Women Influentials

Leaders of women's associations are in position to influence, favorably or otherwise, acceptance of educational opportunities in a community

ANNA B. BROWN

THAT WOMEN can and do exert influence in our society has been stated many times. The profusion of women's associations is evident, and these associations may be the means by which women gain a reputation for influence. The fact that the few women who have been identified in studies as leaders (influentials) in over-all community power structures suggests (1) that such studies have analyzed power or influence in the man's world and (2) that there are differences between the man's and the woman's world. An exploration of the top women influentials (leaders) in the woman's world has revealed some attitudes relevant to Extension. For example, in three Michigan communities studied, top women influentials had not participated in Extension programs in the past and are not participating now. However, these women did indicate a relative degree of interest in traditional home economics areas, especially in family relations or parent education and child development.

Even though research evidence is limited and inconclusive, it may help focus attention on a segment of society which could be important to the future of Extension's home economics programs. This article will review findings from studies which relate to the ideas mentioned above, raise some questions, and suggest some possible areas of concern for Extension.

Various writers have expressed the opinion that women can and do exert influence in society. For example, Ward[1] suggested 70 years ago that it was time to unleash all the forces of society, especially those vast complementary forces which women alone can wield.

[1] Lester F. Ward, *Dynamic Sociology, Vol. I* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1894).

ANNA B. BROWN *is a former County Extension Agent, Home Economics, Washtenaw County, Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

Forty years later, Bogardus[2] stated that women play en effective, although often indirect, part in male leadership. Later, Montagu observed that "women are the cultural torch bearers in America."[3] Women play an important role on school boards and boards of higher education; their influence in schools and in the community cannot be measured.

Women and Influence

One way in which women participate in society is through organizational activity; this may be the vehicle for gaining reputation as a leader. With respect to organizational activity, Warner[4] noted that there is a profusion of women's clubs at all levels of society. But the amount of participation in voluntary associations appears to differ by socio-economic class (determined on the basis of the husband's occupation).[5] It seems that women within each occupational category are confronted with a public pattern of expectations about their behavior which influences the likelihood of their participating in voluntary associations. Upper-lower-class and lower-middle-class members do join organizations, but these are neighborhood rather than community-wide groups. Upper-middle-class and upper-class women are more active, especially in all-community groups.[6]

A recent survey of 2300 women showed that there were thousands of women's associations. Church associations attracted the single largest group; however, 48 per cent of the women belonged to nothing. It was concluded that "the American woman is not a compulsive joiner."[7] This idea is supported by the findings of a Michigan study. Women were found to select organizational activities according to their interests.[8] Another study explained that women who occupy different stages in the family cycle or who play

[2] Emory S. Bogardus, *Leaders and Leadership* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, Inc., 1934).

[3] Ashley Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women* (New York: Lancer Books, Inc., 1952), p. 170.

[4] W. Lloyd Warner, *et al.*, *Democracy in Jonesville* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1949).

[5] See Carol Slater, "Class Differences in Definition of Role and Membership in Voluntary Associations Among Urban Married Women," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXV (May, 1960), 616-19.

[6] Mhyra S. Minnis, "The Patterns of Women's Organizations: Significance, Types, Social Prestige Rank, and Activities," in Marvin B. Sussman (ed.), *Community Structure and Analysis* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1959).

[7] George Gallup and Evan Hill, "The American Woman," *The Saturday Evening Post*, CCXXXV (December 22-29, 1962), 16-26.

[8] Anna C. B. Brown, "A Study of Women Influentials in Three Michigan Communities, Their Attitudes Towards and Perceived Ability to Influence Adult Education Practices" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1963).

different family-type roles belong to different types of associations and use different references for belonging.[9]

There are several reasons why women belong to organizations. In general, women's associations meet emotional needs by providing many women a sense of usefulness and belonging.[10] Tompkins[11] noted more specifically that women belong to associations for the purposes of maintaining or improving their concepts-of-self in terms of the values accorded certain role behavior by society.

Participation in Organizations

Participation in organizational activity may be the vehicle by which women gain a reputation for influence. In the opinion of Warner and Lunt, "a few well-placed women at the top who belong to an interlocking set of associations exercise great power in a community like Yankee City."[12] As a result of a study of community leaders, Blumberg stated that "formally organized voluntary associations are important in the distribution of power in the community. . . ."[13] He further suggested that women probably depend on associations for the development of power much more than men do. It may be that women are action oriented; that the ability to get things done is much more important than economic, social, or political status. Such ability must be demonstrated; the most logical way is through participation in associations and in the community.[14]

In a study purporting to examine the role of women in the power structure of a community, it was suggested that one way in which women wield power is through memberships on boards of social agencies rather than through participation in economic and political structures; but results were not conclusive. Male board memberships predominated; only five boards had a majority of women members; these boards provided services for children (which is consistent with the traditional role expectations for women). The conclusions of this study dealt with an analysis of board functions

[9] Jean Beattie Tompkins, "Reference Groups and Status Values as Determinants of Behavior: A Study of Women's Voluntary Association Behavior" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1955).

[10] See Minnis, *op. cit.;* and Simone de Beauvior, *The Second Sex,* translated and edited by H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1961).

[11] Tompkins, *op.cit.*

[12] W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), p. 337.

[13] Leonard U. Blumberg, "Community Leaders: The Social Bases and Social-Psychological Concomitants of Community Power" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1955), p. 46.

[14] See Brown, *op. cit.,* pp. 29, 117-21.

and board memberships rather than with the role played by women in the power structure of the community.[15]

Some over-all community power studies show that women do appear in the top power lists but that, when they do, they are considered relatively low power. However, they are high in power with respect to the general population.[16] Other studies show that women do not appear in the top community power structure.[17] Such studies have been conducted by men interested in examining the structure of society in the community insofar as power and influence are concerned. Could it be that this is essentially an exploration of the man's world and that those women who do appear in the power structure relate more closely to the man's world? Would these women also be considered top influentials in the woman's world? Research designed to analyze over-all power structure, as well as women influentials in the woman's world in the same community, would provide clues to these questions.

Informants in the various community power studies have involved, more often than not, knowledgeable men. Merton[18] found that there was "a distinct tendency for men to report the influence of other men whereas women reported male and female influentials in almost equal numbers." The suggestion was advanced that further research probably would show spheres of influence virtually monopolized by men, others by women, and still others more or less equally shared.

That there is a woman's world—an area in which women subsist and interact—seems evident.[19] Several studies have noted some

[15] Nicholas Babchuck, *et al.*, "Men and Women in Community Agencies: A Note on Power and Prestige," *American Sociological Review*, XXV (June, 1960), 399-403.

[16] See Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); Delbert C. Miller, "Industry and Community Power Structures: A Comparative Study of an American and an English City," *American Sociological Review*, XXIII (February, 1958), 9-15; and Blue A. Carstenson, "A Method for Studying How People Perceive the Power Structure in Their Communities as Tested in Five Michigan Communities" (unpublished D.Ed. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1956).

[17] See Gerhard F. Gettel, "A Study of Power in a North Central States Community" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1956); Orrin E. Klapp and L. Vincent Padgett, "Power Structures and Decision-Making in a Mexican Border City," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXV (January, 1960), 400-6; and Alexander J. Muntean, "Community Change and Hospital Development: A Case Study of Community Power Structure" (unpublished Master's thesis, Michigan State University, 1959).

[18] Robert K. Merton, "Patterns of Influence: A Study of Interpersonal Influence and Communications Behavior in a Local Community," in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1957), pp. 387-420.

[19] See de Beauvoir, *op. cit.;* and Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963).

differences between the man's and the woman's world. For example, there is a striking divergence in the belief systems of men and women. Women play down race, creed, color, and sex differences; men tend to exaggerate them. The supreme value for women is the happiness and well-being of the individual; for men, forces of loyalty are to the organization, business, institution, and so on. Women think in long-range ultimate effects while men are more earth-bound, datum-driven; that is, women are more concerned with ends and men with means.[20]

In a study of control and leadership in women's as compared to men's groups, Ross[21] found that women considered personal qualities (such as getting along with people, interest, enthusiasm) and ability and experience (such as efficiency and good organizational ability) about equally important leadership qualities. Social and business position and time for the job were much less important. In contrast, men considered social and business position the most important leadership quality and other qualities much less important. She concluded that the essential difference between men's and women's organized behavior is based on the idea that women's groups function on the basis of personal relations (in which controls and leadership lie within the realm of primary relationships) while men's groups are controlled by more impersonal mechanisms (in which leadership is given to those who hold social and business power).

Women Influentials

One study has identified top women influentials (leaders) on a community-wide basis in three Michigan communities.[22] The technique used was similar to that employed in the studies of over-all community power structure[23] except that all informants were women—heads of the various women's associations found in the community. Informants were asked to name women whom they thought to be leaders: that is, women who could get things done on a community-wide basis. Lists were compiled and the interviewing continued until nearly all women mentioned two or more times

[20] See John R. Seeley, *et al.*, *Crestwood Heights: A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1956).

[21] Aileen D. Ross, "Control and Leadership in Women's Groups: An Analysis of Philanthropic Money-Raising Activity," *Social Forces,* XXXVII (December, 1958), 124-31.

[22] Brown, *op. cit.*

[23] For examples see Carstenson, *op. cit.;* Gettel, *op. cit.;* Miller, *op. cit.;* and Muntean, *op. cit.*

were interviewed. From this list, all the women who had received five or more nominations were called top women influentials.

Top women leaders thus identified were generally (1) in the age range 36 to 70; (2) college graduates or had some college work; (3) married or widowed, with children at home or away from home; (4) women whose husbands were in executive, business, or professional occupations; (5) not employed full time outside the home; (6) residents of the urban areas of the community and having lived in the community between 11 and 35 years; (7) born in Michigan but not in the community in which they were living.

Communities studied were small (villages located in them ranged from 2998 to 3355 in population) and were classified on a rural-urban continuum ranging from high to low in the per cent of population employed in agriculture in the county.[24] Counties from which the communities were selected were considered to have good Cooperative Extension programs by the administrative staff of the Michigan Extension Service.

These top women influentials belonged to more than one association. Women from the community in the high agricultural area belonged to more associations (an average of 6.0 compared to 5.3 and 5.7) than those in the other two communities. The highest number of influentials (three) who indicated membership in a home economics Extension group was from the community located in the medium agricultural area. Home economics groups were not perceived as exerting influence in either the high or low agricultural area but they were ranked the most influential association in the medium agricultural area. In all communities, the proportion of women influentials who had participated or were currently participating in Cooperative Extension (any of its programs) was considerably less than half of the total.

With respect to general acquaintance with selected adult education programs and activities, influentials were most knowledgeable about church education programs and libraries and public school adult education programs. They were least knowledgeable about labor education programs. In general, and when listed as separate items, knowledge of the home economics Extension program and the 4-H program was greater than knowledge of the Cooperative Extension Service or the agricultural Extension program. Their knowledge of the Cooperative Extension Service as an item ranked next to last (labor education was last) in all communities.

On the basis of findings from these three communities, it appears

[24] In the high area, 42.5 per cent of the population was employed in agriculture; in the median area, 21.9 per cent; in the low area, 6.4 per cent.

that: (1) women influentials, who were for the most part urban residents, lack information about the Cooperative Extension Service; (2) their image of Extension seems to be that of "a program for the rural people," "the activity or skills level," "mostly home economics"; and (3) the rural-urban cleavage still exists, even in small communities. Is the lack of participation by influentials in Extension due to a lack of information or knowledge about the program or simply because they are not interested?

An attempt was made to ascertain the degree of influentials' interests in selected areas of home economics (see Table 1). Five traditional areas were ranked neither top nor bottom. Parent education and child development garnered the most interest; clothing elicited the least interest; the ranking of each area generally varied by community. It seemed that if one or two women in a community were personally interested in an area, the chances were that the interest of other women in the same area was aroused.

Table 1. Rank orders of areas of interest for women influentials in three Michigan communities

Interest areas	Communities by proportion of population in agriculture		
	Low	Medium	High
Church	1	1	3
Community development	2	2	1.5
Parent education & child development*	3	4	9.5
International understanding	4	13.5	4
Health	5	3	1.5
Civic affairs	6	5	5
Home management*	7	9	7
Home furnishings*	8.5	6.5	8
Food and nutrition*	8.5	8	6
Crafts and hobbies	10	11	12.5
Music	11	6.5	12.5
Art	12	13.5	11
Clothing*	13	10	14
Recreation	14	12	9.5
"Society" (social entertaining)	15	15	15

* Traditional home economics areas.

Interest in social entertaining placed last in all communities. Influentials did not consider themselves social leaders; they clearly indicated that other leadership qualities were much more important. Interest in home economics areas was consistent with the traditional role expectation for women—that of homemaker. Most influentials indicated that home and family come first, particularly when out-

side activities not directly related to their home and family were concerned.

This study did not attempt to compare influentials' degree of interest with other populations such as women lower in the influential scale or a random sample of women. Influentials may be more sophisticated in their requests for specific information than other women. It would be enlightening to compare influentials' degree of interest in traditional home economics areas with that of members of home economics Extension groups.

Implications

Influentials are the reputed leaders in the community; hence, they are in a position to influence, favorably or otherwise, acceptance of Extension programs as an educational opportunity for all women. According to the study cited, top influentials have not been (but could be) involved in the implementation of Extension programs —at least to the extent that information regarding home economics might be disseminated more effectively through associations in the community. However, discretion must be exercised in identifying influentials: this should be done as a legitimate research problem —not by informal inquiry. The kind of information required for such identification can be secured only by assuring strictest confidence.

Since associations do play an important part in the fabric of society—and influentials belong to associations—another way to implement Extension programs may be through the existing network of associations to which women belong: groups in which they are interested, which they perceive as educational, and which reflect the different stages in their family cycle. Associations, other than the home economics groups, could be the gate for disseminating home economics information into an urban community. The small communities in the Michigan study were already well organized—over-organized according to respondents. In short, women's associations may be an avenue through which Extension could extend its information into urban areas.

> THE only people who achieve much are those who want knowledge so badly that they seek it while the conditions are still unfavorable. Favorable conditions never come.
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> —from C. S. LEWIS as quoted in *Forbes*, XCII (July 1, 1963), 58.