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# **ALTRUISTIC LEADERS**

## **Voices of women in Voluntary Organizations**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work  
in the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of four women leaders of large voluntary social service organizations in Aotearoa New Zealand. The key research question in this study centered around their leadership role in these non-profit making organizations. This research was approached from a feminist perspective. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. Person-centered questions explored their leadership pathway, the skills needed, leadership style, views on their unpaid status and how gender impacted on their role. Organization-centered questions explored the participant's views on leading a volunteer workforce and the impact of organizational and community trends.

The results of the research revealed a pathway to leadership which involved broad community group experience, an accumulation of wide ranging skills and a knowledge-base drawn mainly from family responsibilities. These women were motivated to undertake their role for reasons of community enhancement and personal satisfaction. They valued workable partnerships, participation, sociability and flexibility in their unpaid work. The ability to listen, understand, predict and influence behavior, were identified as important leadership behaviors, similar to a transformational leadership style. Their inclusive, conciliatory, visionary style included a commitment towards democratic decision-making and consultation in a pragmatic way. The results suggest the participants linked leadership and organizational effectiveness to a learning culture, understanding of governance roles and the needs of volunteers. They felt privileged to be able to view the 'big picture' of organizational, community and political systems and structures. The role of mentor in leadership succession was identified as important to their organization's continued well being. As these women walked along a finite mosaic pathway of personal and organizational networks, themes of challenge, change and self-education emerged. This limited study concluded that these leaders were confident in a role they enjoyed, in organizations they were totally committed to and understood.

## DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my late husband Ross Gerald Hanlen David & Natalie, Anne-Marie & Barry, John & Stacey and Catherine my parents, Nell and John Kearney and to all my family, past and present who have modeled the concept of volunteerism.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the generosity of the women participants. I felt privileged to meet with them, hear their voices, share and reflect upon their rich experiences. Without this generosity this research would not have been possible.

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I also would like to thank my family, friends and social work colleagues who have encouraged me to complete this work. There have been many times when I have been torn between spending time with the family, friends and my new grandchildren, my garden and sitting down at the computer to write or to read texts.

I pay tribute to all women leaders of voluntary organizations in Aotearoa New Zealand, past, present and to come. In some small way I hope these findings will be useful to those special women, which I fear are a dwindling community resource.

‘You make a living by what you get but you make a life by what you give.’

Winston Churchill

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**'Women hold up somewhat more than half the sky....' Gill (1990)**

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# INTRODUCTION

'It is fair to say that in the non-profit sector women hold up somewhat more than half the sky....The non-profit sector needs to look at the role of women in its organizations. Their voluntary labour should not be taken for granted, and they must be accorded the status and dignity they deserve,' states Gill (1990) cited in Furniss (c.1993:7).

This study examines the perspectives of four women in voluntary sector leadership. Leadership can mean different things to different people. Although this socially constructed concept is difficult to define, most definitions would include the notion that leaders influence achievement of organizational goals. Local and international literature has acknowledged intense interest and debate in the concept of leadership in business, but to a far lesser extent, leadership in the voluntary sector. In Aotearoa New Zealand there has also been a lack of interest in what it is like for women in unpaid leadership roles, the chairpersons of governance boards, in the voluntary social services which suggests they lack organizational status.

This study of leadership perceptions commenced in 2001, the International Year of Volunteers, a year in which the United Nations General Assembly set objectives to be achieved, primarily to heighten recognition of voluntary work. In my view, neither voluntary sector leadership nor voluntary social services have been accorded the value or status in society that is warranted and thus they fall into the category of 'disadvantaged' individuals and groups in Aotearoa New Zealand. In an attempt to further knowledge and understanding on the topic of women in voluntary sector leadership an exploration of gender, relationships and transformational leadership style was undertaken.

## **The research topic overview**

In this study leadership perspectives of women in unpaid positions in large voluntary organizations in this country were examined with the use of feminist methodology. The objectives of the qualitative study were to:

- (1) Examine the influences on women along their pathway to leadership and what it was like for them in the leadership role.
- (2) Examine the impact of gender, unpaid work, women's perception of their leadership style, skills required and volunteer relationships.
- (3) Examine the impact of community and organizational trends on women and their organization.

This topic was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, the study represents an attempt to move from assumptions I had gained in a similar leadership role, to a clearer understanding, through analysis, of the viewpoint of other women in the social services. Firstly, the question arose as to what conditions influenced, inspired and motivated women to gift their valuable time to the role, hence their pathway into leadership was examined.

Secondly, I embarked on this study as I considered it would be supportive to other women to gain insight into leadership development, what the role may require, and skills needed to be effective and supportive in a rapidly changing social, political and economic environment. The usefulness of a particular leadership style, clarity of implications of unpaid status or gender-role status of leaders and the establishment of good working relationships with volunteers, I envisage will be knowledge of benefit to other aspiring leaders.

Aligned with my own feminist values, in documenting the views of women leaders I hope that these shared experiences will encourage women to consider leadership roles, as well as affirm, value and strengthen the bonds between those who currently carry out this role.

Thirdly, I chose this topic because it relates to the transfer of knowledge from the personal to the political arena. The study of social work, social policy, and social services and advocacy obligations, has increased my understanding of the complexities of leadership, particularly the impingement of socioeconomic and political factors and trends that affect the lives of individual leaders and their organizations. An important consideration was to examine the identified impact of societal and organizational trends

on the leadership and bring to light leadership experiences. The area of organizational and leadership stereotyping for instance, was important to examine in terms of policy implications.

The intent of the study was to frame a clear picture on how women chairpersons of large social service organizations perceive their role. The concept of motivation as an influential leadership characteristic was examined with the use of transactional and transformational theory. The latter is considered an appropriate style of leadership useful for women in the sector (Tremaine 2000). The aim has been to give greater clarity to what motivates and de-motivates leaders in contrast with the led and those in paid work.

### **Women in voluntary leadership roles in Aotearoa New Zealand**

Volunteers and voluntary organizations build leaders, yet little is known about women in this role in this country, compared to women in corporate management. The social services are formally organized activities intended to enhance people's social welfare and generally are developmental, remedial or rehabilitative services. The social services are viewed as gendered work, with a predominance of woman workers as well as women clients. It is seen as equally important that women in leadership are recognized as equal to men, but different (Wilson 1995). It is not clear whether men or women predominate in the voluntary leadership arena, this is a matter for further study.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century religious organizations, communities, families, the state and philanthropists provided charitable social services for the needy. In the 1980s Aotearoa New Zealand moved away from a welfare state to a welfare society and the state wished to be seen as the last recourse for action. It was recognized by feminists that this move away from state provision would result in women once again picking up the caring and nurturing of the sick, the elderly and children with more expected of families, voluntary organizations and religious groups.

A Time Use Survey (1999) conducted by the Ministry of Women's Affairs suggests the average Aotearoa New Zealand volunteer is a part-time working woman, aged between 45-64 years. Women spend more time than men on unpaid work for other households or

individuals and non-profit organizations. (New Zealand Federation of Voluntary Welfare Organizations (Inc.) (2001).

It is not completely clear how many charitable organizations exist in Aotearoa New Zealand, but in the year 2000, there were 21,444 incorporated societies and 11,582 charitable trusts registered. 'This does not include at least 160 formal Maori/Iwi organizations which register under other legislation, or school boards of trustees and other educational groups registered under the Education Act.' (Rossco News 2001:4). It is therefore estimated that there are at least 33,186 leaders of voluntary groups in this country.

Many voluntary groups are affiliated to national umbrella groups in New Zealand. Namely, the New Zealand Federation of Voluntary Welfare Organizations, the New Zealand Council of Social Services and the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services. These groups work in collaboration with each other to promote, support and advocate for the voluntary sector.

The New Zealand Federation of Voluntary Welfare Organizations made headlines in 1999 when the National Government threatened to cut its funding. With a change of Government the Federation has survived to continue to advocate for the sector, using leadership resources to give 'advice about the way the voluntary sector works together and its relationship with government,' said Tina Reid, Chief Executive Officer of the Federation of Voluntary Welfare Agencies, cited in New Zealand Association Citizens Advice Bureaux Incorporated (2001:11). Tina Reid states that of the 120 organizations that belong to the Federation about half are national bodies like New Zealand Association Citizens Advice Bureaux, IHC and Women's Refuge. The participants in this study were either chairpersons or presidents of the governance boards of large social services, drawn from the Federation of Voluntary Welfare Agencies membership.

Another cluster of leaders working collaboratively is the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, with members such as the Salvation Army, which has 3,000 volunteers in New Zealand, (The Salvation Army 2001). There is also a nation-wide

network of volunteer centres working to enhance the worthwhile contribution of volunteers and advocate for their needs.

### **The research question and methodology**

This research examines women leaders through the utilization of feminist theory and feminist methodology. Feminist values suggest that the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical, reciprocal and the interviewer invests her own personal identity as a woman in the process, as opposed to what could be considered masculine methodology and values of autonomy, separation, distance and control.

Qualitative analysis for the small number of women interviewed was considered the appropriate approach to use to make a study of unpaid leaders, namely chairpersons. The interview questions were framed around their leadership pathway, influence of previous leaders, role, gender impact, skills, style, status, working relationship with volunteers, key organizational issues, community trends impacting on women leaders and advice they would give to other women leaders. Some chapters that follow utilize a liberal feminist person-centred (chapter 5) and organizational-centred (chapter 6) approach to leadership, that is, the leader's individual perceptions of the role and the impact of the organizational situation.

### **My voice**

My leadership pathway has been influenced in part by social, mental and cultural factors and the Christian philosophy of voluntary contribution to society, which has been modeled in my family over many generations. During my married life my late husband accepted transfers with his work which required relocation to various parts of the country. Voluntary work became an important avenue for my socialization into new communities as well as providing significant learning experiences and diversity of relationship building on my leadership pathway.

As with most women with families, the challenges of parenthood, coupled with a progression of roles in community organizations such as Kindergarten, Play Centre, Parent Teachers Association, Board of Trustees, Church, recreational groups,

contributed to my acquisition of transferable skills, abilities and knowledge. Team sport activity in my youth and early married life provided further socialization and opportunity to learn about team participation, motivation, mentoring, coaching, selecting, supporting and leading others.

As Vice President of a large voluntary social service for four years I was fortunate to receive exposure to two contrasting leadership styles of women national presidents, who acted as chairpersons of the Board of Governance. Interestingly, these women had the same personality traits of extroversion, sensitivity, thinking and judging from the Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator scale, as I had. I became interested in the potential usefulness of this indicator scale to aid recruitment and selection of people into positions that suit their abilities. Although the trait aspect contributes to 'making' a leader, the complexities of the debate around this aspect of the leadership question receives only a 'snapshot' in this study.

Encouragement and mentoring by other women who had identified my strengths, led to the presidential nomination, its acceptance, candidate's speeches, secret ballot and election. My election as a national president of 2,500 volunteers, involved the role of chairperson of a board of 16 members, mainly women.

Acting as a mentor, my husband, a media manager, assisted me with the public relations/publicity and finance portfolio roles I held concurrently with my national president/chairperson's role. Finance and public relations are two skill areas that appear less attractive to women in the social services. There is a skill gap in social service organizations in these two areas, a subject for further research.

Upon election, I was subject to patronizing attitudes from a few men within and from other similar type organizations, who offered their assistance by provision of their business cards. Further, in my experience the board members, leaders in their own right, were frequently perceived as paid bureaucrats from Wellington by a small section of the membership, despite the fact they were unpaid, did not behave in bureaucratic ways or live in the capital city. These members carried considerable responsibility in a rapidly

changing environment, a group of highly committed advocates, energetic, passionate people, devoted to the cause.

Some lack of recognition of the national responsibilities of the leader was encountered to varying degrees within the volunteer environment. Although the leadership mantle was assumed, there was a simultaneous expectation from the membership that the board members work at both national and local level. The leadership was expected to stay in touch with the branches, the 'grass roots', still 'pitching in' with the 'real hands on' work at the 'coal face'. That is, the leader was expected to simultaneously work through governance mechanisms, as well as regular locally based 'front line' volunteer work with clients. It was evident from the electorate that they wished to have confidence in their leader, a leader who had not 'lost touch with the troops' serving the clients. Although masculine and military terminology is used to describe my 'voice', these are terms frequently heard in the social service sector where mature women like myself, predominate.

I had aspirations of avoiding the negative vibes associated with large structures, but quickly discovered that the larger the organization became, more tiers of communication and rules were required to avoid chaos. The challenge to the leadership was focused on board process of transacting new policies to replace guidelines for ninety-one branches, relationship building, constant communication, external networking and political advocacy on behalf of client need, funding, learning opportunities for the membership and promoting the integrity of voluntary work.

Subsequently, my voluntary sector leadership role has been undervalued in job applications for paid employment, as voluntary work appeared not to be a valid leadership experience. The choosing of home, family and community contribution were not seen as serious or valuable skill contributions or as environments for structured learning, nor was unpaid work considered a vehicle for the enhancement of career training. On the other hand, the leadership role led to a number of board members being recognized by government as 'lay' appointments to other Boards and Tribunals.

Although I feel privileged to have experienced the president's role of a large national voluntary organization, I gained equally from paid and unpaid staff, more than I gave. My own personal philosophy has been shaped by the belief that leadership is an opportunity to share gifts through guided decision making, to tackle problems and conflict, to develop and support others, to build on the efforts of the past and create new pathways for others to follow. An analysis of my own experience, utilizing systems thinking, which calls attention to aspects of interaction in organizational life, assisted with the framing of the question for this study.

### **Concepts and themes**

The concept of women in leadership is viewed as a dynamic social phenomenon. This study focuses on key concepts of women's pathways to chairing boards of national organizations; the relationships with the membership; motivational aspects influencing the role and a comparison between transactional and transformational styles.

A key concept is that of organizational size, that is those with large national networks of local branches across the country. These organizations have been well established for long periods of time, surviving and respected due to activity in the direct provision of front line social and community service or in what is known by the sector as 'grass roots' or 'flax roots' work.

Community development concepts of community of interest, sense of belonging to and participation in community and organizational life are important themes associated with leadership influence. The sharing of self as a personal resource, a gift to be used in constructive ways to create a more cohesive society is a theme interwoven throughout this study. The motivation to give time and energy through leadership, to enhance community betterment through sharing skills, knowledge and wisdom along life's pathway is a theme developed.

An important theme of this study is the embarkation on a leadership pathway of choice, a basket of provisions, interaction with the environment, (ecological systems approach (Germain, 1981 in Payne 1991:22) exposure to a 'big picture', with networks to consider, and challenges of cross roads, are seen as part of the mosaic design of the

leadership concept. Leaders were asked to reflect on their leadership activities, in order to assist and guide others who may follow, action which is associated with the action/reflection model of social work.

### **Outline of thesis**

An outline of the study is provided here to furnish the reader with an overview of each chapter. Chapter 1 provides a compacted overview of some literature on leadership theories and concepts. The chapter is divided into three sections. Firstly, the literature describes a few of the core leadership theories and new approaches such as transformational leadership. Secondly, a person-centred approach to how women may lead differently and the development of leadership, decision-making and communication styles attributed to women is discussed. Thirdly, aspects of an organization-centered approach to leadership, voluntary organizations, altruistic role, the influence of large organizational structure on leadership style and shared governance leadership are described.

Chapter 2 discusses some possible influences on a pathway to leadership in voluntary organizations. Significant life experiences, psychological factors, family and relationship influence, gender stereotyping, confidence and self-efficacy, role models and mentoring are discussed in relation to the literature. The influence of age, stage of life, networks and the exit path are discussed briefly.

Chapter 3 discusses leadership effectiveness, four dimensions of transformational leadership in contrast with transactional leadership, the skills to span the dimensions and making the links and aspects of de-motivation and resistance to leadership influence.

Chapter 4 discusses the feminist research process, methodology and research design used for this study as well as ethical issues.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the study under person-centered themes - their pathway to election; role perception; unpaid work status; gender impact; skills need for the task; style identification.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings of the study under organization-centered themes. The participants' advice to other women considering similar leadership roles and succession is recorded.

Chapter 7 contains a discussion on the findings while chapter 8 contains the conclusion, summary, recommendations for future research, relevance and application. The following chapter reviews core leadership theories, styles of leadership attributed to woman's advantage and the exploration of the altruistic role in a large voluntary organizational structure.