

Original Article

Leading from the Margins: Lived Experiences of Female Presidents in Farmers' Associations

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated the leadership experiences of 10 female presidents of farmers' associations in Imelda, Zamboanga Sibugay, Philippines. Female leadership in these associations is challenged by gender bias, limited resources, and restrictive social norms, yet it plays a key role in community development. The study examined leadership practices, challenges, and coping strategies through purposive sampling and in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed using stepwise thematic analysis. Findings show that leadership involves service, relationship-building, and sustained effort to gain respect. Inclusive practices such as consultation, mentoring, shared decision-making, and capacity-building strengthened trust, engagement, and organizational cohesion. Persistent challenges included gender bias, limited access to resources, restrictive social norms, and balancing leadership with household and community responsibilities. Leaders relied on resilience, strategic planning, adaptability, and network-building. Empowering members through shared responsibilities enhanced participation and organizational sustainability. The study suggests that female leadership is transformative and enhances organizational outcomes, but its effectiveness depends on access to resources, institutional support, and opportunities for skill development. Women navigate leadership from the margins while fostering resilience and promoting community development, offering

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insights for policy and organizational support to strengthen female leadership in agriculture.

Keywords: agriculture, gender norms, leadership, resilience, women empowerment

1. Introduction

Women play a critical role in agriculture globally and in the Philippines, contributing to community sustainability, rural development, and food security. They are frequently involved in the management of livestock, crop production, domestic food systems, and post-harvest activities, often completing multiple tasks simultaneously (Islam, Jannat, & Al Rafi, 2024). Despite their contributions, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Despite their frequent involvement in farmers' groups, they hold only a limited number of leadership positions, which restricts their ability to influence organizational governance and decisions (Nakazi et al., 2017).

Cultural and structural barriers limit women's participation in leadership positions. Gender norms, societal expectations, and traditional beliefs frequently place limitations on women's ability to hold significant positions or influence decision-making. In addition, women frequently encounter restricted access to financial resources, training, and extension services, all while concurrently managing household responsibilities (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2021). The overall governance of farmers' organizations is affected by these constraints, which reduce their visibility in leadership positions.

Research suggests that female leaders frequently adopt participatory, inclusive, and collaborative leadership strategies. These strategies foster a sense of unity within groups, motivate members to participate, and facilitate the adoption of new ideas. In the Philippines, women leaders have been demonstrated the ability to enhance communication among members, facilitate training programs, and serve as crucial intermediaries between farmers and government support services (Luna, 2021; Ragasa et al., 2022). In rural areas, these leadership methods facilitate the long-term growth and resilience of organizations.

Despite these insights, existing studies are mostly broad, survey-based, or policy-oriented. Few examine the lived experiences of women leading farmers' associations, particularly at the president level. There is limited knowledge about how female leaders navigate daily challenges, make decisions, and implement strategies in local contexts such as Imelda, Zamboanga Sibugay. Although women participate in agricultural organizations, research shows they often face barriers such as restricted participation in decision-making, unpaid work overload, and structural inequalities, which limit their leadership engagement and influence (Kansiime, Mugisha, & Nanyunja, 2024). Previous studies also overlook the

processes behind observed outcomes, such as productivity, member engagement, and organizational development.

Studying the experiences of female presidents in a farmers' association is critical to understanding how leadership functions in practice. Such research can inform policies, enhance leadership training programs, and support the development of more inclusive and effective farmers' organizations. A qualitative approach enables in-depth exploration of lived experiences, offering rich insights into the strategies and practices that sustain leadership and organizational growth.

The study focuses on the lived experiences of ten female presidents from different farmers associations in Imelda, Zamboanga Sibugay. Also, it aims to recognize their leadership practices, challenges, and coping strategies, providing a comprehensive view of women's leadership in rural farmers associations. Specifically, it sought to answer four questions: What are the lived experiences of the female president in leading the farmers' association? How do they exercise leadership practices to guide the association and support member participation? What challenges do they encounter in their leadership role? What strategies do they employ to overcome these challenges? Hence, by examining these aspects, the study seeks to provide practical, context-specific knowledge to strengthen women's leadership in rural agricultural organizations.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences of female presidents in farmers' associations in Imelda, Zamboanga Sibugay. The design was appropriate for the study, as it provided an opportunity to investigate in-depth the context-specific experiences and practices of women leaders, going beyond abstract measures. Rather than testing a predefined hypothesis, the study focused on understanding participants' accounts and situated experiences (Yin, 2018).

To ensure methodological transparency, the data collection process involved in-depth interviews with ten (10) female presidents in a farmers' association in Imelda, Zamboanga Sibugay, all selected through purposive sampling. Purposeful (or purposive) sampling is chosen to select "information-rich cases" ensuring the selection of participants with substantial experience as leaders (Patton, 2015).

The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one year of experience as president of their respective association, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the leadership role in organizational decision-making and leadership practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to provide detailed, context-specific narratives. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes, ensuring sufficient time for participants to elaborate on their leadership experiences, challenges, and coping

strategies. The interview guide was developed with open-ended questions focused on the core research questions. It was iteratively refined based on initial interviews to ensure that the interviews were responsive to participants' unique perspectives. The researchers served as the primary instruments for data collection and analysis, conducting interviews, recording sessions with participants' consent, transcribing the interviews, and translating relevant responses from the local language into English for reporting. Interview audio files and transcripts were handled with confidentiality, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Ethical procedures adhered to standard qualitative research principles, including voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, and compliance with the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), which mandates secure handling of personal information.

Data analysis followed stepwise thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2023). After transcription, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading through the transcript multiple times. Then, it was engaged in open coding, where meaning-bearing segments were identified and labeled. Axial coding followed by grouping related codes into initial themes. The final themes emerge iteratively, with the researcher refining and adjusting them to represent the participants' experiences best. This recursive process ensured that themes were grouped within participants' narratives, thereby minimizing methodological transparency.

Trustworthiness was ensured through systematic documentation of the research process, coding consistency, reflexive awareness, and clear alignment between findings and participant quotations. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants and the use of direct quotes. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of participants, settings, and contexts. Dependability was reinforced through a clear, stepwise account of data collection and analysis, while confirmability was maintained through audit-minded procedures that linked themes to participants' statements rather than to researchers' interpretations (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024).

3. Results

3.1 Lived Experiences

Theme 1: Personal Motivation and Commitment as a Woman Leader

Participants described their leadership as emerging from service to farmers, personal entry into leadership roles, and experiences within a male-dominated farming context. Their motivations reflected a mix of voluntary acceptance, encouragement from members, and a perceived need to establish credibility while navigating expectations placed on women leaders. They stated that:

"I wanted to show that a woman can lead farmers effectively, especially because I saw that most leaders before were men and I wanted to change that perception through my work." (P1)

"At first, some doubted me because I am a woman in a leadership position, so I worked harder to prove myself. I wanted to prove them wrong, not just for myself but to show other women they can do it too. But it wasn't easy because people didn't expect much from me." (P2)

"I accepted the role to help farmers, but at the same time, I saw it as an opportunity to encourage other women who are hesitant to take leadership roles." (P3)

"The journey wasn't always smooth, but I knew that if I didn't step up, others wouldn't either. As a woman, I felt that pressure every day. At the same time, I felt a responsibility to show others that they can rise to leadership too, even if it is difficult." (P4)

"Initially, I felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities, and I was not sure if I could handle the role. But over time, I realized that I had the potential to guide others, and I wanted to become a role model for women who doubt themselves." (P5)

"I felt pressure to perform well because people expect less from female leaders, so I make sure that I meet expectations and show that I am capable." (P6)

"I did not plan to become president at first, but I was encouraged by members to take the role, so I accepted it to support the group and learn along the way." (P7)

"I became president to show that women can manage farming organizations, especially in situations where leadership is usually given to men." (P8)

"I wanted to serve, but I also wanted to challenge the idea that leadership is only for men, because I experienced how women are often overlooked in decision-making." (P9)

"I accepted the position to support farmers, but also to represent women in leadership since there are only a few of us in these roles." (P10)

Theme 2: Emotional, Social, and Work-Life Balance in Female Leadership

Participants described leadership as shaped by emotional pressure, social expectations, gendered experiences, and the constant balance between organizational and family responsibilities. Their accounts show that leadership involves emotional strain, role conflict, gender-based scrutiny, and continuous negotiation between public duties and private obligations, and that sustaining

leadership requires both resilience and adaptive coping in daily life. They verbalized that:

“I feel proud when members trust me, but I also feel pressure to prove myself. There are days when it feels like it’s too much but knowing that the community depends on me gives me strength. I also balance leadership duties with household responsibilities.” (P1)

“Some members question my decisions more because I am a woman. It is hard to manage time between family and association work.” (P2)

“It is fulfilling, but I get stressed balancing leadership and family responsibilities. I feel exhausted handling both roles.” (P3)

“I don’t see it as a burden because I have learned how to manage my time properly. I set priorities and make sure I finish important tasks first, so I can still handle both roles. It is difficult at times to stay positive and hopeful under pressure, but I continue because I am helping people. It is not just about being strong in front of the group, it is about staying strong inside where emotional burdens are less visible.” (P4)

“It is emotionally draining but I remind myself that I am doing this for the community. It is rewarding when I see the impact, but I feel the toll it takes personally. I feel that my family responsibilities give me strength rather than stress because they motivate me to continue my leadership role.” (P5)

“Sometimes I feel underestimated, but I continue to lead with confidence. There is pressure to fulfill both personal and leadership duties, and I struggle to meet expectations in both areas.” (P6)

“There are times when I feel emotionally drained handling conflicts. I struggle to divide my time effectively between home and leadership responsibilities.” (P7)

“Balancing my role as a leader and as a mother is difficult. I have to manage stress from both home and work.” (P8)

“I feel happy when members support me, but criticism affects me more deeply. It is difficult to meet expectations in both areas.” (P9)

“Leadership is rewarding, but it requires emotional strength as a woman. I carry both emotional and leadership responsibilities every day.” (P10)

3.2 Leadership Practices

Theme 1: Inclusive and Relational Leadership Approach

Participants emphasized inclusive and relationship-based leadership. They often used communication, empathy, and collaboration to engage members. Their leadership style reflected care, listening, and shared decision-making. They mentioned that:

"I make sure everyone is heard before making decisions. I believe that when everyone has a voice, the group becomes stronger. It's not always easy, especially when there are conflicting opinions, but I think it's important to maintain open communication. (P1)

"I listen carefully to members' concerns and include them in planning. It's not about making all the decisions - it's about empowering others and giving them roles. (P2)

"I approach leadership with patience and understanding. I know that each person has different needs, so I try to be adaptable and listen. (P3)

"I try to build trust by listening to every member idea and concern even when I don't agree with them. It helps them feel heard which is important for group unity." (P4)

"Communication is the key. If members don't feel like they can approach you or share their thoughts freely, they won't be as engaged in the work." (P5)

"I try to build good relationships with members, so they feel comfortable." (P6)

"I encourage open communication so members can express ideas. I remind them that all suggestions are welcome, as they help us improve as a group. (P7)

"I involve members because I want them to feel valued. When they see that their input is included in decisions, they become more active and committed." (P8)

"I adjust decisions based on what members need." (P9)

"I focus on cooperation rather than authority." (P10)

Theme 2: Nurturing and Capacity-Building Practices

Participants described nurturing and capacity-building as a core leadership practice focused on step-by-step guidance, skills training, confidence-building, and close mentoring of members, particularly those who are new or less confident in participating in and engaging with farm activities. They verbalized that:

"I guide members step by step, especially those who are new. I think it is important to be patient and help them build their confidence through continuous guidance during activities." (P1)

"I teach members techniques and make sure they understand how to apply them in actual farming activities." (P2)

"I support members who lack confidence in their skills, especially when they are hesitant to take part in group tasks." (P3)

"I spend a lot of time with new members especially women. Many don't believe they can contribute, so I give them small tasks first and acknowledge their efforts so they gain confidence." (P4)

"I focus on helping members realize their potential. Many of them doubt their abilities, so I involve them in hands-on activities and provide simple guidance so they can learn by doing." (P5)

"I take time to mentor individuals who need more help. I stay with them during activities until they become confident enough to work independently." (P6)

"I encourage women members to participate more actively. I assign them roles so they can practice leadership and build confidence in group settings." (P7)

"I train members so they can improve their farming practices and apply better techniques in their work." (P8)

"I help members develop both skills and confidence so they can contribute more actively to the association." (P9)

"I see my role as guiding and supporting others so they can grow and become more capable in their responsibilities." (P10)

Theme 3: Leading Through Action and Resilience

Participants highlighted leadership as a practice of visible effort, consistency, and endurance under pressure. They described working directly with members, aligning actions with decisions, and sustaining performance despite doubt, pressure, and heavy responsibilities. They mentioned that:

"I work alongside members to show that I am capable. I join farm activities, assist during group work, and stay present during implementation so members see that leadership is not only about directing but also doing the work with them" (P1)

"I make sure my actions match my decisions. I follow through on agreements and ensure that what we decide as a group is carried out properly in every activity" (P2)

"I stay strong even when others doubt me. I continue my responsibilities and avoid showing discouragement so that members will still trust my leadership even during criticism." (P3)

"I struggle at times to meet all expectations, and it becomes difficult to maintain confidence when pressure builds. There are moments when I feel uncertain about my decisions, especially when problems come at the same time." (P4)

"There are moments when responsibilities feel too heavy, and I find it hard to sustain constant strength in leadership. I continue working, but the pressure affects my energy and focus on some days." (P5)

"I prove my leadership through results, not words." (P6)

"I remain consistent so members can trust me." (P7)

"I show that I can handle responsibilities despite challenges." (P8)

"I stay firm in decisions even when questioned. I explain my position when needed but maintain my stand to ensure direction and order in the group." (P9)

"I lead through hard work and persistence. I continue fulfilling duties even during difficult seasons and make sure responsibilities are completed on time." (P10)

3.3 Challenges

Theme 1: Gender Bias and Stereotypes

Participants identified gender bias as a major challenge. They experienced doubt, resistance, and unequal treatment compared to male leaders. They mentioned that:

"Some members think men are better leaders than women. I had to deal with that perception when I first became president" (P1)

"I had to prove myself more because I am a woman. People assumed that I wasn't qualified to lead because I was female and it made me work even harder to earn their respect" (P2)

"Some do not take my decisions seriously at first. It's frustrating because I know that I'm making the right choices for the group, but I often must explain myself more than the male leaders (P3)

"I'm constantly asked for explanations when a decision I made doesn't sit well with others. They don't ask male leaders the same questions." (P4)

"At time, I feel like I must prove myself repeatedly. I don't get the same respect as my male counterparts, but I keep pushing forward." (P5)

"There are members who prefer male leadership." (P6)

"I feel that my authority is sometimes questioned." (P7)

"I experience bias in meetings where my ideas are challenged more." (P8)

"People expect me to be less strict because I am a woman." (P9)

"I need to work harder to gain the same respect as male leaders." (P10)

Theme 2: Resource and Structural Constraints

Participants reported limited funding, equipment, and institutional support. These challenges affected their ability to implement programs effectively. They mentioned that:

"We lack equipment and financial support for projects. It's hard to make progress when we don't have the necessary resources. (P1)

"Limited funding affects our activities. We can't run the programs we want to because we simply don't have the money to support them" (P2)

"We do not have enough resources for all members. I try to make sure that the most important needs are met first, but it's difficult when we're always working with limited funds." (P3)

"We often rely on donations from the members but even then, it is not enough. We need institutional support but it's hard to secure." (P4)

"The lack of resources makes it hard to maintain programs. We can only do so much with what we have and sometimes it feels like we're just treading water instead of moving forward. (P5)

"Support from institutions is sometimes insufficient." (P6)

"We struggle with access to tools and facilities." (P7)

"Resources are not enough to sustain programs." (P8)

"We depend on external support which is not always available." (P9)

"Funding limitations affect planning and execution." (P10)

3.4 Coping Strategies

Theme 1: Strength, Adaptability, and Self-Management

Participants coped by developing resilience, time management, and adaptability. They strengthened their confidence and adjusted to challenges. They mentioned that:

"I stay strong and focused despite challenges. It's easy to get discouraged but I remind myself of the bigger picture." (P1)

"I manage my time carefully between responsibilities. I've had to learn how to prioritize and make sure I'm giving enough time to both my leadership role and personal life." (P2)

"I remain patient and adapt to situations." (P3)

"I've learned to be more flexible. When things don't go as planned, I adapt quickly and find solutions on the spot. I try to stay calm and keep a clear head." (P4)

"I build confidence through experience. Every setback teaches me something new and I use it to improve how I lead. It is important to embrace challenges and use them as opportunity for you to grow." (P5)

"I build confidence through experience." (P6)

"I stay calm and think before making decisions." (P7)

"I adjust plans based on available resources." (P8)

"I keep learning to improve my leadership." (P9)

"I stay committed despite difficulties." (P10)

Theme 2: Seeking Support and Building Networks

Participants relied on support systems, including peers, agencies, and organizations. These networks helped them access resources and guidance. They stated that:

"I seek help from agricultural offices for training. It is important to stay updated on new farming techniques and strategies. I also try to attend as many workshops as I can to improve my leadership skills." (P1)

"I collaborate with other leaders for support." (P2)

"I attend training programs to improve my skills." (P3)

"I connect with agricultural extension workers and local government agencies. They offer programs that we can benefit from, and I can apply for grants in our association." (P4)

"I reach out to other women leaders in nearby towns. Their insights are valuable and we share resources and ideas that can help all the members in the group." (P5)

"I rely on partnerships for resources." (P6)

"I communicate with other associations." (P7)

"I build connections to support projects." (P8)

"I learn from other leaders' experiences." (P9)

"I use networks to strengthen our programs." (P10)

Theme 3: Empowering Members and Building Trust

Participants described leadership as a process of engaging members through communication, shared roles, and efforts to build trust and participation, while also facing difficulties in sustaining active involvement, consistency, and responsiveness among members. They verbalized that:

“I assign roles to members to increase involvement, but there are times when some members do not fully participate despite assigned responsibilities, which affects group progress.” (P1)

“I communicate regularly to keep members informed, yet there are instances when messages are not properly received or acted upon, leading to delays in implementation.” (P2)

“I recognize members’ efforts to motivate them, but some members still show low engagement even after encouragement, which makes participation uneven.” (P3)

“I encourage members to take initiative, but not all members respond actively, and I sometimes end up repeating tasks that were already delegated.” (P6)

“I build trust through transparency, but maintaining trust is challenging when misunderstandings arise or when decisions are questioned after implementation.” (P7)

“I involve members in decisions, but participation is sometimes limited because only a few members actively engage in discussions and planning.” (P8)

“I support members to become active participants, yet some remain dependent on leadership direction instead of taking initiative on their own.” (P9)

“I create a sense of shared responsibility, but in practice, responsibility is not always equally carried, and workload often falls on a few active members.” (P10)

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that leadership among female presidents in farmers’ associations is not only socially valuable but also structurally constrained. The challenge of gaining credibility in a male-dominated environment is echoed in participants’ experiences of gender bias. They reported that their leadership was constantly under scrutiny and they had to prove themselves more than their male counterparts. This finding aligns with existing studies (Kawarazuka et al., 2020) that demonstrate how women leaders in agriculture must often perform better to gain legitimacy.

This also supports evidence that women experience barriers, such as low participation in community groups, restrictions on decision-making, and an overload of unpaid work, all of which hinder their leadership roles despite increasing involvement in agriculture. These constraints reflect deep-rooted gender norms and socio-cultural limitations that slow progress toward inclusive leadership (Albornoz Arias et al., 2025).

The first major insight concerns the gendered nature of lived experiences. Participants emphasized the need to prove competence and gain respect, as leadership was not automatically granted but continuously negotiated in a male-dominated farming context. Their narratives show that leadership emerged through service, encouragement, and representation, but sustained acceptance required consistent demonstration of capability.

This aligns with studies showing that women in agricultural leadership often face higher scrutiny and must perform beyond expectations to gain legitimacy within existing power structures (Quisumbing, 2021; Valerio et al., 2024). In this study, leadership reflects both community service and resistance to gender-based expectations. However, this contrasts with Agarwal (2010), who found that leadership acceptance in some rural contexts is more closely linked to participation and social capital than to gender, and that legitimacy develops through sustained engagement in community institutions.

The second key insight highlights the intertwined emotional, social, and work-life dimensions of women's leadership. Participants described leadership as a continuous balancing act between organizational duties and family responsibilities, marked by emotional strain, role conflict, and gendered expectations. While they experienced fulfillment through community service and member trust, this was often accompanied by pressure, fatigue, and emotional burden from managing both public and private roles.

This finding aligns with studies showing that women in agriculture experience overlapping productive, reproductive, and leadership responsibilities, resulting in time constraints and psychological strain (Ragasa et al., 2022; FAO, 2023). In this study, emotional resilience and time management emerged as necessary responses to sustain leadership under these combined pressures.

The third area focuses on leadership practices. Participants adopted inclusive and participatory approaches, emphasizing consultation, communication, and shared decision making. This supports evidence that women leaders tend to use collaborative leadership styles that enhance trust and participation and increase group cohesion (Post et al., 2020; Valerio et al., 2024). In this study, such practices served both as leadership strategies and mechanisms to strengthen legitimacy and collective engagement.

Capacity building and mentoring also emerged as central practices. Participants invested time in training members and improving their skills. This aligns with findings that strengthening human capital among farmers improves productivity, sustainability, and organizational resilience (Meinzen-Dick et al.,

2021; Winarti et al., 2025). In the present study, mentoring served both as empowerment and as a strategy to distribute leadership within the group.

A further significant finding concerns challenge. Gender bias remained a persistent barrier. Participants reported being questioned, underestimated, and compared to male leaders. This is consistent with global evidence that gender norms continue to shape leadership opportunities and perceptions of authority in agriculture. This aligns with evidence from a systematic literature review showing that social norms, gender stereotypes, and structural inequalities persist as barriers to women's leadership and access to decision making roles in agriculture, limiting their authority compared to male counterparts (Dabkienė, 2025)

Resource constraints also limit leadership effectiveness. Participants highlighted a lack of funding, tools, and institutional support. Studies confirm that women farmers have less access to productive resources, which affects both productivity and leadership outcomes (Ragasa et al., 2022). In this study, structural limitations shaped the scope of programs and participants' decision-making capacity.

Work-life balance further complicates leadership. Participants struggled to manage leadership duties alongside family responsibilities. This reflects findings that women face time poverty due to multiple roles, which affects their participation in leadership and decision-making (Ragasa et al., 2022; FAO, 2023).

The final area concerns coping strategies. Participants relied on resilience, planning, and adaptability to sustain leadership. This supports evidence that women leaders develop strong self-management skills to navigate complex roles and overlapping demands (Post et al., 2020).

They also built networks and partnerships to access resources and support. Research shows that women depend on social structures and networks to access agricultural knowledge, training, and resources within gendered systems (Kawarazuka et al., 2020). In this study, partnerships helped address resource gaps and strengthen program implementation.

Empowering members was a key strategy used by participants through communication, role assignment, decision involvement, and trust-building, yet their experiences show that these efforts do not always lead to consistent participation or equal responsibility. Members sometimes remained passive, unresponsive, or dependent on leaders, thereby reducing collective engagement and placing a heavier workload on active members. This aligns with findings that inclusive leadership improves engagement and strengthens collective outcomes, especially when supported by sustained empowerment and capacity-building efforts (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2021; Winarti et al., 2025). However, findings also contradict this view, showing that inclusive practices alone do not guarantee active participation, as structural dependence and uneven member initiative can persist despite leadership efforts to promote empowerment (Agarwal, 2010).

Overall, the findings show that female leadership in farmers' associations operates within structural inequality, limited resources, and gendered

expectations. Despite these constraints, women leaders adopt inclusive, resilient, and community-focused approaches. Their experiences reflect both the challenges of leading from the margin and the capacity to transform leadership practices within their communities.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that the lived experiences of the female president in leading the farmers' association are shaped by both opportunity and constraint. Participants experienced leadership as a service-oriented role that required constant effort to establish credibility in a male-dominated environment, reflecting the negotiation of gendered expectations and the need to prove competence. Their leadership was marked by pride and fulfillment, but also by emotional and social strain resulting from overlapping productive, reproductive, and community responsibilities.

In exercising leadership, participants relied on inclusive, participatory, and relational approaches. They emphasized consultation, communication, shared decision-making, and mentoring, which fostered trust, engagement, and capacity-building among members. Leadership practices served both as a mechanism for organizational effectiveness and as a strategy to strengthen legitimacy and cohesion within the association.

Participants encountered multiple challenges in their leadership roles. Gender bias, persistent social norms, and stereotypes led to questioning and underestimation of their authority. Resource limitations, including insufficient funding, equipment, and institutional support, constrained program implementation and decision-making capacity. Work-life balance added further complexity, as participants navigated family obligations alongside leadership duties.

To overcome these challenges, participants employed resilience, adaptability, and strategic planning. They built networks and partnerships to access resources and support, and empowered members through skill development, role assignment, and shared responsibilities. These coping strategies allowed them to sustain leadership, enhance member participation, and maintain organizational functioning despite structural and socio-cultural barriers.

Overall, the study demonstrates that female leadership in farmers' associations is both constrained and transformative. Participants' experiences highlight the negotiation of gendered expectations, the adoption of inclusive practices, the navigation of structural limitations, and the use of adaptive strategies. Their leadership reflects the capacity to empower members, strengthen organizational resilience, and challenge traditional norms, offering insights into leading from the margin while fostering inclusive and sustainable community development.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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