience barriers preventing them from advancing. Further research needs to be conducted to understand the specific barriers hindering female leadership growth within the Farm Bureau organization.

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