

Analysis of the Mechanism of Women's Leadership Cultivation at the Community Level-Public Participation and Social Work Empowerment

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Abstract. This study mainly explores ways to enhance community women's leadership from the perspective of social work empowerment. Although more women have joined community governance in recent years, many of them still face long-standing structural limits, gender expectations, and the dilemma of limited institutional support. Combined with existing studies and several theoretical approaches, this paper shows three main empowerment strategies. To begin with, group work allows women to gradually build leadership skills, including speaking, planning, decision skills, while also forming mutual support network in the group in the community. Then, community work helps open more formal leading spaces for women by adding gender-sensitive rules and practices into community meetings, project design, and daily decision-making procedures, which offers more chances for women to move upward from basic participation to real involvement in decision-making. Third, by providing resource links, offer women access to policy institutions, professional organizations, and social resource platforms, thereby obtaining training, funding, and broader development opportunities. In this process, social workers play an important role by serving as coordinators, advocates, and connectors. This paper points out the important conclusion that the cultivation of sustainable female leadership requires the combined effect of personal capacity building, structural reforms, and multi-level resource support.

Keywords: Women's leadership, community governance, social work empowerment, gender equality

1. Introduction

Women are now more prevalent in community governance today, which contribute to social harmony, help with local decision-making, and support the daily well-being of community residents. However, even though women participate actively, their leadership is still limited by cultural norms, structural inequalities, and institutional constraints. Many scholars call this as “female leadership paradox,” meaning that although women show leadership abilities in daily practice, they are not equally represented in formal power positions. This is because in many communities, women's participation in the workplace is still constrained by concepts such as gender roles and family

responsibilities. As a result, women are often regarded as assistants or organizers rather than formal leaders capable of making important decisions. In this case, social work is becoming an area where women can exert their leadership. According to the empowerment theory, in social work, enhancing individual capabilities, increasing participation and changing the structure of inequality are key. Meanwhile, an increasing number of communities are also implementing the participatory governance model. In this model, women can play the roles of facilitators, advocates and resource matchmakers, participating in community governance in a unique way. All these provide channels for enhancing women's leadership.

This study explores how social work can support women's leadership in community governance. By referencing recent domestic and international research, this paper will show three related approaches: group work that strengthens basic skills and confidence; community work that creates formal opportunities for women to join decision-making; and resource linkage that connects women to broader systems. These strategies show that personal empowerment and structural change must be combined.

By analyzing these approaches, this paper would contribute to the discussions on gender equality, community participation, and empowerment practice, and can provide theoretical insights and practical guidance for strengthening women's leadership in contemporary community settings.

2. Current situation of women's public participation and leadership in communities

2.1. Main forms of women's public participation in communities

In Chinese community governance system, women's participation has become a major force in many daily public affairs. Most of the time, women take part in volunteer activities such as elderly companionship, after-school tutoring, environmental cleaning, or basic service-oriented work. Such participation often has the characteristics of "caring" and "service", which means that most women participate in community affairs more out of personal emotions and a sense of social responsibility, rather than political or managerial motives. This widespread phenomenon indicates that although women are actively involved in community affairs, they rarely have the opportunity to participate in decision-making. For instance, positions in key decision-making bodies such as community committees and industry committees are still mainly held by men. Even if some women hold relevant positions, their roles are usually symbolic rather than practical. This indicates that people's traditional concepts of gender still influence the workplace, and there are still structural imbalances in grassroots positions. This phenomenon also exists in other societies. According to international research, even in societies with a high sense of gender equality, stereotypes still prevent women from obtaining leadership or networking resources [1].

2.2. Existing characteristics of community women's leadership

Based on existing research, women's leadership in communities often exhibits "service-oriented" characteristics. For instance, many women are engaged in interpersonal relationship coordination work, but they have few opportunities in strategic planning or resource management. This is influenced by the long-standing concept of gender role division in social culture. Specifically, it is generally believed that women are more empathetic and inclusive and are better at communication. In contrast, men are regarded as more rational and authoritative and thus are more suitable to be leaders [2]. While this expectation can to some extent help cultivate female leadership, it greatly limits the multidimensional development of women's leadership potential. Additionally, in real

community practice, women often serve as group leaders, volunteer coordinators, or members of the Women's Federation. As mentioned above, although they contribute a lot to social support and community trust-building, they often lack real decision-making power. Smith et al. call this situation as the "female leadership paradox" meaning that women show strong leadership in informal settings but remain at the edge of formal power structure [3]. Specifically speaking, in community settings, it is not difficult to see that women play an important driving role in most community-level activities, yet they seldom influence major decisions or agendas.

2.3. Current status of social work intervention

In recent years, more social work professionals have taken part in community-level women's empowerment work that aims to support women's growth. Some communities have created "women's homes" or small learning groups to offer training and emotional support. However, these interventions are still too basic, they only focus on counseling, family-related topics, or simple skills like handicrafts, while structured leadership-development programs remain lacking. There is international research points out that effective leadership development should include not only personal skill building but also institutional support, such as policy connections and access to resources [4]. In contrast, many local community projects operate independently, which also hinders cooperation among communities.

Another important issue is that the professional identity of social workers in this field remains unclear. This has led many people to view female practitioners as a disadvantaged group rather than leaders. Therefore, although the empowerment theory in social work emphasizes that people should be supported to control their own lives and participate in social change, this provides important guidance for helping women transform from simple participants to active leaders [5]. Although women's participation in community work has become more common, their space in formal decision-making is still limited. This contradiction is often shown in own fieldwork experiences, that social norms, institutional boundaries, and the limited involvement of professional social workers all play a part in the restriction.

Generally, it is hard to tell which influence is the strongest, but together they restrict women's leadership development.

3. Conceptual clarification and theoretical foundation

3.1. Conceptual clarification

Women's leadership generally refers to women's ability to influence others, guide collective action, and take part in decision-making. Compared with more traditional leadership styles, women's leadership often shows strengths in communication, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving, which can help increase trust and cohesion in communities [6]. However, this does not fully resolve the problem of "female leadership paradox." In other words, although women have the ability to coordinate and solve problems, they are still unable to hold core leadership positions due to the influence of social concepts [3].

Furthermore, public participation is another important concept. For many women, participation is the first step to gaining leadership, which helps them understand community needs and test their own influence. To become a decision-maker, one must be recognized by the community. Therefore, whether participation can be transformed into leadership is a question that women need to consider.

Empowerment is also an important concept. In social work, workers usually play the role of facilitators. Their main task is to connect resources and promote the formation of a supportive institutional environment [4]. Therefore, at the community level, empowering women can help them understand their own strengths and become excellent leadership roles.

3.2. Theoretical foundations for women's leadership development

Empowerment theory is a core concept in social work, providing a theoretical basis for women on how to become leaders. According to Wen's research, empowerment includes psychological empowerment, social empowerment and political empowerment [5]. Psychological empowerment can help build self-confidence, social empowerment can help establish social networks, and political empowerment can enable one to participate in public decision-making. Only when all three rights are granted simultaneously can women transform from service recipients to community administrators in community work.

The Glass Cliff theory suggests that women are only required to hold leadership positions when an organization or society is in a difficult or unstable period, as the risk of failure is high during such times. This also explains why even if women hold high-pressure positions, it is still very difficult for them to become leaders [7].

According to the Gender role theory, the traditional social perception usually regards women as caregivers and men as decision-makers. This widespread expectation not only affects women's self-perception but also influences the public's judgment of individual leadership potential [2]. For instance, in community work, women often need to strike a balance between work and family care. As a result, when female leaders make decisions, people may question whether they are truly in line with community development. Therefore, only by changing this perception can female leaders truly gain recognition.

Finally, Brownfinbrenner's ecosystem theory also explains this issue from multiple levels. At the micro level, the attitudes of family and friends are the key factors influencing women's self-confidence. At the intermediate level, community organizations and policies determine whether women can obtain leadership positions. At the macro level, influenced by cultural values, the effectiveness of female leadership still faces many doubts. Therefore, developing women's leadership is not an individual act but requires the joint support of multiple levels.

The strengths perspective focuses on individuals' abilities rather than their weaknesses that encourages practitioners to identify existing strengths such as communication, empathy, and cooperation, and turn them into leadership assets [8].

In summary, these theories—empowerment, gender roles, ecological systems, and the strengths perspective, offer different but complementary explanations. Together, they show that women's leadership development requires both personal growth and larger systemic change.

4. Social work empowerment paths for community women's leadership

4.1. Group work: building competence and collective support

Group work is one of the most effective methods in social work for helping women build leadership skills in communities. Women can practice communication, teamwork, public speaking and any skills they can learn to improve the leadership through group activities, they can also join the workshops set up by the social workers such as “Community Decision-Making Simulation” or

“Project Planning Practice.” which allow women to learn through the process and help reduce their nervousness about formal participation.

Many women find leadership more achievable when they see people with similar backgrounds succeed, as some research showing that women can combine both assertive and cooperative traits when they work in supportive networks [9]. Social workers can also invite experienced women leaders like Women’s Federation members or neighborhood committee leaders, to share their own stories. People could create a “model demonstration–peer encouragement” effect.

Group activities also provide emotional space. Women can freely talk about the common challenges they face, which helps them more clearly establish their identity as "community female leaders". Through group discussions, groups can establish a relationship of mutual assistance. During this process, the communication skills of female leaders can be enhanced, and it also provides support for subsequent work. This is because, after the group activity technology, this mutual assistance network can still continue to function. Furthermore, as their network of relationships expands, female leaders will also gain more public trust. Therefore, this can consolidate their long-term leadership [6].

4.2. Community work: expanding participation and leadership platforms

Community work should create structural opportunities for women. Specifically, community workers should aim to establish fair participation mechanisms to reduce barriers to women's participation. This can empower women at the grassroots level with decision-making rights, thereby enhancing their influence in decision-making [10].

Institutional rules are also very important. Without reasonable systems, the legitimacy of female leaders and the transparency of their decision-making will be questioned, thereby weakening public trust in them [4].

Therefore, in order to establish a participation mechanism and ensure the fairness of the system, the community can consider setting up seats for women in women's discussion corners or community committees to ensure that women's voices are heard and taken into account in the final decision-making process. In addition, community workers should also collaborate with women to design community projects, so as to fully leverage women's advantages to address residents' needs. For instance, the community can call on the mother group to form a parenting team or establish an environmental monitoring group led by women. These projects enable women to participate in solving community problems and take on leadership roles throughout the process. Through these practices, women's abilities will be more recognized by residents, and they will also be more confident in taking on leadership roles [1].

In addition to community activities, the proportion of women in some key positions, such as budgeting and community planning, should also be increased. Only in this way can people ensure that the participation system does not merely remain superficial but enable participants to truly play their roles [5]. In this way, women will be regarded as active contributors to the community rather than supporting roles.

4.3. Resource linkage: creating a multi-level support network

Obtaining multi-level support is also a key to enhancing women's leadership. Communities can offer support to women from both political and professional perspectives.

To connect with political resources, the community can cooperate with the Women's Federation or government agencies to seek more positions for women, especially some leadership positions. If

women can hold leadership positions in these official organizations, public recognition of their leadership will increase significantly [3]. In addition, to broaden women's horizons and enhance their visibility, the community can also organize female employees to participate in government training programs or public speaking. These political resources will provide assistance for the future work of female leaders.

To connect with professional resources, the community should actively collaborate with universities or professional institutions to offer project management training courses for female leaders. Participating in these courses can help them consider issues from a more professional perspective when making decisions, thereby reducing the public's prejudice against perception [2].

Overall, these resources can provide more comprehensive support for female leaders, enabling them to find solutions to complex problems in different situations. More importantly, these resources also provide additional protection for women, enabling them to participate in decision-making with greater confidence. This is of great significance for female leaders to develop long-term leadership.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals the role of social work empowerment in enhancing women's leadership. Specifically, group work can help women build confidence, improve communication skills and expand their social networks. Community work can enable women to directly participate in decision-making by proactively reducing gender barriers. Resource matching can help women gain support from policies, experts and the public, thereby obtaining opportunities for long-term development.

These three approaches can also be summarized as: personal capacity building, structural transformation and multi-level support. Through these three approaches, women are more likely to transform from mere participants to influential leaders. In other words, enhancing female leadership is not only about addressing the issue of gender discrimination, but also about providing assistance to women from more perspectives. Therefore, practices based on empowerment theory can help communities establish gender-balanced leadership teams and further enhance the fairness of democratic decision-making.

In the future, to adapt to the development of The Times and social demands, researchers can consider analyzing whether institutional innovation and technological empowerment can further enhance women's leadership. In addition, from a gender perspective, in-depth research can be conducted on whether increasing the participation rate of women in community work can achieve more stable community governance. Through these studies, it is possible to better provide women with solutions that meet the expectations of individuals, families, organizations and society. This will provide an important theoretical basis for the research on female leadership.

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