

Barriers, Breakthroughs, and Backbone of Rural Elected Women

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100 Rural Women

Executive Summary

Women are underrepresented in elected positions across all levels of government, especially in rural Minnesota. 100 Rural Women is a nonprofit organization focused on facilitating leadership opportunities for rural women. Its mission is important because rural women not only experience a lack of parity, but they also deal with less access to services, infrastructure and paid employment opportunities (Pozarny, 2016). In order to assist 100 Rural Women in their focus, we facilitated 19 interviews with rural women in elected office across the state in order to understand the motivators, barriers, and supports needed to assist rural women in their pathways to elected office. We found many women face barriers such as sexism, not knowing the basics of how to run a campaign, and difficulty balancing their various responsibilities. The interviewees reported that the most meaningful supports were informal, such as their friends, family, and other elected officials that provided mentorship and insight throughout their campaign and time in office. Through our interviews, we found that all interviewees are interested in participating in a mentorship network to support other elected women and to encourage more women to run for office. These findings suggest that a support network based on providing meaningful connection, as well as training on the barriers encountered would be an important tool for getting more rural women into leadership positions.

Introduction

Gender representation in Minnesota is nowhere near parity. In the state legislature alone, 34.8% of legislators are women, compared to 50.2% of the population of Minnesota being female (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In other elected roles, like county commissioners, women only make up 18% of the representatives (Donahue, 2021). This lack of representation aligns with the historical precedent of the unequal representation from marginalized groups at all levels of government across the U.S. Women were not able to vote until 1920, and levels of representation have failed to reach parity, even after more than 100 years have passed since suffrage. Women leaders are perceived to be more compassionate and better able to work out compromises, both valuable assets that can be brought into government (Horowitz. et al, 2019). The lack of women means these traits are more likely to be missing in government, where their addition could be critical to cultivating a government that can best serve their constituents. Women in general need to be asked many more times than their male counterparts to run for office.

In rural areas, lack of women's representation is further exacerbated because women have less access to infrastructure, opportunities for paid employment and access to services (Pozarny, 2016). This lack of gender representation, specifically in rural areas, is the focus of 100 Rural Women. This organization seeks to provide the means for women to connect and create opportunities for rural women to serve in leadership positions in their communities, including elected office. In collaborating with 100 Rural Women, this study has sought to understand what barriers exist for rural women when seeking office, in addition to what motivates women to run for office. We also sought to understand the supports that currently exist for elected women, and the unique challenges that rural elected officials face. We conducted 19 interviews of women

serving in rural elected offices to get a better perspective on this issue, in addition to getting their perspectives on how a support network could be designed.

Literature Review

Barriers to Elected Office

It is well documented and researched that there are persistent challenges and barriers that women face when running for political office. A study of elected women across levels of government in Pennsylvania (Capozzi, 2020) found through in-depth interviews that there were common barriers experienced by all interviewees. The barriers the research identifies include the lack of being able to fit into the “good old boys club” and the exclusion women face from groups of elected men. The study also found that women faced barriers related to motherhood and having family responsibilities that conflict with the time and energy needed to run for office. The lack of female role models is also cited as a barrier because many women don’t know how to run for office and there were few female political role models to ask for help (Capozzi, 2020).

Not only do women face barriers that men do not face, they also respond to perceived notions of leadership and their competence differently than men. A 2019 study (Sanchez and Lehner) found that women’s aspirations for leadership were impacted by how competent they think they are, how negative they view the tradeoffs of leadership (i.e. lack of flexibility, more stress, less personal time), and how much experience they have. Oftentimes, women underestimate their abilities compared to men. This could be the result of gender socialization that promotes stereotypes that cause girls to underestimate their intellectual capabilities more often than boys which could cause them to have lower expectations for themselves in future activities (Parsons et al, 1976 as cited in Sánchez and Lehner, 2019). Therefore, “women are less

likely to aspire to leadership if they perceive their competencies are not enough for the job” while men “are more likely to aspire regardless of their perceptions of their competencies” (Sánchez and Lehner, 2019, p. 185). Leadership roles have some downsides such as more stress and less work/life balance. Women are more likely to be deterred by the negative aspects of leadership compared to men, which decreases their aspirations for leadership roles. Additionally, the amount of experience a woman has impacts their leadership aspirations. The study found that the more experience competent women gain, the less likely they are to aspire for leadership roles compared to men. This is because as they gain more experience, they gain greater awareness of the negative aspects of leadership, which becomes a large deterrent (Sánchez and Lehner, 2019).

Importance of Mentorship

Mentorship is a powerful tool in supporting women in their professional and political careers. Mentorship can take many forms, but it can broadly be defined as “a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psycho-social support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career or professional development” (Bozeman and Feeney, 2007 as cited in Reid et al., 2020). Mentorship is critical because career support and leadership development, which often happens as a result of mentoring, has been found to be statistically significantly correlated with career advancement (Mcilongo and Strydom, 2021).

Studies have found that favorable mentorship experiences depend on various factors. One study found that mentorship experiences are better when the mentee has the motivation to actively seek mentors and opportunities for growth, when the mentee seeks mentors throughout their career, not just the beginning, and when mentorships are reciprocal in which both the mentee and mentor are invested in the relationship and receive benefits (Read, Fisher, and Juran, 2020). Another study looked at the value of formal mentorship programs and found that greater

mentorship quality was reported when mentors and mentees were matched based on their interests and needs as reported to the program coordinators. When mentors and mentees felt they had input on their matches, they were likely to be more motivated to maximize the relationship. They also found that mentees reported higher quality mentorship when they were paired with a mentor in the same department where they worked. This was due to both physical and psychosocial proximity to each other that made it easier to build the relationship (Allen, et al., 2006).

Methods

Research Design

The team conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with female elected officials. Recruitment of the interviewees took place through emails, phone calls, and email introductions made by 100 Rural Women. These officials consisted of rural elected officials at various levels of government, former elected officials, and peer organizations. The types of offices represented were; a mayor, city council members, hospital board members, school board members, tribal representatives, sheriffs, county commissioners, state senators, state house representatives, and county attorneys.

Each team member shared a similar script to ensure that each interviewee had the same consent form and research questions. The interviews were conducted by one team member at a time via Zoom. Each interview was recorded using Otter.ai, an audio recording and transcribing software. After completing an interview, the recording was assigned to a different team member to provide a contact note to ensure that every team member was situated in the various perspectives. This led the team to easily identify themes from the various interviews.

The themes of our interviews were identifiable as a result of the thematic analysis conducted by the team. The thematic analysis was grouped into the following categories:

- Motivation: Through the interviews, the team made it a point to clearly identify what motivated and inspired women in rural communities to run for elected positions. This was useful to understand why communities had the number of female elected officials they had.
- Existing supports: For each of the participants, the team identified what supports were available at their various levels. Whether the supports were pre-existing or were informally made up by them. This could potentially influence the recommendations and suggestions made by the team.
- Barriers: The interview also allowed the team to pinpoint common barriers elected female officials face in their run for office. It was important to identify where most of these barriers/challenges stemmed from and if it was common at all levels.
- Impact of identity: Based on the literature review carried out, the team realized that certain decisions made by female elected officials were heavily influenced by their identity, thus we chose to explore how prevalent this was in our interviews.
- Interest in joining a mentorship program: The team also wanted to identify if there was particular interest in joining a mentorship program for female elected officials. Whether as a mentor or a mentee, we wanted to gauge the interest level for such a network.
- Rural/Urban: The team through interviews carried out, especially with a peer organization, wanted to identify the unique barriers and opportunities for women in rural communities.

Overall, the frame of the questions was designed to collect as much information about the situation of elected officials as possible. All the interviews conducted were confidential and no response from the participants was tied to a particular finding.

Results

Overview

After reviewing data from the interviews, there were some common themes that emerged. Whether it revealed why they chose to run (motivators), the struggles they faced when running, the barriers while serving in the elected positions, the networks easily available to each woman (existing support), or the kind of support they wish to have had or have, it is evident that more attention should be paid to having women in elected positions.

Motivators

Most of the interviewees that participated in the research shared that their desire to make an impact in their society led them to run for elected office. They wanted their communities to be a safe space for all people and in order to do that, they felt they had to take part in the decision-making process that affected everyone. This desire could also be traced to the fact that they grew up in a civically engaged family or had mentors who were active in some form of leadership and thus it was the most logical step for them to take to make a similar impact.

A large part of their motivation also came from the interviewees' desire to feel represented. For most of the interviewees, having elected officials that were a real representation of the community was important to them. There seemed to be a gap between the elected officials, who were mostly male and white, and a majority of the community members, who were of the

younger generation or female or mothers, or even ethnic minorities. Thus, most of the interviewees expressed that it felt necessary for them to run for an elected position to make unheard voices heard.

More than a handful of our interviewees expressed that they were either encouraged to run by friends and colleagues or were nominated/appointed by previously elected officials. From the interviews, it was apparent that some of the female elected officials were not considering running for office until they were prompted. The popular anecdote, “A woman must be asked about seven times before she considers running for office”, was repeatedly used by the interviewees when relating their personal stories and how they finally decided to run for office. However, the commonality among all the motivators for the interviewees deciding to run was the timing. Each participant shared how vital it was to campaign for an elected position at the right time in order to have a good work/life balance.

Existing Supports

The women we interviewed relied on a variety of supports that helped them in their journey to elected office. When asked about what supports were most helpful in their run for office, most women first mentioned the support of their family and friends. Many women emphasized the importance of their spouse or partner being supportive of their run for office. This was so essential because women had to rely on their friends and family for campaign support, such as help with door knocking or supporting their campaign finances; and families had to be able to accommodate the change in the woman’s schedule and her work/life balance. Another support that makes it possible for women to run for office is flexibility with their family, jobs, and other responsibilities. Many women said they would not have been able to run for

office if they did not have flexibility in their schedules and their duties related to other responsibilities.

Many women mentioned a variety of formal organizations that provide some support to elected officials. This includes professional organizations such as the Minnesota School Board Association, Minnesota County Attorneys Association, and other role specific groups. However, these organizations provide limited support because they are statewide and often do not focus on issues that are important to rural communities. Additionally, some of these organizations have attempted to promote mentorship but people have not been dedicated enough to the mentorship program to make it effective.

One of the most effective supports according to the women were individuals that had expertise in running for office that could provide them guidance and advice. This includes previously elected officials, other current elected officials, and campaign managers. These types of individuals were most helpful because they knew the specifics of how to run a campaign and the related processes, policies, and procedures. For women running for office at lower levels of government, campaign managers are often not feasible. Therefore, these women have to run their own campaigns and find support from other or previously elected officials who could explain the things they need to do. Another important support was experienced staff members in the offices they served that helped guide them through learning their new role once they got elected. Many women said once they got elected, they did not know how to do the job or where to learn how to do the job. These supportive staff members were essential in helping them be successful elected officials.

Barriers

The interviewees mentioned various personal barriers that made each of their stories unique. There were a few commonalities across many interviews, particularly hearing that the struggle to balance their work, home and other responsibilities was a major challenge for many women, particularly in the early stages of their elected office terms. Another common barrier was the lack of other women in positions of authority, which made it difficult for the women who were in elected office to have their voices heard. With a majority of the women mentioning that others in similar positions were mostly male, it was difficult for women to convince men that the way that they had always done things may not be in their best interest, or the best interests of the community.

For the mothers interviewed, many of them mentioned that they experienced having their qualifications questioned, in a way that their male counterparts would not. The specific instance for these mothers was based on constituents, reporters or other elected officials questioning their ability to manage their time, because they were mothers. Their male counterparts did not and would not receive questions of that nature surrounding their role as a father. During the campaign process, women experienced loneliness, and feeling that they did not have enough support to be able to pull their race off. Part of that struggle came from women who were seen as outsiders in smaller communities, meaning they were not born in the community, regardless of the time that they have lived in it.

Impact of Identity

In analyzing the impact that identities of the women interviewed have had on their work as elected officials, it is important to note that the vast majority of the interviewees were white women. This is the result of most female elected officials being white, but it is important to place

the impact of these identities into that specific context. Women saw their particular identities, whether their race, gender, motherhood, or their faith, as things that made them more relatable to constituents. Through their identities, each interviewee had their own unique perspective to bring to the table, providing them with expertise on certain issues. Their experiences impact the issues that they prioritize in their terms. Some women mentioned that those same features of their identity made it difficult for them to know the best way to support all of their constituents. Some felt that particular aspects of their identities were alienating to some constituents, and made it difficult for the elected officials to understand how best to represent their community. Some women also identified specific values or philosophies that they utilized to guide their lives as well as their work. One specific example is an interviewee who explained that their life is guided by trying to treat everyone the same, which extends to her work as an elected official.

Rural Barriers

While the small-town atmosphere was one that many of the interviewees appreciated, there was a catch-22 situation that came with it when it comes to running for office. Particularly when running for office in a town the woman grew up in, she had great name recognition, which helped out with her campaigning process. But, it also meant that most of the town had watched her grow up, and many of the community members still saw them as little girls, not qualified to be an elected official. The community members also knew a lot about the lives of the elected officials, which led to higher levels of scrutiny than may be present in an urban setting. On the flip side, women who were not born in the town struggled to gain credibility, and they were often seen as outsiders by their community.

Several of the interviewees mentioned that they are able to hold their positions because they are independently wealthy or have a flexible job that allows them to serve the community. They acknowledged that the compensation in rural areas is less than it would be in an urban setting, and this works to keep a more diverse set of voices from being able to serve in public office. When the compensation does not align with the amount of work being done, it makes it difficult for women without financial resources to be able to dedicate their time to elected office. Within the rural area, the set of issues that women are dealing with are different from what urban women deal with. Not to say that the issues are more difficult to deal with, but they are more nuanced, and it takes a good understanding of the community's particular needs to be able to represent them well.

The last specific rural barrier deals with the dispersed nature of some of the communities that women served. Having to drive many miles to reach constituents is far more difficult than visiting an apartment complex in an urban setting. The physical distance can also keep women from participating in any sort of in-person career development opportunities, because of the time they would have to spend commuting to events like that.

Recommendations

Supports that Women Need

The majority of our interviewees shared that there were challenges from when they decided to run until they won the election. Some of the interviewees did not have any political background and thus had to learn for themselves how to campaign and run for their positions which took a mental and emotional toll on them. Thus, we would recommend that 100 Rural

Women consider supporting women who decide to run for elected positions in the following ways:

Managing campaign finances: For the most part, some of the interviewees shared how they were ignorant of the financial aspect of campaigning; whether it was raising funds, creating accounts for the funds with local banks, running campaign finances, or budgeting, it was a real challenge. Unfortunately, having no one to teach them how to handle this aspect made campaigning very unappealing to them. They had to self-learn how to manage campaign finances on the go, while managing their other responsibilities. Thus, having the opportunity to learn how to manage campaign finances would have made a world of difference to them and lessened their challenges.

Basic campaign “how-tos”: Interviewees also expressed how confusing and time-consuming it was to participate in the actual campaign. Some responses from the interviewees indicated that they were unsure what the next steps would be after declaring their desire to run for elected positions. Some were unaware they had to take professional photographs after their declaration to run and just went right on to door knocking. Others expressed that they were not social media savvy and thus relied heavily on door-knocking and traditional media to campaign in their communities. A common thread in the interviews was the fact that each participant worked tirelessly in their campaign; however, their work could have been reduced if they knew what was expected of them and had a network or support system to guide them through their campaign process.

Insight and guidance on how to do the job once elected: Another interesting point that came up in our interviews was that some of our interviewees lacked guidance on how to get their jobs done after getting elected. Most of our interviewees shared that they had to learn on the job because they were not familiar with how certain tasks were done and thus relied on longstanding staff in their office or former elected officials or officials in other counties or even google. Thus, providing support for newly elected female officials by connecting them with officials in similar job roles would make it easier for them to excel.

Mentorship Network Ideas

All of the women we spoke with were interested in participating in mentorship activities through 100 Rural Women. They shared a variety of ideas about elements of a mentorship network that they think would make the program successful. We have aggregated these ideas into a set of recommendations for 100 Rural Women as they strategize about how to create a mentorship network to support elected rural women and rural women that are interested in running for office.

First, we recommend 100 Rural Women host both *online and in person mentorship meetings and activities*. It is important to host online events because this has greater accessibility for many people in respect to time commitment and availability because people don't have to accommodate travel time which can be significant for rural women. Also, it allows for more people across a greater geographic area to connect. This can be helpful so that women can connect with people they would not normally connect with. *It is essential that these meetings accommodate the busy schedules of elected officials*. This could mean offering meetings at a variety of different times throughout the day and week so that women have different

opportunities to participate depending on their schedules. A few women mentioned they have been unable to attend meetings for formal organizations and other networking events because they occurred in the evenings during prime time to door knock or do other campaign activities.

Next, we recommend that 100 Rural Women *facilitate informal meetings to build trust among the participating women*. This should be done by providing opportunities for women to gather in large groups and in one-on-one meetings. This will help foster trust by allowing women to connect with a large number of women in the group meetings and will allow women to build deeper relationships through the one-on-one meetings. Additionally, *these meetings should focus on facilitating experience-sharing between women*. Women were particularly interested in learning from and connecting with women who have similar roles to them. This is important because women want to get beyond surface level interactions to get to the experience and information sharing that will be impactful and valuable to others.

Overall, the women were interested in participating in a mentorship network and supporting women that are interested in running for office. The challenge they face is that they are not able to identify candidates and do not know who is interested in running for office. Therefore, 100 Rural Women should seize this opportunity to maximize the interest that women have in supporting new women into office to help meet their organizational goals.

Limitations

While this study produced important results for 100 Rural Women, there were nonetheless limitations that prevented this project from reaching its full potential. The main limitation of this project stemmed from the nature of the women we were seeking to interview. Elected officials have busy schedules, and trying to convince them to participate in this project

and allocate time away from their job and life was not easy. Many women were simply too busy to participate or did not answer our requests for an interview. The timing of this project fell during a particularly busy time for the Minnesota state legislature, making it difficult to coordinate a time to interview. This issue with scheduling was most pervasive in our attempt to connect with a state-wide elected female official, which we were unable to arrange. A statewide position could have provided an interesting perspective not available in the local officials that did participate. Another limitation of this research is that the preferences suggested were Minnesota specific in their application. It is also important to contextualize again that the majority of the interviewees were white, which is a reflection of the overall makeup of elected female officials in Minnesota. With more time, the study could have focused more efforts on seeking out more women of color.

Conclusion/Discussion

The implications of this study are first and foremost that the women we interviewed are interested in participating in a support network with 100 Rural Women. This research sets the stage for 100 Rural Women to facilitate a unique mentorship program to help raise the voices of rural women in leadership positions. By identifying how women are currently supported, what support would be most beneficial for them, and their ideas about how to facilitate that support, the mentorship network will have a solid foundation to from which to work. As discussed previously, women are viewed to lead more collaboratively, something that is desperately needed in this polarized political environment that the country is operating in currently. By starting small at the local level, 100 Rural Women can build up a group of women who are passionate about serving their communities, who can make a difference in the way that government is run.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol - Informed Consent

Verbal Informed Consent - 100 Rural Women Network

Caitlyn Walker, Delaney Stekr and Naa Korkoi Larmie will be going over the consent process.

Background and Purpose of the study:

We are a group of researchers from the University of Minnesota interested in learning from women like you about the barriers you faced and/or currently face in your role as an elected woman. We are also interested in what supports helped you overcome those barriers in your journey to elected office.

Procedures:

You will be asked questions about your path to elected office, including the struggles and successes that you experienced. These questions will be centered around your experience specifically as a female elected official. By consenting to this interview, you will be consenting to having the interview recorded, as a way to assist in accurate transcribing.

If there is anything in the topic that I am not asking about and you think is relevant, please do bring it. You can also not answer any question you do not wish to answer. If you feel uncomfortable with any of the answers that you do provide, inform your interviewer and that statement will not be included in the research.

I will be interviewing other female elected officials within Minnesota. All the other interviews are also anonymous. When we are done with the study, we will write a report that we will submit to 100 Rural Women, in addition to our professor.

Confidentiality:

The interview is anonymous. That means that I will not reveal to anyone what we talk about. With your permission, I will be audio recording the interview and transcribing it later. I will put all the recordings into a secure drive online. My research partners and professors are the only people who will have access to the interview. Prior to the recording of the interview beginning, we will ask you to remove your name from the Zoom as a way to reassure that your name is not attached to the information that is collected. Once the interview has been transcribed, the audio will promptly be deleted. The information gathered in these interviews will be aggregated and summarized, so responses will not be attached to individuals.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

I would be grateful if you could spare some of your time. The participant is free to stop the conversation at any time. You may also choose not to answer certain questions or can change

your mind and decide not to participate. You are here voluntarily. This interview will take up a maximum of an hour of your time. All interviews will be conducted over Zoom.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation provided for this research.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact the researchers at walk1300@umn.edu, stekr001@umn.edu, larmi007@umn.edu.

You can also reach our advisor Kevin Gerdes, at ksgerdes@umn.edu (612-626-1337) telephone number, and e-mail address here.

May I answer any questions for you about the study or myself? Do you have any thoughts or comments about the study? I am happy to answer anything.

Statement of Consent:

Do you want to participate in this study?

Appendix B

Elected Official Interview Questions

1. Tell us about yourself.
 - a. Name
 - b. Location
 - c. Role(s) - level of government, how long, etc.
 - d. Other responsibilities (family, jobs, etc.)
2. What got you interested in running for elected office?
3. Can you describe the process from when you decided to run till where you are currently?
 - a. What was the most helpful tool/person/organization that assisted you throughout your campaign?
4. What supports exist to support you currently in your role as an elected female?
5. What was the biggest challenge in your run for elected office? How did you overcome these challenges?
6. Was there anyone you looked up to or helped guide you through your path to elected office?
 - a. If you are part of a mentorship program/network, how did you hear about it?
 - b. How did you get connected to the program?
7. IF in office 10+ years: How have you seen government change during your time as an elected official?
8. How do your identities impact the work you do as an elected official?
9. How would you design a support network for rural women seeking elected office in Minnesota?
10. Would you be willing to be contacted in the future to be involved in a mentorship network?

Appendix C

Peer Organization Interview Questions

Peer organization:

1. Does your organization target any specific demographics in looking to support candidates?
 - a. urban/rural, race, position they are running for
2. What is your process for finding candidates to support?
3. How is your organization funded?
4. What support does your organization provide female candidates?
5. What is the biggest challenge that you face when trying to get female candidates into elected positions?
6. How has COVID impacted the operations of your organization?
 - a. If they have shifted more virtual, what tactics have been most effective in reaching women, and still providing the support they need?
7. What are the key elements of your organization that have allowed you to be successful?
8. If they have served smaller government, rural candidates, did that group require any unique support to be successful?