

Shaping Our Futures Together: Engaging Women in Leadership Development

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Abstract

There is much rhetoric about the need to build women's capacity so they can better contribute in their workplaces and communities, and to decision-making bodies such as boards and committees. This paper outlines the innovative 'Shaping Our Futures Together' (SOFT) leadership workshop program developed by the NSW Rural Women's Network¹ (RWN). SOFT has been delivered in a range of locations to over 200 women from diverse backgrounds (including Indigenous women and women with limited education and literacy). Participants involved in SOFT are taken on a two-day 'journey' which includes experiential, interactive and diverse learning activities aimed at building self-esteem and confidence, reflecting on issues and creating visions and goals. These skills enhance social capital and active citizenship, and acknowledge women who are often overlooked, within existing community 'resources'. SOFT also provides opportunities for further networking to improve supportive relationships on both personal and community levels. The paper includes a rationale and background to SOFT's genesis and some of the innovative educational strategies used to deliver this women-only program. Research supports programs such as SOFT.

Keywords

Women, rural, leadership, self-esteem, gender



¹ The RWN is a government program within the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries. It has two staff who work with its community-based State Advisory Committee and other non-government and government agencies to develop initiatives which stimulate actions on priority rural women's issues. It is also a key information and referral portal <www.agric.nsw.gov.au/rwn> and provides input to policy development.

Introduction

A community worth living in has to include women and reflect women's experiences just as much as men's. Women have a different view of the world: our biological, social and emotional experiences are different from men's. Yet most of the important decisions in public and private life have until very recently assumed that men's lives and expectations are the only ones there are. Many women want to make a difference and our world a better place. They need power to do it, but it isn't easy for women to be powerful in what has been a man's world for thousands of years (Kirner and Rayner 1999, p. 2).

Rural women² have a great capacity to contribute and lead within their communities. The aim of this paper is to provide a brief synopsis of current research around women and leadership and to outline features of the Shaping Our Futures Together (SOFT) leadership program developed by the Rural Women's Network (RWN), which is meeting some of the training needs of women living in rural, regional and remote locations across New South Wales (NSW), Australia.

One of the key outcomes of the first International Women in Agriculture Conference, held in Melbourne in 1994, was a recommendation for skills development in the area of leadership. Research confirms that rural women wanting to take up leadership challenges want more support and locally based flexible training opportunities so they do not have to be away from their families for long periods of time (Alston 2000).

Alston's research of 615 respondents from across Australia revealed that the top three strategies rural women identified as useful in assisting their participation on boards or committees were training (23 per cent), confidence building (20 per cent) and support/encouragement (19 per cent).

Gender and leadership

The Australian Council for Women was established in the early 1990s to provide advice to the Federal Government for Australia's input to the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. The 1994 pre-conference report recommended an increase in the number of women involved in decision making at all levels of society including the family, the community, work, industry, government and non-government organisations, and politics (Claridge 1998).

Despite government rhetoric, commitments to implement actions following on from the United Nations Conference on Women in 1995, there is little evidence to show that these commitments are being addressed 'with great zeal' (Alston 2000, p. 61).

While women and men share many similarities, they often think, feel and interact in very different ways because of varied social experiences. Women frequently play primary caring roles within the family or are regular community volunteers. They play a key role in sustaining social capital within communities

² The term 'rural women' is used broadly in this paper to mean all women living outside the major New South Wales urban areas of greater Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong. It includes farming women; women living in villages, towns and regional centres; women from non-English speaking backgrounds; women in mining communities; Indigenous women; and women living in isolated outback regions.

and are primary consumers of products and services, so they bring different qualities and experiences to leadership.

In their household and community based work, many women develop technical, management, finance, interpersonal and organisational expertise which is transferable into paid work situations (Cox and Leonard 1991 cited in McClure 2000, p. 97).

This socialisation process, combined with prevailing attitudes, can strongly impact on women's self-confidence and ability to participate in leadership positions (Alston 2000; Haslam McKenzie 2003; Muir 2003).

Rural ideologies, which reinforce gender roles and stereotypes, have played a huge role in marginalising women and impeded their ability to become more involved in many leadership and decision-making areas.

In her presentation, delivered at the 1995 Women in Leadership Project International Conference, Mary Salce talked about a 'grass shroud':

The grass shroud covering women farmers goes back a long way, starting with the nursery rhymes we sang as children. For example, Old McDonald, who had a farm, was male. And do you remember the one which runs 'the farmer takes a wife, the farmer takes a wife' (cited in Lord et al. 1996, p. 23).

Despite some advances in the past ten years, men still predominantly occupy positions of power in rural communities, such as local government, the professions and in community leadership, reinforcing entrenched prevailing leadership stereotypes (Haslam McKenzie 2003; Pini 2001).

Women's involvement in leadership can create an important balance because of their varied experiences and should not be overlooked. This difference from men's 'ways of knowing' needs to be valued (Pini 2001). The lack of diversity in decision making contributes to a distorted view, which is reflected in policies and decisions made. Women's perspectives focus less on pure economics and more on the future of farming families, declining government spending on infrastructure in rural areas, the shrinking of country towns and the need to address equity issues of younger people (Salce 1995 cited in Lord et al. 1996).

The encouragement and support of women as equal partners in decision-making is in the national interest, particularly in regard to the sustainability of the rural sector (Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE) 1996, p. 13).

An Australian Government report (Karpin 1995) recommended more women be recruited into leadership positions because they have what leadership requires: good interpersonal and team skills, strategic thinking to solve complex problems, vision, and a demonstrated flexibility and capacity for self-management with high ethical standards.

Progress towards better representation of women in various programs and positions of power and leadership is slow. Statistics suggest that the leadership within Australian organisations lacks diversity and does not reflect the make-up of the workforce or domestic and international markets. It can be argued that increased diversity in positions of power and influence are crucial economic as well as equity issues (Sinclair 1998).

It is often perceived that women do not have the skills needed for decision-making positions. Studies, however, show that women *do* have the necessary financial and management skills required for leadership, which can be evidenced through the growing number of successful small businesses run by women.

Increasingly, Australian small business owners are women. Women start around 70% of new businesses and are predicted to own 50% of small business by 2000. They currently create about half the private sector jobs ... and evidence from Australia, France and the UK and elsewhere, indicates that women run their organisations better (Sinclair 1998, p. 7).

Another contributing factor to the small number of women in leadership positions is their lack of power through not owning land. Alston's research (2000) reveals that only around 14 per cent of women felt they had a joint role in farm decisions and that women were more involved in other off-farm decisions such as those relating to family. They had little say in production decisions regardless of their legal status or farm management background. Despite higher education qualifications among women in rural areas, women are still largely invisible in policy and decision making at all levels, from the kitchen table to the boardroom.

Research by government agencies and academics has identified a number of key barriers for women wanting to be more involved in decision making (Table 1).

The RWN developed the customised women-only two-day SOFT leadership program in 2001 to address some of the barriers to leadership that rural women face, through its carefully considered content and delivery methods which provide locally accessible, appropriate and affordable training opportunities.

Table 1. Summary of the main leadership barriers and challenges faced by Australian rural women

Note: not in priority order	
1.	Lack of recognition and valuing of women's leadership skills, experience and education, evidenced by their absence in many areas of decision making
2.	Women's own lack of self-confidence
3.	Pervading rural ideologies which reinforce gender-specific stereotypes of women as wives, mothers and helpers, as well as cultural and community closure against women
4.	Lack of encouragement and support by family, partner, community and industry
5.	Family make-up of farms, and women's lack of ownership and point of entry into agriculture
6.	Family responsibilities and lack of childcare services
7.	Lack of time as well as the actual timing and location of meetings
8.	Distance, travel and cost
9.	Farm work commitments and associated replacement labour costs
10.	Board and committee structures
11.	The sheer hard work associated with taking on another load when they are already so stretched
Information compiled from research done by: Alston 2000; Wilkinson and Alston 1999; Dimpoulos and Sheridan 2000; Haslam Mackenzie 2003; Muir 2003 and 2004; Purdie 1993.	

Women-only learning programs

Women learn best when their presence, perspective and experience is valued. This most often tends to occur with other women, in groups where women can engage in dialogues that expose issues and increases the possibility of empowerment. Best learning occurs where group processes of discussion and listening are encouraged and developed. Best learning also tends to occur when women can explore their own social construction through an examination of the similarities and differences that exist between different women and different groups of women (Ritchie 1998, p. 37).

Research on women-only courses stresses the importance of creating optimal learning opportunities in affirmative and secure environments where women can share and explore their own experiences and knowledge. An awareness of different-gendered social realities needs to be acknowledged, and women's ways of knowing valued, so that women can become more involved in decision-making arenas (Benjamin et al. 1997; Claridge 1998; Muir 2003; Wilkinson and Alston 1999).

Inherent in the SOFT design is a belief that women have the power to shape their own future but need confidence and practical skills to unlock their leadership potential. The SOFT program provides a number of simple tools and processes which women can use in the future. The decision to embrace opportunities or change is, however, always a personal one (Limerick and Heywood 1993; Muir 2004).

Research shows that women tend to value learning through discussing and connecting or sharing personal experiences with others in cooperative learning environments where they can feel positively supported and encouraged, and able to draw on their own experiences while relating new knowledge to prior knowledge (Belenky et al. 1986; National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) 1991; Ritchie 1998).

The experience of learning alongside other women in a positive and supportive environment, exploring and celebrating similarities and differences, not only enhances confidence and raises awareness, but also changes lives (NIACE 1991, p. 9).

Many of these women-specific educational needs were considered when developing both the content and delivery of the SOFT workshop program. It is essential to the entire SOFT process that time is devoted to creating a 'safe space' where women can feel free to explore and discuss any personal issues that may arise. 'Group ground rules', such as respecting confidentiality, are agreed to and set in the opening session. It is important that all participants are involved in forming these ground rules, as the process is essential to the success of the rest of the two-day workshop. Feeling able to raise issues and reveal thoughts on particular subjects without fear is critical to group effectiveness (Benjamin et al. 1997).

Women-only groups facilitate this process by providing "affirmative, secure bases for women where they can be accepted and respected ... form relationships and networks, strengthen their identities, and at the same time, learn" (Sanguinetti 1994 cited in Ritchie 1998, p. 37). Women's groups can help to promote mutual understanding — "I understand, because I have been there and I'd like to share with you how I approached my problems".

SOFT encourages women to take risks and to try new ways of thinking and doing, and it provides a platform for women who may not have had the opportunity or space to reflect and think about issues and plan for future goals (Muir 2004).

Women are not a homogeneous group. They are individuals with differing life experiences and situations (Ritchie 1998). In each introductory SOFT session, considerable time is also spent allowing participants to learn a little about each other. Emphasis is placed on who they are as women rather than what they do, their jobs, finances, status, roles and so on. Introductions centre on first names and making connections with important aspects of each other's lives, such as family, friends and meaningful places. This connection to the 'being' rather than the 'doing' is where women can come together and start to build trust by valuing each and every woman for who they are. This is especially important when Indigenous women or those from disadvantaged backgrounds are in the group, because class and status, which could act as barriers to engagement, are not deemed a priority (Muir 2004).

Research shows that teaching methods for non-formal learning are responsive to people from diverse backgrounds and provide non-threatening, confidence-building and nurturing environments where learners participate equitably in learning (Harrison 2003). Women learn best in an environment that is supportive and nurturing rather than competitive (Ritchie 1998).

Telling a personal story becomes a social process for making lived experiences understandable and meaningful (Ellis 1992, pp. 79-80).

Valuing and reflecting on experiences and developing shared understandings is a basis for change within individuals and groups. The group experience is in reality a social experience of shared social action (Benjamin et al. 1997; Bolitho and Hutchison 2003; Ritchie 1998).

So much begins at the level of personal development, small changes for individual women – little rumblings – which add up to diverse and profound shifts in political awareness (McMinn 1995, p. 153).

Women learn not only in classrooms but also through relationships and engaging with family and the community (Belenky et al. 1986, p. ix). Bringing SOFT women together places them in a position to achieve individual and common objectives and can lead to social change.

SOFT's content and delivery

Each fourteen-hour SOFT workshop is usually run over two consecutive days³ and is designed to engage and energise new and existing rural women leaders by providing a framework for sharing creative ideas, learning new skills, and establishing support networks.

From the social space where women are engaged with each other, it is possible to gain the confidence to move out into the public world of work, community involvement, local women's networks or further education (McMinn 1995, p. 153).

Since 2001, ten SOFT programs have been delivered to over 170 women living in rural, regional and remote areas of NSW. Participants have come from a broad cross-section of the community and include Indigenous women, younger women, older women, farming women, unemployed and employed women, and business women.

There are no selection criteria or prerequisite skills needed to participate. SOFT is appropriate for women with any level of education and has the flexibility to respond to the requirements of special needs groups such as Indigenous women. A modified version of SOFT has been developed and delivered to meet the more specific and culturally appropriate needs of Australian Aboriginal women (Muir 2004).

Most SOFT participants pay some kind of subsidised registration fee, with the balance of costs coming from various funding sources. Childcare is an ongoing issue for many women, and the timing of the workshop is negotiated to ensure women with family responsibilities are not disadvantaged. In some programs, childcare or 'childminding' services have been provided by sourcing extra funding.

³ The RWN commenced a pilot SOFT learning program with TAFE NSW in March 2005 using satellite technology. The two-day format has been modified into ten, two-hour interactive sessions which are broadcast live through the School of the Air network.

SOFT provides a broad range of activities to cater for diverse learning styles. It includes 'thinking' as well as physical or 'doing' activities. Some activities include the whole group while others involve small-group work or require individual participation. The learning is experiential wherever possible and involves practising, reflecting and sharing personal stories and insights with other participants. Examples of the type of activities undertaken include role playing, journaling, visualising, creating collages, discussing values, learning to communicate more effectively, practising assertiveness skills, managing time, networking, visioning, goal setting and action planning. The final sessions focus on dealing with changes in self when returning to the 'real world' (Muir 2004).

Although SOFT is structured, the atmosphere created is one of learning together and developing a personal pathway through the activities rather than being formal, rigid and prescriptive.

Selected music is played in the background during many SOFT sessions to encourage creativity and promote a receptive atmosphere for learning. The right side of the human brain is often described as the creative side, responding to music, images, wholes and simultaneous connections (Hollier et al. 2004). SOFT's visualisation techniques, images and music tap into this creative potential.

Slow reflective music can bring participants' brain waves in to the theta cycle, which encourages sudden insights and inspirations. (Millbower 2004, p. 20)

Settings

Non-formal learning includes social and cultural aspects of learning and contributes to increased participation and cohesion by connecting people, building networks and developing social capital (Harrison 2003). Each SOFT workshop program requires a minimum of ten women to ensure a synergy of group dynamics is attained. The workshops can be run anywhere — they have been delivered in many non-formal settings such as community halls, open spaces, gardens, verandahs, motel dining rooms and farm stays.

SOFT workshops are run in partnership with a local community person who is responsible for getting a group together and assisting with the planning, such as securing appropriate venues, helping with promotions and organising catering.

Self-confidence

Once you start to feel good about yourself, you will quite naturally start to feel competent, and you will find the confidence to believe that you really can do anything you want to (Kirner and Rayner 1999, p. 41).

Socialisation and the attitudes of men impact on women's self-confidence. Alston's study (2000) revealed that board and committee chairs, both women and men, stated that women's lack of confidence was a critical factor in their absence from leadership within mainstream arenas of power.

Men automatically assume that they will be leaders and work towards this goal, whereas women do not have this belief about themselves. Unfortunately, women are inclined to play down their own skills and understandings, incorrectly assuming that those in positions of leadership are particularly clever with a special knowledge bank (Office of Training and Further Education Forum 1997, p. 36).

Women's lack of self-confidence constantly self-sabotages their ability to pursue decision-making positions. Women fear what others will think of them and underestimate their skills and abilities to contribute or participate in debates (Claridge 1998; McClure 2000).

I never realised I had any leadership ability but was made to step out and once I did take that step I found it was not difficult. It is the first steps out, all women have to overcome. Women just don't like to promote themselves (Alston 2000, p. 124).

SOFT provides a 'space' where women can come together as women, recognising their female identity while sharing valued personal experiences and women's ways of 'knowing'.

For women attending women's education classes, the opportunity is often a significant break from the private world of the home ... To share feelings and experiences with other women can lead to an appreciation of the commonality of our experience and recognition of social structures oppressive to women (McMinn 1995, p. 153).

Support and networking

Research suggests that women, like men, recognise the importance of gaining the support of their partner when taking on leadership positions.

Having a 'wife' is a major advantage in being able to work long hours, to give one's career priority in the family and pursue an uninterrupted career. Male advantage in the workplace is closely linked with the 'invisible' domestic support system (Office of Training and Further Education Forum 1997, p. 30).

Poor self-confidence and the lack of support from men were the most commonly mentioned constraints in a study of rural women conducted in Queensland by Claridge (1998). Without support, it is difficult for both men and women to juggle family, involvement in leadership, and other community or personal responsibilities. Women, like men, need this critical family and partner support. And, like the 'old boy's networks', women felt they needed support from other women. This is where women's networks and organisations have been very beneficial (Alston 2000; Grace 1997; McClure 2000; Pini 2001).

Claridge's (1998) study confirmed the need for women to support each other by encouragement and the development of networks. Women's government networks and non-government organisations are playing an important role in supporting women to feel less intimidated and more empowered. It is difficult for women to constantly fight the gender stereotypes and strive out alone in an often-hostile

environment. These networks are recognised as a critical support for women, who often feel isolated as they struggle to work within the male-dominant decision-making arenas.

Despite this, women in Alston's research (2000) said that the 'tall poppy syndrome' was alive and well in rural communities. Women sometimes do not support each other and see women breaking through the leadership barriers as contributing to the breakdown of communities and the security of gender roles and responsibilities. There are women playing a major role as 'patrollers' of gendered power relations.

Frequently women marry into rural farming communities and bring less entrenched values to the community. Women who step outside these roles are often viewed with suspicion or even contempt (McClure 2000).

Feedback and evaluation

SOFT is co-facilitated by two women trainers ('non-performing' facilitators) who also participate in many of the activities and are present for the entire two-day workshop. This ongoing 'deep engagement' helps to build group rapport and provides each 'non-performing' facilitator with the opportunity to 'read' the group and provide constructive and constant feedback to the 'performing' facilitator, thus ensuring the participants' needs are being continually monitored.

SOFT's content and facilitation techniques are constantly being refined and customised to meet women's needs, and at the end of every SOFT workshop each participant is asked to complete a simple evaluation form so that feedback on overall learning experiences can be gathered. This information is then used to enhance future workshop content and delivery. SOFT is also mapped against two national (Australian) training competencies.

Conclusion

SOFT aims to build social capital and contribute to the sustainability of rural communities by providing a springboard for developing networks and learning relevant skills in accessible non-threatening environments. SOFT relies on exploring many aspects of leadership with an emphasis on not 'prescribing' ways of leading but rather providing experiences that allow women to learn skills, find their own way of understanding and reflect on what works for them. It supports women's individual and group ways of 'knowing' and encourages confidence to try new ideas, experiment with intuition and develop meaningful goals that are relevant to individual values within a safe environment.

Until women are acknowledged, supported, encouraged and given access to official leadership roles and power networks, where they can exercise their leadership skills while being able to balance family and work, progress will remain slow. Research supports a continuation of women-only, non-formal, leadership courses like SOFT, which is playing a key part in empowering women to identify issues, build networks, set goals which contribute to shaping their own future and enhance contributions to sustainable families and communities (Muir 2004).

Recommendations

The following recommendations hope to address the issues of providing relevant, affordable and accessible learning opportunities for all women. They are not in priority order.

The recommendations are:

1. that women's ways of knowing, and gender-specific learning, need to be recognised and valued by governments and training providers when developing leadership courses targeting women living in rural, regional and remote locations
2. that non-formal, women-only leadership courses continue to be acknowledged and valued by governments and training providers as an important step within the lifelong learning continuum
3. that non-formal, women-only leadership courses which focus on building self-esteem, setting personal goals and providing opportunities to establish support networks for women in rural, regional and remote areas, be funded by governments.

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