

Women Who Transform: A Study on Female Leadership in Volunteer Associations on the Coast of Paraná– Brazil

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Abstract

Female leadership in Brazil has been gaining ground in several areas of society, especially when related to social issues. Recent data show that almost half of the leadership positions in this type of organization are held by women. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the occurrence of female leadership in social associations for women on the Coast of Paraná Brazil, in communities in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability. A descriptive, exploratory study with qualitative nature was conducted with 10 female leaders on the Coast of Paraná. The results of the research revealed that most female leaders do not have formal support from government institutions, and that partnerships with institutions and other leaders are the main resources and agents of transformation. The main factors attributed to this resilience are the love of volunteering, persistence, and the dissemination of activities that generates visibility in the media and helps new volunteers to come to the associations. The services offered by these organizations are entirely free, provided close to the houses of the women benefiting from them and have a positive impact on the access to education, employment opportunities, medical care and increased income for these women, promoting a more promising future outlook.

Keywords: female empowerment, female entrepreneurship, socioeconomic vulnerability, Paraná Coast, regional development

1. Introduction

The submissive condition of Brazilian women dates back to the colonial period, when they were required to organize the home, dedicate themselves to their children and obey men blindly, establishing the culture of the patriarchy (SPINDOLA; SANTOS, 2003). In Brazil, the traditional family model is still strongly represented, which establishes a clear division of roles, in which the man is generally involved in paid work, while the woman dedicates herself to family life, including managing the home and caring for the children (FLECK; WAGNER, 2003).

The situation described has been changed slowly. Women have also begun to occupy professional spaces, but the advances have not exempted them from the old social responsibilities regarding the education of children and domestic tasks, imposing on women the exercise of multiple activities. The Brazilian labor market has not yet been major changes in this scenario, decades later. The wage gap between genders remains discriminatory, with differences between genders in the insertion of men and women and in the difference in distinct incomes when they are allocated to the same occupation, a situation that persists nowadays and that despite women having acquired more education, wages have not kept up with this growth (PROST, 2003; CAMBOTA; PONTES 2007).

The last few decades have shown a transformation in the role and position of Brazilian women, especially in the middle classes of the population. However, the growing impoverishment of the middle classes in Brazil has driven women to seek work outside their homes, among the poorest classes, this search becomes a very difficult task with the limitations imposed by the environment.

The women's movement in search for better living conditions resulted in a new identity that, however, faced an unstable world and revealed itself to be in a crisis of values and fragmented, with no clear direction on what to be or what to do, or even what to feel and think, faced with a construction rooted in itself that challenged its internal construction over time, but which is full of courage to break the paradigms anchored only in courage and perseverance in the fight for survival. According to Anacleto et al. (2016), the number of Brazilian women seeking alternatives for economic activities as a way of having more income has increased, just as the last decades have also shown the growing participation of women as providers or co-providers in family arrangements. According to the same authors, the new challenges for these women in searching for work have increased their participation in entrepreneurship, however, it is not always linked to a formalized professional activity, and it still occurs with little or no adequate training required by the market.

Actions in search of better living conditions in Brazil can be classified as highly difficult, however, for women this situation is even more difficult, nevertheless, women are increasingly seeking entrepreneurial activities. Anacleto et al. (2016) describe that entrepreneurship does not represent a merely economic attitude, but also a social one, while entrepreneurs become important social actors for the transformation of their lives and one way can be the organization and support of organizations. Thus, support groups for women have emerged in Brazil in the form of associations that, in addition to the fight for gender equality, transcend other issues such as social support, guidance against gender violence and preparation for insertion or re-insertion into the job market.

Specifically, regarding the Coast of Paraná the region has many communities and neighborhoods with a high number of women in situations of social vulnerability and in recent years the number of associations that aim to support women in the daily struggle for better living conditions for themselves and their families has grown. Female leadership has been gaining ground in several areas of Brazilian society, especially in the social area of the third sector. In this context, in the associations and non-governmental organizations, this momentum has been especially important. Recent data show that almost half of the leadership positions in NGOs (47%) are held by women, and of the people who do volunteer work, they represent (62%) in the country (GGGR, 2022).

Therefore, given the context presented that reveals the existence of problematic situations experienced by women, and the lack of information on the impact of these associations on the lives of these women, this study aims to organize and present a brief overview of female leadership in volunteer associations aimed at women on the Coast of Paraná - Brazil.

2. Method

The research was conducted on the Coast of Paraná, Brazil with social associations and non-governmental organizations that provide support to women in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability.

The study was conducted over a period of twelve months, from June 2023 to June 2024. Ten women who lead associations and NGOs on the Coast of Paraná were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis, identifying themes and patterns related to the impact of female leadership on women's empowerment and in the community development.

The data collection process involved semi-structured interviews with the leaders of the associations, exploring their experiences, practices and perceptions about women's empowerment and community development. The interviews were conducted individually and in person, following a pre-defined script. It was important to understand how women who lead social associations are helping other women and their communities and, to find out how they do this and how this can help other people in the future.

The research site covered the Coast of Paraná which includes seven municipalities. The region was chosen because,

according to Anacleto et al. (2017) and Anacleto et al. (2020), most of the municipalities have low per capita income, similar to more than ten thousand other Brazilian municipalities. The descriptive exploratory research was carried out between June 2023 and June 2024, and it was directed at ten women who are presidents of social associations and non-governmental organizations that support other women in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability.

The present study was carried out following the proposal of Negrelle et al. (2012) and Zanotti et al. (2020), and initially, from the associations with great recognition in the cities, it was asked them to indicate other women leaders who could participate in the study, as it was possible to identify some elements of the population that was the object of the study, then they indicated other women generating a self-generated sampling process. Thus, a semi-structured questionnaire was previously prepared for field data collection. Before each interview began, the purpose of the study was explained to the interviewees. Only after that step the data collection process began, with the interviews being conducted at women's support associations.

Initially, the interviewees answered questions about their socioeconomic profile in terms of age, gender, education, marital status, and length of time working. Later, they answered questions about the impact of volunteer activities on their lives and on the lives of the women who were benefited. The analysis of the main factors was performed as proposed by Negrelle et al. (2012), using a cross-impact matrix, in which the set of reports was cross-referenced. The matrix, as proposed by Negrelle et al. (2012), uses percentage values from 0 to 100 for each opinion expressed by the interviewees collectively in relation to the other opinions expressed. Each item is analyzed in terms of the influence exerted on the different types of activities related to the leadership in associations. Thus, the higher the index, the greater the relevance of the item.

The impact matrix generates a relevance index that can be obtained using the equation:

$$IR = \frac{FA \times FB \times 100}{\sum SF}$$

Where, IR = Relevance Index of the situation evaluated;

Fa = Received influence indexes;

Fb = Caused influence indexes;

$\sum SF$ = Sum of the indexes (Fax Fb) of all the questions analyzed.

After completing the primary data collection, interpretative analysis was adopted and, through the data triangulation technique, between the researchers' observations and the similar responses obtained from them.

The research was outlined by the qualitative approach of a social and historical nature and, in the end, similar to that proposed by Anacleto et al. (2019) After completing the data collection, interpretative analysis was adopted and through the data triangulation technique between the specialized literature, the researchers' observations and the similar responses obtained from women leaders, promoting an in-depth analysis of female leadership in volunteer associations on the Coast of Paraná– Brazil.

3. Results

Women's leadership in associations presented a profile similar to women in other productive activities, with no direct relationship between age and leadership processes (Figure 1).

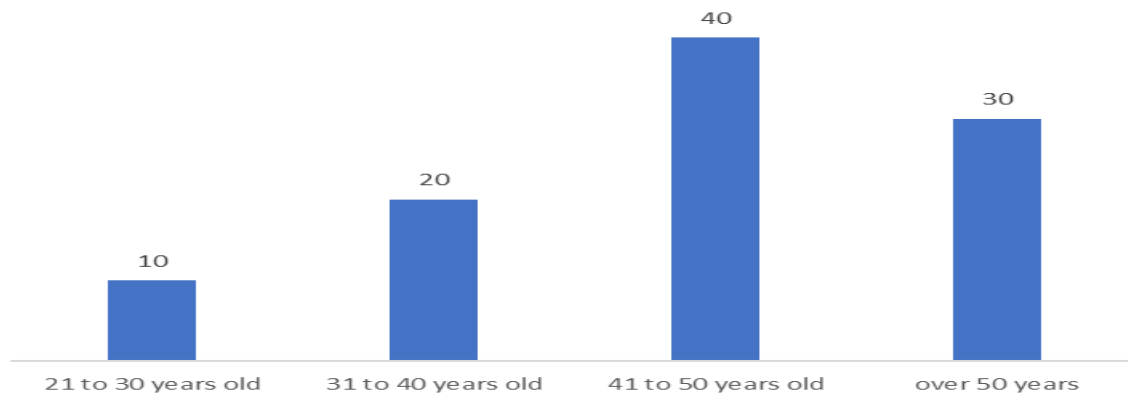


Figure 1. Age profile (%) of women leaders in associations on the Coast of Paraná

The racial representation in the leadership of the associations on the Coast of Paraná showed that 90% of the women identified themselves as white, while only 10% identified themselves as brown. And in terms of marital status, 60% of the leaders were married, 10% were single, 20% were widows and 10% were divorced.

The majority of women in the leadership process (52.4%) did not have children, while those with one child (23.8%) are similar to the percentage of women leaders with two or more children (23.8%). In terms of residence, a significant portion of the interviewees (47.6%) lived with their spouses, parents or siblings, while 42.4% lived with their children and only 10% of the women leaders lived alone. Among the women who lived with other adult family members, the entire group reported that reconciling family and professional responsibilities is possible as long as there is support from several family members to reconcile their responsibilities, execution and maintenance of leadership positions.

Entrepreneurship is a topic that is constantly in evidence in Brazil, and among the interviewees, 90% define themselves as entrepreneurial women. This situation may be associated with the level of education that among women in leadership positions was classified as high for the Brazilian reality, given that the majority of leaders (70%) had higher education (Figure 2).

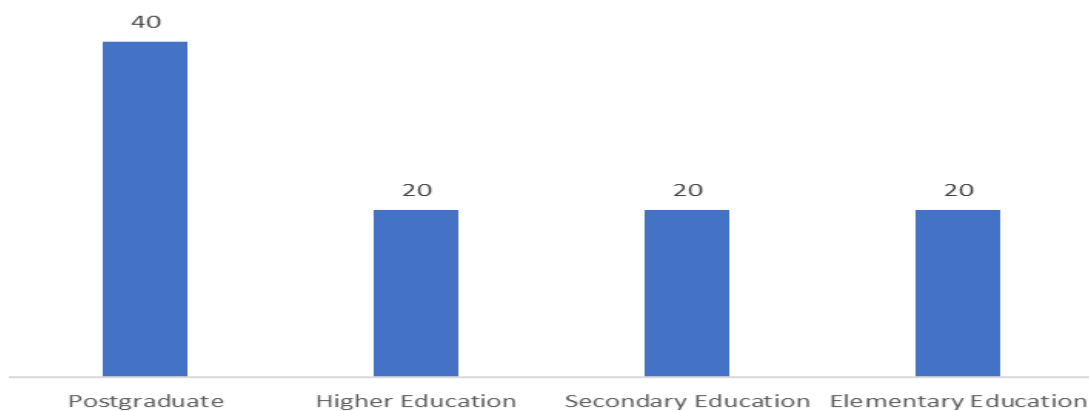


Figure 2. Level of education of the leaders who participate in associations on the Coast of Paraná

The associations prioritize the promotion of courses and training that could contribute to a rapid change in quality of life, as well as encouraging participation in entrepreneurship workshops that aimed to contribute fully to the professional development of the participating women, thus improving their qualifications and behaviors for the job market.

All of the interviewees reported significant changes observed in the women who attended the associations, with those related to financial empowerment being the most recognized (Table 1).

Table 1. Positive changes in the lives of women who participate in associations according to leaders from the Coast of Paraná

Ranking	Positive changes in women's lives	Index
1	Re-insertion into the job market	25,1
2	Financial income	22,3
3	New professional training aimed at the market	16,4
4	Discovery of new skills	8,32
5	Friendship networks through socialization in associations	6,01
6	Breaking or mitigating the cycle of violence	6,01
7	Salary improvement in the workplace	4,82
8	Increased self-esteem	4,82
9	Previous preparation for job searches.	3,11
10	Literacy for women who did not know how to read and write.	3,11

Despite the benefits observed and the positive changes in the lives of women who attend the associations, according to the interviewees, the challenges to be overcome in this journey are evident and difficult, especially the multiple work shifts (Table 2).

Table 2. Main challenges faced by women in the search for better living conditions

Ranking	Challenges faced by women	Index
1	Overload due to multiple daily shifts	31,4
2	Little time available to participate in the growth processes in associations	15,8
3	Sexist husband/partner	12,9
4	Little or no family support	12,9
5	Financial difficulties	11,0
6	Little knowledge of technologies	6,01
7	Low level of education	5,37
8	Low wages received	5,37
9	Violent environment	5,37
10	Lack of professional experience	4,88

The services offered by these organizations are free of charge and, according to all those interviewed, partnerships with other institutions and other leaders are the main resources for transformation. The main factors attributed to this resilience are the love of volunteering, persistence, and the promotion of activities that generate visibility in the media and help new volunteers reach the associations, even if in insufficient numbers. Therefore, it is urgent to analyze the challenges that the associations face in order to expand their services and support a greater number of women (Table 3).

Table 3. Main challenges that associations face in the fight to improve women's quality of life

Classification	Challenges faced by associations	Index
1	High dropout rate among participants	19,3
2	Lack of resources to help women during the training period.	15,3
3	Inadequate and small physical structures	14,9
4	Invisibility in government institutions	14,9
5	Area of operation limited to a few neighborhoods	8,06
6	Difficulty in communicating with employers	7,74
7	Little technological equipment	6,28
8	Difficulty in attracting new volunteers and partners	5,66
9	Informality of associations prevents them from receiving resources	4,25
10	Lack of experience in volunteer management	3,61

4. Discussion

Social vulnerability in Brazil is a complex and varied concept, but it refers to groups of individuals in situations of fragility and risk, invariably linked to socioeconomic factors that are consolidated in inequality. There are numerous groups in this social condition in Brazil, however, and it is possible to state that women constantly face gender inequality. In contrast to this situation, many groups have emerged, anchored in social and political movements, fighting for changes, whether for equal rights in the workplace, in politics, against gender discrimination, seeking to prioritize equal and fair opportunities for women, strengthening female empowerment.

According to UN Women (2024), female empowerment is a term used to define a political, social and philosophical precursor, with the aim of promoting the cause of women, their struggles, their strength and courage. In a patriarchal society, female empowerment is a positive consequence for women, given that it is a way to combat gender oppression and encourage the achievement of autonomy, self-determination, and thus expand autonomy to develop personally and professionally. One of the fastest growing forms of this is female entrepreneurship. Female entrepreneurship has proven to be more easily achieved through processes of encouraging female leadership that occur through the development of female leaders, a situation also observed on the Coast of Paraná Brazil. A significant portion of the population in this region lives in risky conditions and in high socioeconomic vulnerability, so projects focus on means that provide improvements in life, also involving professional and personal development. According to Anese et al. (2018), the influences that social actions cause in society can be transformative, since they promote the emergence of new ways of thinking and living, positively influencing their choices. Specifically with regard to the Coast of Paraná in the Southern region of Brazil, social projects have been carried out by women and directed towards other women who experience situations similar to those they have already experienced, which makes the transformation actions a look from oneself to the other person, however, the search and for the collective, from a desire for change of a group from the collective contribution to promote certain social actions, based on partnership and cooperation, taking control of life for oneself and then being able to take responsibility for one's own social construction from this point of support.

The similarity with previous studies confirms that the social representations of female duties, defined based on the traditional sexual division of labor, are changing and women are making a significant contribution to the family income, with the inclusion of spouses and mothers in paid activities. However, the study reveals that in order to achieve this, women give up developing several daily activities that could be for themselves in favor of their family. The scenario described results in a situation similar to that described by Anacleto et al. (2016), which reveals that since ancient times, women have suffered from multiple activities and their insertion in the market has not reduced this despite the contribution of income. This situation was also observed among the women in the present study who, given the impossibility of dividing labor, take on the various activities that arise in their daily lives, in addition to those performed in the work environment, which contributes to physical and emotional overload, which, in many situations, causes stress or disorders in the body. Despite the benefits that volunteer associations have in fact generated for women living in that region, one question remains: what differentiates the women who are in the leadership of these associations from the women who benefit from their actions and efforts?

The answer is ambiguous, because if they are leaders and they are different, but deeply it is possible to observe two particularities between these two groups.

The first is the high number of women leaders who have higher education, and the study also revealed that the undergraduate courses taken by the leaders included training in people and human resources management.

Human resources management in volunteer associations can be classified as a strategic area in the management and development of daily activities, in the search for transformations and demands imposed by the environment, as well as the values and objectives of the institution. Thus, the high percentage of women with higher education observed may be acting as a facilitator in maximizing the available intellectual capital and strengthening leadership processes. In the case observed, leadership can be understood as the construction of interpersonal relationships aimed at cooperative work without forms of coercion, but which results in the mobilization of people through the influence exerted. It is important to emphasize that this model results in a process that helps those led to perceive their needs and plan their actions in order to achieve their personal goals and, consequently, leadership associations.

The trajectory of a leader, however, is not only associated with the issue of training. Maxwell (2000) reaffirms that training is relevant, but also emphasizes that there are other essential qualities that foster efficiency, referring to the essential human values to have credibility and result in the desire of the people led to follow them, similarly to what was reported by Maxwell (2000). This research also observed that resilience, love for volunteering, and persistence were what generated visibility in the media and helped new volunteers to come to the associations and could increase the number of women benefiting. The second issue is that all of the interviewees who are in leadership positions in the associations reported that the work is only possible based on the family structure, which acts as a differentiating factor given that it was reported by 100% of the interviewees that the support of several family members to reconcile their responsibilities, execution and maintenance of leadership positions was essential.

The situation observed in this study contrasts with other studies that reveal that women, due to the multiplicity of actions in their daily lives, constantly feel anguish and need greater family support, and that they would like greater collaboration from men, which would result in an improvement in their quality of life, since they would be relieved of the amount of tasks, reducing the burden and obligation placed solely on themselves (SPINDOLA; SANTOS, 2003; LOVISOLO, SOARES; BARTHOLO, 2006).

Anacleto et al. (2011) report that women have taken up causes built and raised by men and, not infrequently, have had the support of significant portions of them in their struggles, similar to what was observed in this case. However, the effective participation of men in the division of domestic work, in most cases, can still be considered incipient. Women, even in a society considered modern, have benefited little from male partnerships to make their daily activities easier, other than sharing their activities with their partners. In most cases, the position of men in the division of domestic activities continues to be traditional, that is, women have entered the labor market, but continue to be the main responsible for their home, carrying out domestic activities and raising children, with household tasks being eminently feminine.

The condition observed in the present study derives from a conception that, as contemporary women, they assume a multiplicity of roles, which over time have been characterized as feminine. However, in the population investigated, contrary to the studies of Anacleto et al. (2011) the effective collaboration of the male universe, which attracted some responsibilities, promotes a change in the patriarchal scenario where women alone bear the physical, mental and psychological consequences of their choices, specifically in the case of women leaders. It is therefore concluded that the greater involvement of the male gender in the equal division of domestic and family activities has unquestionably reduced the multifaceted demands on women, allowing them to develop professionally and personally, collaborating in the support and provision of their homes, and, at the same time, promotes that other women benefit from this process, promoting a more promising future perspective for women in vulnerable situations who perceive in these associations the possibility of changing their lives.

5. Final Considerations

The results of the research revealed that most female leaders do not have formal support from government institutions, and that partnerships with institutions and other leaders are the main resources and agents of change.

The main factors attributed to this resilience are the love of volunteering, persistence, and the promotion of activities that generate visibility in the media and help new volunteers reach the associations.

The services offered by these organizations are entirely free of charge, offered near the homes of the women who benefit from them, and have a positive impact on access to education, employment opportunities, medical care, and increased income for the women who receive assistance, promoting a more promising future outlook. It can be

concluded that associations that offer support to women in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability on the Coast of Paraná Brazil cause significant positive impacts, given that the programs and services offered by these organizations positively influence access to education, employment opportunities and medical care for the women served. In addition, the interventions of these associations contribute to the empowerment and improvement of the quality of life of the women in situation of vulnerability.

The study made it possible to observe that associations have been a preponderant factor in the social development of the region, however, there is an urgent need to carry out new studies in order to understand more deeply how forms of action with a higher level of professionalization in associations can impact efficiency and be more effective in transforming and improving the lives of women reported here.

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Authors’ contributions

All authors participated in all stages of the study, including defining the methodology, data collection, scientific writing and final approval of the manuscript.

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Competing interests

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Obtained.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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