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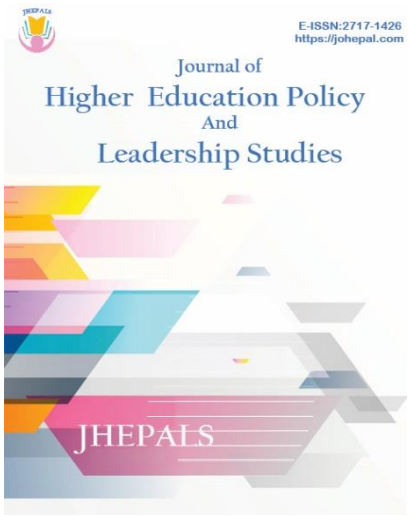
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Rural Women's Leadership: Approaches, Enabling Factors and Challenges for Its Recognition and Strengthening

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Abstract

Women's leadership in rural contexts manifests in diverse forms that challenge traditional notions of power, representation, and agency. The latter is understood as the capacity to make autonomous decisions and actively transform the environment. The present article conducts a systematic review of the extant scientific literature, structured in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guideline, aiming to analyse the theoretical perspectives, enabling factors, and structural barriers shaping the consolidation of rural women's leadership. A qualitative-thematic and frequency analysis was conducted on 18 studies indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. Findings reveal that leadership does not primarily develop through formal organizational hierarchies but through socioeconomic empowerment, household decision-making, and community participation. Educational constraints and patriarchal structures represent the main barriers, whereas peer learning networks and collective engagement facilitate leadership processes. The evidence shows a concentration of research on microfinance initiatives in South Asia, highlighting limited attention to regions such as Latin America. The study concludes that intersectional approaches are essential to recognize informal leadership practices and strengthen inclusive, sustainable rural policies.

Keywords: Rural Female Leadership; Economic Empowerment; Community Agency; Enabling Factors; Structural Barriers; Systematic Review

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Introduction

In rural contexts, leadership assumes particular forms that are responsive to the distinctive territorial, cultural and social conditions that prevail. In contradistinction to the leadership observed in corporate or urban structures, the leadership in this community is distinguished by its proximity to the community, its collective management, and its connection to the land. In such an environment, rural women have been shown to be an indispensable driving force for sustainable development, social cohesion, and the capacity of communities to respond to economic, social, and environmental crises. Rural women, in both formal and informal roles, lead productive, educational, health, and territorial defence projects without receiving the institutional or media recognition that these actions deserve (Mataboge, 2024).

On a global scale, a range of international regulatory frameworks underscore the imperative to ensure the involvement of rural women in decision-making processes. Instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 5 and 10) promote gender equality and inclusion in all territorial spheres.

Despite the formulation of national public policies inspired by these guidelines in numerous countries, the extant literature reveals the persistence of significant gaps (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Behera et al., 2024). These asymmetries manifest themselves in the low visibility of these leaders, the limited female representation in formal positions of power, and the paucity of studies that systematise their experiences.

While there has been an increase in the recognition of the integrating role of rural women, the state of scientific knowledge on their forms of leadership remains fragmented and dispersed. The extant research in this area has been primarily focused on isolated case studies, approached from rigid sectoral or disciplinary perspectives that overlook the reciprocal interaction between the socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. This fragmentation renders invisible the community and informal leadership practices that develop outside institutional channels and, therefore, are not usually recorded in traditional systems of academic knowledge production (Yar & Musadiq, 2024).

The diversity of the territorial, cultural and institutional contexts in which these women exercise leadership hinders the development of comprehensive analytical models that would allow for the characterisation of different types of rural female leadership. Moreover, a significant proportion of extant literature focuses on individual barriers or experiences, without articulating the results with common theoretical frameworks or considering factors that facilitate leadership or broader support structures (Yar & Rahmani, 2024; Adefila et al., 2024). The dearth of systematic reviews and integrative comparative studies hinders the identification of common patterns, best practices, and lessons that can be transferred to other geographic contexts. Consequently, a significant proportion of institutional empowerment strategies are devoid of a robust empirical foundation, thereby compromising their relevance, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability. This perpetuates the risk of implementing interventions that are disconnected from the quotidian rural realities.

In order to address this gap, the present research aims to systematically analyse the approaches, enabling factors, and challenges documented in the academic literature on

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rural women's leadership. The objective is to provide a critical synthesis that clarifies the mechanisms for its recognition and empowerment. The following research questions were formulated to guide this analysis:

1. What leadership models or approaches are most frequent among rural women according to the academic literature?
2. What social, cultural, and institutional factors facilitate the emergence and development of these leadership styles?
3. What structural barriers limit the recognition and effective participation of rural women in decision-making spaces?
4. What are the community impacts resulting from the active exercise of women's leadership in rural settings?
5. What characteristics do programs and institutions aimed at strengthening this leadership have?

The present study adopts an integrative approach by means of a systematic analysis of the perspectives, enabling factors and challenges associated with rural women's leadership. This approach overcomes the thematic fragmentation present in previous research. The added value of the present study lies in its capacity to provide a critical foundation that can guide future research, the design of public policies, and the implementation of empowerment strategies with greater relevance and effectiveness. The subsequent sections of the manuscript delineate the methodological protocol that was employed for the selection of documents, present a synthesis of the findings organised thematically, and discuss their theoretical and practical implications.

Research Methodology

In order to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability, the present systematic review was structured in accordance with the guidelines of the PRISMA 2020 statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Page et al., 2021), a standard designed to structure systematic reviews in a clear and replicable manner. The guide facilitated the documentation of each stage of the process, from the identification of studies to the final synthesis of results. The application of the present study is particularly suitable for the analysis of rural women's leadership, given the dispersion, diversity, and fragmentation of extant literature on the subject. The PRISMA 2020 standard has thus been developed to facilitate the logical organisation and analytical traceability of findings, whilst guaranteeing the inclusion of studies with verifiable quality standards. This systematic approach enables the coherent articulation of approaches, facilitators, and challenges, thereby strengthening the empirical basis upon which future public policies in the sector can be developed.

Eligibility Criteria

In order to ensure the coherence, relevance, and quality of the documentary corpus, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined. The selection of articles was constrained to those published in peer-reviewed academic journals, a measure implemented to ensure methodological and editorial standards were met. The publication period was constrained

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to the timeframe between 2000 and 2024, thereby encapsulating the sustained escalation of global academic interest in gender dynamics within rural contexts. Due to the preponderance of research team coverage and their pervasiveness in indexed scientific production, texts were selected exclusively in English or Spanish.

Thematic analysis of the studies revealed a direct address to leadership practices, community participation processes, decision-making, and the empowerment dynamics of rural women. Given that the extant literature in this field frequently operationalises leadership through the gain of economic and social agency, research was included for which empowerment acted as a manifestation or prerequisite for the exercise of leadership.

The exclusion of studies was carried out in three phases. In the first instance, duplicate records or those with critical indexing errors were eliminated. In the subsequent phase, records for which the full text could not be retrieved following exhaustive exploration of institutional subscription networks and direct contact with the authors were excluded. In the third phase, through critical judgment, tangential or anecdotal studies were discarded, even those that, despite using keywords in the title or abstract, did not conceptually or empirically develop the phenomenon of rural leadership or empowerment, or lacked a clear methodological design.

Sources of Information

The systematic review was conducted using the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases, which were selected on the basis of their academic recognition, complementary coverage, and strict indexing criteria. Scopus provides a multidisciplinary perspective that integrates viewpoints from non-English-speaking regions (Asubiaro et al., 2024), which is essential for capturing the diversity of the rural context. WoS, in contrast, is distinguished by its prestige and selectivity, with collections such as the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) (Asubiaro et al., 2024). The combination of both platforms ensured minimal indexing bias and a robust corpus in geographical and methodological terms.

Search Strategy

The search equations were designed to maximize the conceptual specificity of the findings related to the object of study. In Scopus, the search was restricted to the title and author keyword fields to ensure that the analyzed variables were central to the manuscripts:

TITLE ("rural women") AND (TITLE ("leadership" OR "female leadership" OR "women empowerment") OR AUTHKEY ("leadership" OR "female leadership" OR "women empowerment"))

In Web of Science, the syntax was adapted while maintaining the same structure through the corresponding field operators:

TS=("rural women") AND (TS=("leadership" OR "female leadership" OR "women empowerment") OR AK=("leadership" OR "female leadership" OR "women empowerment")).

A recognised limitation of this strategy is that the exclusive use of the exact phrase "rural women" and the restriction to main fields may have omitted cross-sectional studies that used alternative terminology (such as "peasant women" or "women in rural areas") in

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the body of the text. However, this restrictive criterion was indispensable to guarantee direct thematic relevance in the face of the dispersion of the literature.

Selection Process

The selection process was conducted in three successive stages. Initially, the titles were examined to verify the fundamental thematic alignment. Secondly, abstracts were evaluated in order to ascertain the presence of leadership or rural empowerment approaches. Thirdly, the full text of the articles that had been shortlisted was analysed in order to confirm their substantive relevance and compliance with the quality criteria.

Each phase of the study was executed using a blind and independent peer review method by two members of the research team. Discrepancies arising during the process were resolved by consensus in mutual arbitration meetings, comparing the disputed cases with the established eligibility criteria.

The flow of the selection process and the quantitative screening of documents according to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines are detailed in Figure 1.

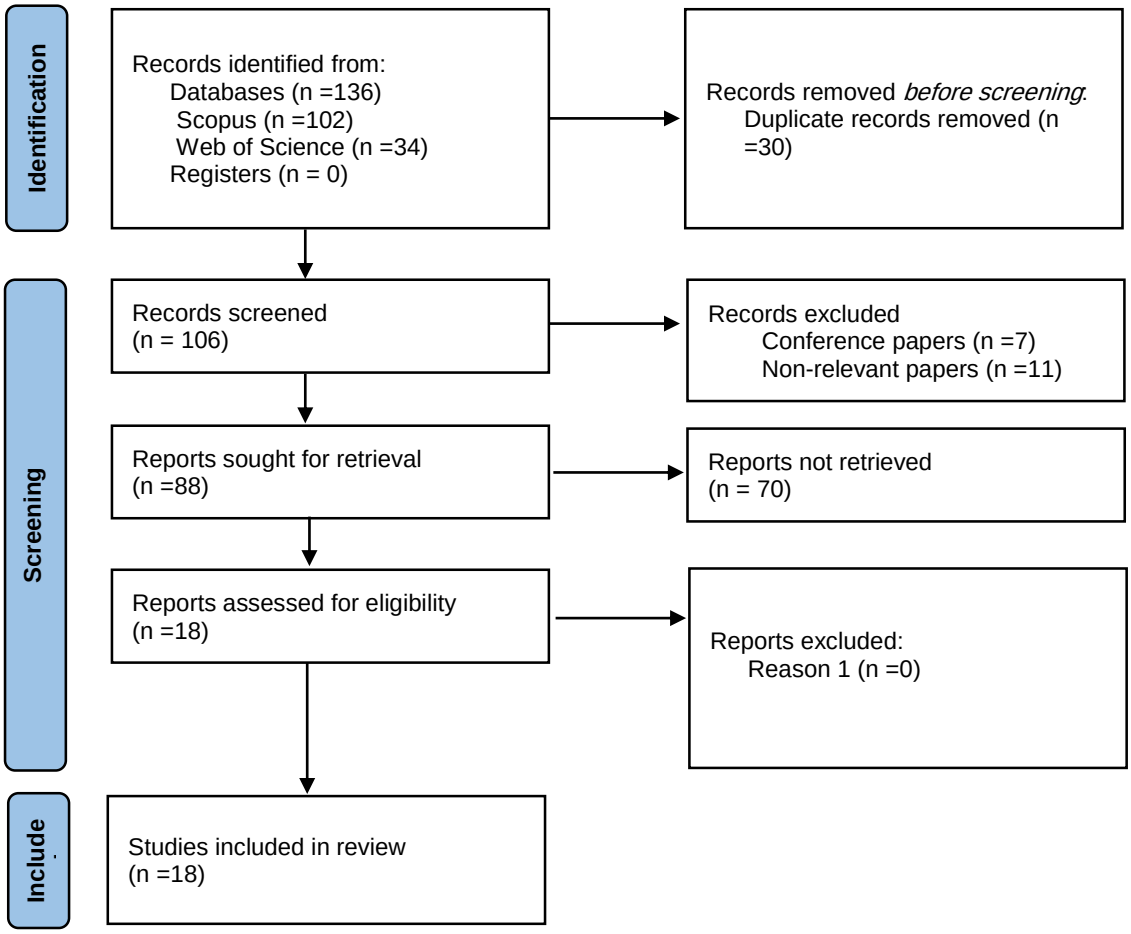


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart. Created by the author using data from Scopus and Web of Science

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Data Processing

Following the consolidation of the 18 articles, a manual and inductive coding phase was conducted, with Microsoft Excel serving as a supporting tool. The information from each manuscript was systematically organised into an analytical matrix that included the following categorical variables: title, authors, year, geographic area/region, methodology applied, type of empowerment leadership identified, enabling factors, structural barriers, community impacts, and institutional support programs. A qualitative-thematic content synthesis was performed on the matrix, in conjunction with a frequency analysis. This process enabled the identification of recurring patterns, complementarities, and contextual divergences among the included studies.

Bias Risk Assessment

In accordance with the 2020 PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews, the risk of bias assessment concentrated on evaluating the internal validity and methodological rigor of the 18 included studies. This entailed a thorough evaluation of the journal's category, the methodological rigour employed, and the clarity with which the results were presented.

In order to mitigate publication and selection biases inherent in the review, a wide diversity of analytical approaches and geographic origins were included in the studies. The risks arising from the exclusive use of certain databases, the search terms employed, and potential reporting biases in the included studies are acknowledged.

Results

The results of the systematic review were organised and structured according to the research questions. This methodological approach permitted the mapping of thematic trends, the identification of recurring patterns, and the analysis of conceptual tensions in the literature on rural women's leadership. Table 1 provides a concise overview of the studies that were incorporated into the comprehensive analysis (n=18).

Table 1.
Studies included in the research. Prepared by the author using data from Scopus and Web of Science.

Title	Authors
Does joint land ownership empower rural women socio-economically? Evidence from Eastern Nepal	Ghimire et al., 2024
Empowering Rural Women in the Cocoa Production Chain in Sardinata, Norte de Santander, Colombia	Albornoz-Arias et al. (2025a)
Empowering rural women through transformative leadership: insights from KWT pawon gendis	Kertamukti et al. (2025)
Impact of mobile phone usage on empowerment of rural women entrepreneurs: Evidence from rural Bangladesh	Rahman et al. (2023)
Knowledge and practice of breast self-examination among rural women in south-west Nigeria: implications for development of women empowerment programme	Hanson et al. (2017)
Rural Women's Leadership Within the Cocoa Production Chain in Tibú, Norte de Santander, Colombia: A Gender Perspective	Albornoz-Arias et al. (2025b)
Sustainable Empowerment Initiatives among Rural Women through Microcredit Borrowings in Bangladesh	Akhter & Cheng (2020)

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Rural Women's Leadership

Title	Authors
Civic and Community Engagement among Poor Rural Women in Bihar: A Pilot Study	Leach et al. (2024)
Empowering rural women through gender and nutrition education amid the COVID-19 crisis: Evidence from Myanmar's Central Dry Zone	Ragasa et al. (2023)
Empowerment of rural women in agriculture: key variables for their transformation; [Empoderamiento de mujeres rurales en la agricultura, variables clave para su transformación]	Martínez-Daza (2024)
Impacts of rural women's traditional economic activities on household economy: Changing economic contributions through empowered women in rural Pakistan	Jabeen et al. (2020)
Investigating the effect of vocational education and training on rural women's empowerment	Ebrahimi et al. (2022)
Microfinance facility for rural women entrepreneurs in Pakistan: An empirical analysis	Khan et al. (2020)
Microfinance for wives: Fresh insights obtained from a study of poor rural women in Pakistan	Tisdell et al. (2020)
Outcomes of a homestead food production program on nutritional knowledge, dietary diversity, food security and empowerment of rural women in Tehran province, Iran	Ezzeddin et al. (2024)
Rural women empowerment through social protection programs: A case of Benazir income support programme in Punjab, Pakistan	Naseer et al. (2021)
Rural Women's Empowerment through Employment from the Beijing Platform for Action Onwards	Termine and Percic (2015)
The impact of poultry production on empowering of rural women development	Mohammed et al. (2020)

Approaches and Models of Rural Leadership: The Link with Empowerment

A fundamental preliminary observation indicates that the scientific literature seldom defines or measures rural women's leadership through corporate positions, hierarchical structures, or formal political roles. Instead, the phenomenon is conceptualised in an emergent manner through the strengthening of agency; that is, women's capacity to make autonomous decisions, act independently, and actively transform their own environment. As demonstrated in Table 1, the titles and approaches of the selected studies predominantly revolve around the construct of socioeconomic, agricultural, digital, or community empowerment (e.g., Akhter & Cheng, 2020; Albornoz-Arias et al., 2025a; Rahman et al., 2023). This demonstrates that, in rural areas, leadership means having a voice, a vote, and control over one's own resources (land, money, technology) rather than simply giving orders to others.

When analysing the distribution of leadership typologies (see Figure 2), it appears that empowerment-oriented leadership is the most frequently mentioned typology (it is mentioned in five cases), and is characterised by collective actions aimed at transforming traditional gender relations. This is followed by individual entrepreneurial leadership and leadership in household decision-making, both of which are mentioned three times. These latter modalities appear to be strongly linked to research developed in South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh), where financial inclusion and access to microcredits act as catalysts for the autonomy of wives in the domestic sphere (Khan et al., 2020; Tisdell et al., 2020).

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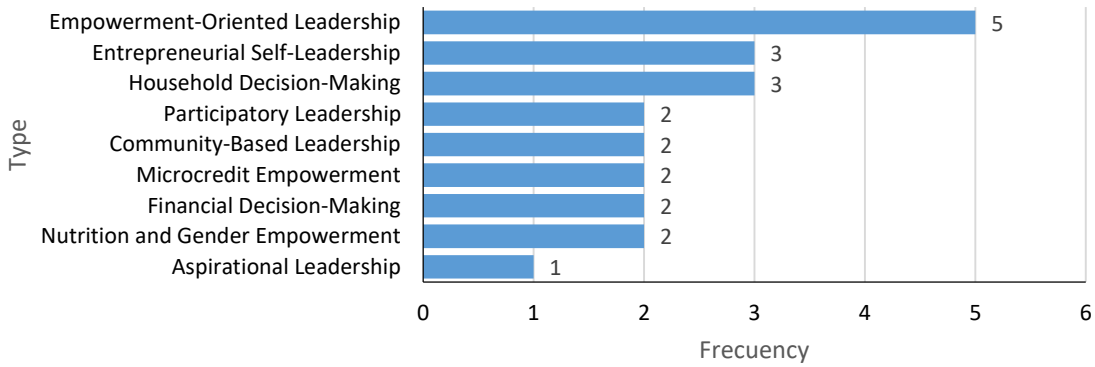


Figure 2. Leadership types identified. Prepared by the author based on Scopus and Web of Science.

This configuration demonstrates that in rural areas, the boundaries between private and public space are porous: the capacity to lead financial or productive decisions within the household (Ezzeddin et al., 2024) forms the basis for the development of broader community or associative leadership, such as that documented in cocoa production chains in Latin America (Albornoz-Arias et al., 2025a).

Facilitating Sociocultural Factors and Structural Barriers

Community engagement, peer learning networks, and technical training programs emerge as the main sociocultural catalysts (Figure 3). As posited by Ebrahimi et al. (2022) and Ragasa et al. (2023), social capital and non-formal education spaces function as safe platforms where women can validate and collectively assert their leadership capacities. Legal frameworks, economic participation, access to resources, and social networks are identified with a slightly lower presence. The presence of family support is observed to be less prevalent. The distribution reveals a variety of social and cultural elements associated with the exercise of leadership in rural areas.

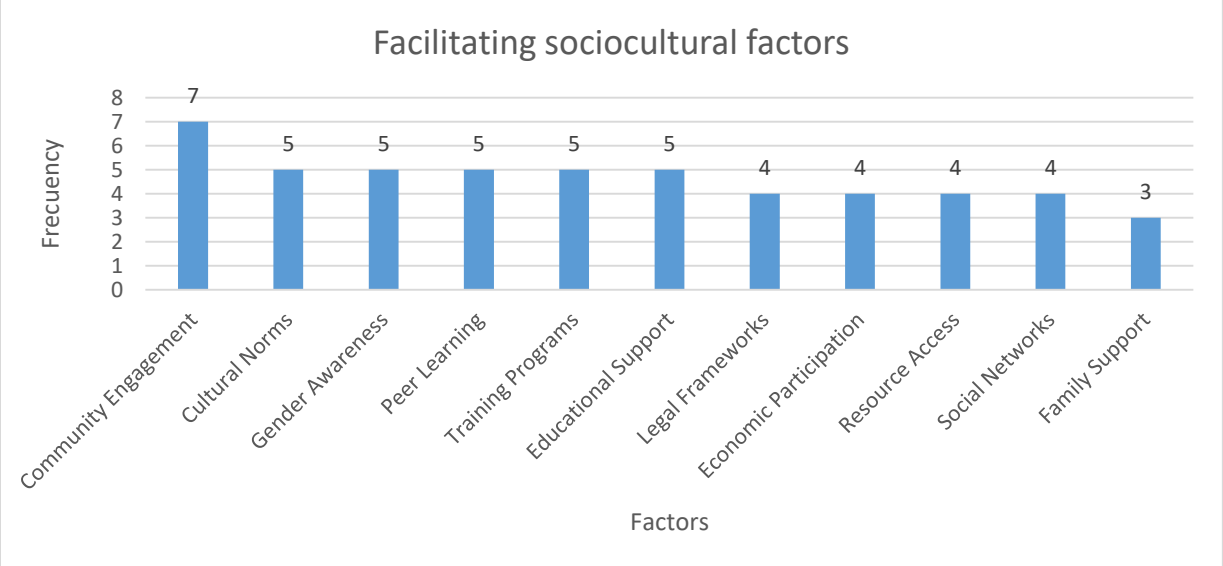


Figure 3. Sociocultural factors that facilitate leadership. Prepared by the author based on Scopus and Web of Science.

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Rural Women's Leadership

Conversely, educational limitations (11 mentions) and gender stereotypes (9 mentions) were identified as the most severe and recurring barriers (Figure 4), closely followed by restrictions on access to credit and patriarchal structures (6 mentions). Cross-sectional qualitative analysis reveals the ambivalent nature of "cultural norms" and "family support". While in some studies they are coded as facilitating factors that support women's participation in community projects, in environments with deeper patriarchal roots (e.g., Jabeen et al., 2020) they act as severe barriers that confine women to the reproductive role, limiting their time availability and mobility.

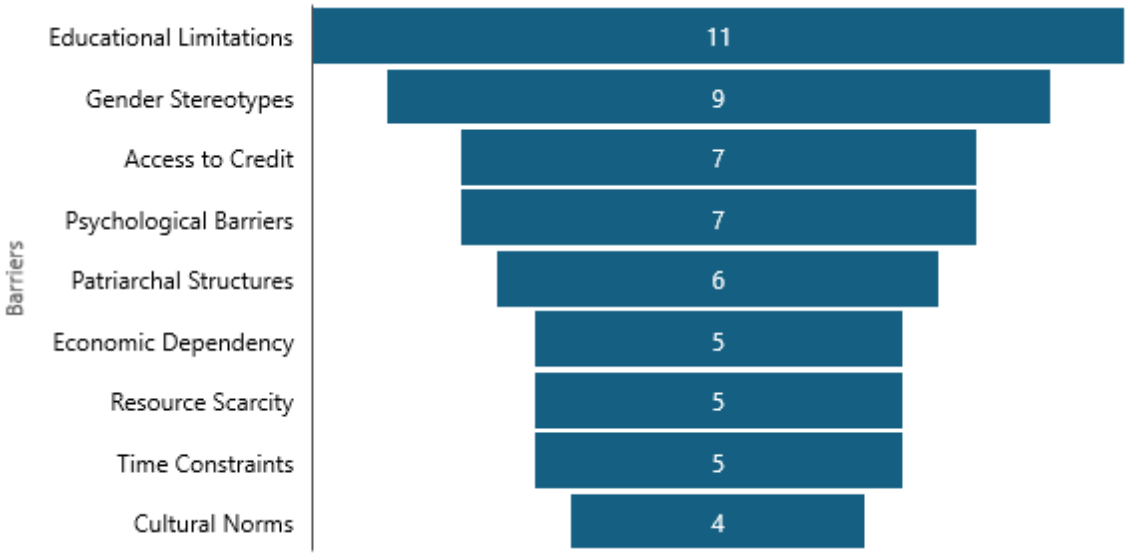


Figure 4. Barriers to participation. Prepared by the author using data from Scopus and Web of Science.

Community Impacts and Institutional Support

The implementation of active leadership strategies, in conjunction with the empowerment of rural women, has been demonstrated to engender a multitude of effects within their respective communities. The data presented in Figure 5 demonstrate an equitable distribution across four primary impacts (each with five mentions): the enhancement of social cohesion, the generation of income, the augmentation of decision-making capacity, and the promotion of agency. The findings demonstrate that the leadership of rural women is not individualistic; its benefits are directly transferred to household well-being, food security (Ezzeddin et al., 2024), and community health (Hanson et al., 2017).

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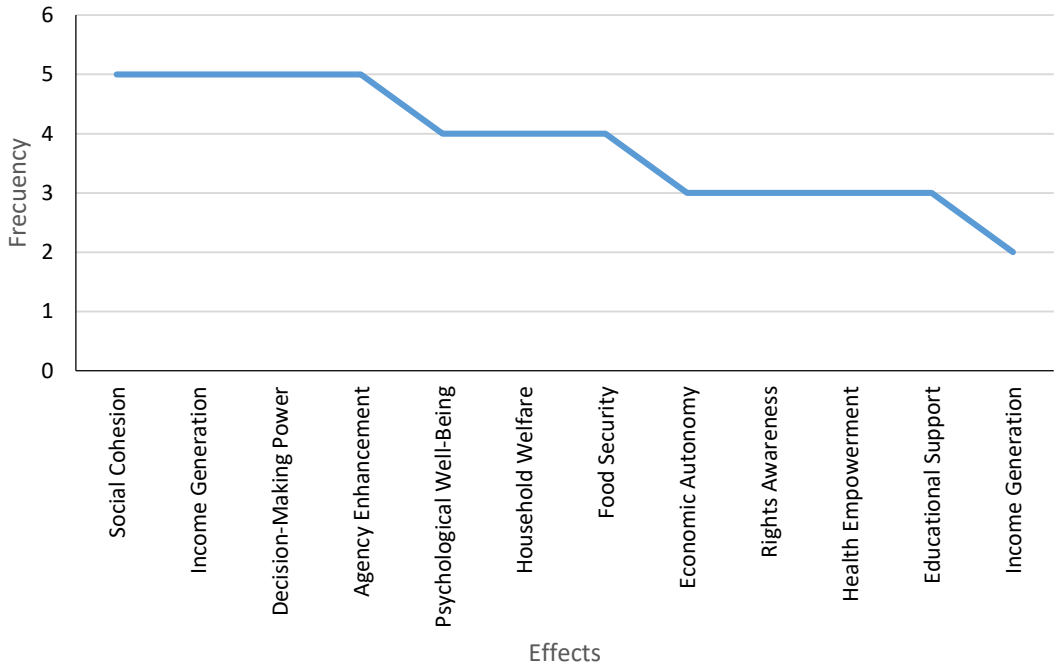


Figure 5. Effects on local communities. Prepared by the author using data from Scopus and Web of Science.

Finally, with regard to institutional support (see Figure 6), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are cited most frequently in the extant literature, thus surpassing the presence of state ministries and international cooperation frameworks. In sparsely populated rural areas, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and microfinance networks frequently assume a pivotal role in addressing the deficiencies that are often left by the state. However, the low frequency observed in variables such as "legal reforms" or "innovation" highlights the necessity to transition from welfare interventions or conditional cash transfers (Naseer et al., 2021) towards structural public policies that formally recognise rural women as key agents of territorial development.

The results were then organised according to the research's guiding questions. This configuration enabled the identification of recurring patterns, shared tensions, and common dynamics associated with rural women's leadership. A comprehensive review of the extant literature revealed a plethora of leadership styles, facilitating factors, restrictive barriers, effects on communities, and existing institutional support. The thematic classification process was able to integrate a wide range of findings and highlight frequent contextual conditions. This approach has contributed to a more nuanced and systematic understanding of the processes of empowerment and agency in rural contexts, eschewing a rigid focus on a single territorial or institutional approach.

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Rural Women's Leadership

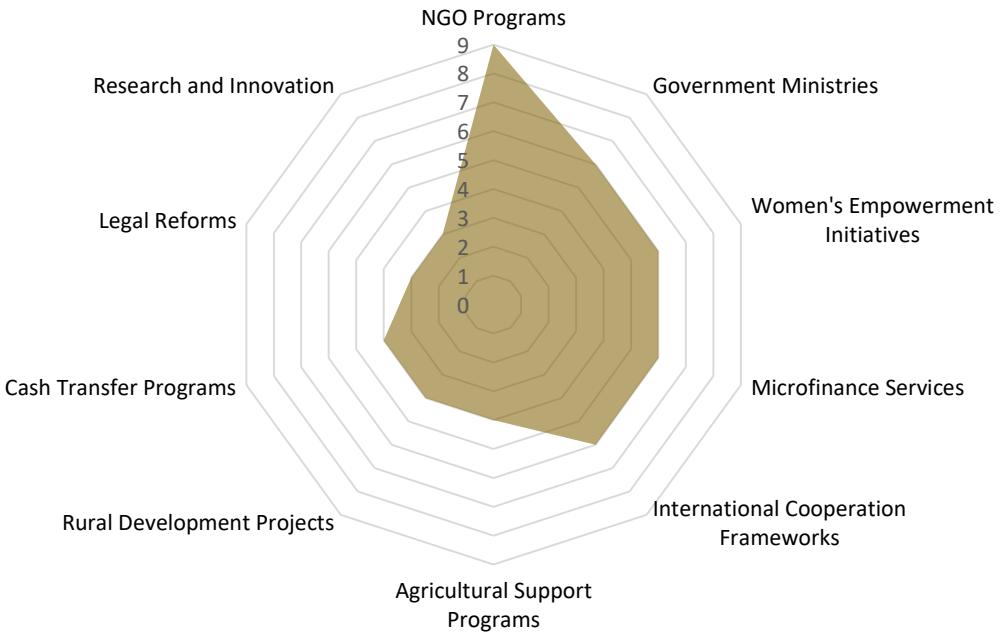


Figure 6. Predominant institutional support programs. Prepared by the author using data from Scopus and Web of Science.

Discussion

The findings confirm that leadership of a rural female demographic is a relational process closely linked to the negotiation of spaces of autonomy both within and outside the home. Contrary to conventional wisdom that ties leadership to formal or hierarchical roles, integrated evidence demonstrates that in rural areas, this phenomenon is operationalised and manifested in a practical way through increased agency and socioeconomic empowerment, unifying individual agendas with community transformations.

Results Analysis

The results of the study indicate a diversity of leadership styles employed by rural women, with a particular emphasis on those focused-on empowerment, economic autonomy, and decision-making. These practices are closely linked to the strategic use of technology and the development of individual and collective capacities. In line with this, Rahman et al. (2023) indicate that the use of mobile technologies strengthens women's empowerment in economic, social, and psychological dimensions, enhancing their leadership in rural contexts. In a similar vein, Albornoz-Arias et al. (2025b) emphasises the pivotal role of community leadership in agricultural value chains, underscoring that association and participation foster social cohesion, even in the face of entrenched structural and sociocultural barriers.

This leadership does not emerge in isolation but is driven by various sociocultural factors, such as community engagement, gender awareness, peer learning, and educational programs. These elements act as catalysts for empowerment, promoting capacity building,

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strengthening social bonds, and fostering a sense of belonging. Leach et al. (2024) posit that community participation facilitates both individual and collective transformations, while Albornoz-Arias et al. (2025a) emphasise that access to resources and the dissolution of traditional roles promote greater female participation in social and productive spaces.

Nevertheless, the leadership of women residing in rural areas continues to be constrained by substantial structural impediments. These include educational restrictions, gender stereotypes, limited access to credit, and various psychological limitations, all of which are framed within patriarchal structures that perpetuate economic dependence and a scarcity of opportunities. Kertamukti et al. (2025) caution that, while transformational leadership can be efficacious, it necessitates adaptations to confront environments characterised by such adversities. In a similar vein, Ezzeddin et al. (2024) demonstrate that, despite the existence of specific programmes, improvements in empowerment and food security remain marginal, thus confirming the persistence and depth of these contextual limitations.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned barriers, the positive impacts of women's leadership are evident across a wide range of community life dimensions. The aforementioned factors include, but are not limited to, the following: strengthened social cohesion, increased income generation, greater economic autonomy, and enhanced decision-making capacity. These effects align with the findings of Sarma et al. (2025), who identified access to agricultural services and participation in organised groups as key drivers of empowerment. In a similar vein, Khan et al. (2020) demonstrated that financial programmes focusing on women can increase income, consumption, and family well-being. However, the authors also cautioned that the most vulnerable women are often excluded from these benefits. The evidence indicates that women's leadership has the capacity to effect profound changes in both the individuals concerned and the social structure of their communities.

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of institutional support programmes in consolidating rural women's leadership. The involvement of NGOs, governments, financial services, and cooperation frameworks has been crucial in facilitating access to resources, training, and integration into organisational networks. Ghimire et al. (2024) demonstrate that land co-ownership programmes enhance access to credit, income, and participation in decision-making processes. Ragasa et al. (2023) demonstrate that educational interventions in nutrition and gender strengthen women's autonomy and improve food diversity in vulnerable contexts. Consequently, the leadership of rural women is posited as a transformative strategy, supported by community processes, public policies, and coordinated institutional actions.

Comparison of Results with Other Studies

The findings of this study highlight the diversity of leadership styles exercised by rural women, as well as the sociocultural and institutional factors that foster it and the structural barriers that limit it. This standpoint is consistent with the findings of Kumari and Tiwari (2025), who identified assertiveness and family support as pivotal factors in the leadership roles of women in agricultural settings. However, the present study's approach is distinct in its focus on micro-social dynamics, with family cohesion as a central mediating variable. In contrast, the current study incorporates a more expansive range of analytical dimensions,

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encompassing community and institutional factors, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms and their interplay.

In the context of participatory design, Doherty et al. (2025) propose an intervention grounded in participatory learning methodologies, with the objective of enhancing the capabilities of health teams. Despite the fact that the study does not directly address rural women, its situated, contextual, and organisational change-oriented approach is similar to the strategies identified in this study, especially those promoted by non-governmental organisations and cooperation frameworks focused on collective empowerment and institutional transformation.

Almeky et al. (2025) propose a model of community participation that combines individual and structural factors. This proposal is consistent with the multicausal approach adopted in this study, which acknowledges the interplay of personal, sociocultural, and structural factors in the evolution of rural women's leadership. However, while the model developed by Almeky et al. (2025) is applied to specialised health services, the present analysis focuses on agency and leadership processes in local contexts.

In the domain of education, Tunsisa et al. (2025) examined the correlation between the dedication of school leaders. The conclusions drawn by the aforementioned parties regarding the role of institutional resources, motivation, and external support are in alignment with the structural limitations that have been identified in this study. Such limitations include, but are not limited to, the absence of institutional recognition of rural women's leadership. In contradistinction to an approach that is oriented towards academic achievement, the present study incorporates a more extensive range of dimensions associated with community development.

Proposed Conceptual Model of Rural Women's Leadership

The synthesis of the evidence analysed allows the proposition of a conceptual model that synthesises the interactions, tensions and trajectories of women's leadership in rural settings. This model functions as a circular system where barriers and facilitators modulate the type of leadership achieved, and the resulting impacts feed back into the system.

As illustrated in Figure 7, the conceptual model of rural women's leadership has been formulated based on the research findings. The framework integrates five key dimensions: enabling sociocultural factors, structural barriers, institutional support programs, leadership styles, and effects on local communities.

- Inputs or originating conditions: Enabling Factors (community engagement, peer networks) and Structural Barriers (patriarchy, low levels of education) shape the terrain where collective action germinates.
- Mediators or institutional framework: Support Programs (NGOs, microfinance services) act as regulatory forces that help mitigate barriers and promote enabling conditions.
- Results and Return: The resulting Leadership Types (domestic agency, entrepreneurship, or community leadership) generate Local Effects (income, social cohesion) that, in the long term, reconfigure the community structure, weakening the original patriarchal barriers.

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The concept of leadership is theorised as a phenomenon resulting from the interaction between conditions that promote or restrict it. Consequently, the effects generated subsequently influence the conditions that enable it. The model delineates causal and modulating relationships, thus facilitating comprehension of the dynamics that either facilitate or impede its development.

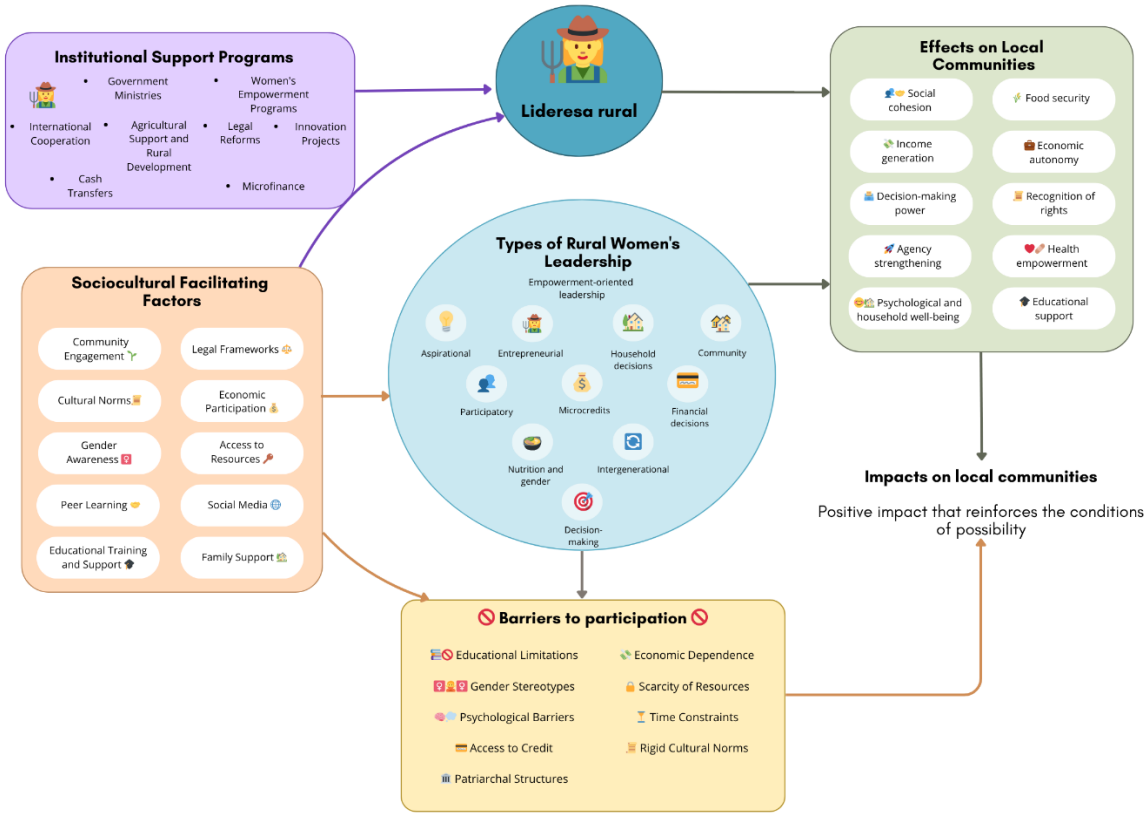


Figure 7. Conceptual model of rural women's leadership (Own elaboration)

Conclusion

The phenomenon of leadership amongst rural women is a complex one, with its origins lying in community, structural and symbolic dynamics. Beyond conventional classifications, a broad spectrum of leadership styles exercised by women in their respective territories is evident. It is important to note that these practices do not invariably originate from visible or institutionalised spaces; however, they do result in tangible transformations within their respective communities. This diversity indicates that leadership does not follow a single model, but rather is shaped by local contexts and specific challenges.

The analysis indicates that the factors conducive to or restrictive of women's leadership in rural areas emanate from heterogeneous historical and sociocultural structures, particularly evident in the dynamics of financial inclusion in South Asia and associative initiatives in Latin America. In order to comprehend these dynamics, situated approaches that incorporate intersectionality as an analytical tool are required. It is evident that structural barriers continue to prevail, manifesting in the form of gender inequality,

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constrained access to resources, and the undervaluation of community knowledge. However, favourable conditions have been identified that can be strengthened through targeted and sustained actions.

In this scenario, institutions assume a pivotal role. The ability to recognise, strengthen and legitimise emerging leadership is of crucial importance. The provision of resources is not the only issue at hand; the creation of frameworks is also imperative in order to validate the contributions of rural women as agents of change. The comprehension of leadership from a relational and multi-scalar perspective has the capacity to facilitate a broadening of understanding and the progression towards more equitable and inclusive rural development processes.

Implications

The implications of this research on rural women's leadership are organised into three dimensions: theoretical, political, and practical. Theoretically, the results expand the discourse on leadership and empowerment by incorporating a situated and contextual perspective. The identification of diverse forms of leadership – community, organisational, informal, intergenerational, and advocacy – challenges traditional approaches focused on formal structures or normative styles. This evidence enables the proposition of an understanding of leadership as a relational, dynamic process linked to the territory. This approach enables the transcendence of interpretations that associate it exclusively with hierarchical positions. The findings demonstrate that women exercise influence and engender transformation from non-institutionalised spaces. Consequently, the conceptual domain of rural leadership is broadened by incorporating sociocultural, identity-related, and community dimensions that are often overlooked in prevailing models.

With regard to the notion of empowerment, the findings indicate that this is not a linear or automatic process. The development of this phenomenon is understood to be influenced by a range of social, historical, and symbolic structures. The barriers to entry that have been identified in this study include gender inequality, excessive domestic and community workload, and limited access to training. These factors combine to create an environment that is restrictive for those seeking to enter the field. However, it is acknowledged that facilitating factors, including support networks, social recognition, and institutional programmes, are also recognised as enabling conditions. This standpoint enables a reinterpretation of the concept of empowerment as a collective, multidimensional, and situated construction. The analysis contributes to theoretical discussions on agency, autonomy, and social change in rural contexts.

At the political level, the findings provide a framework for the development of more inclusive public policies. Firstly, the necessity to incorporate an intersectional gender approach into rural policies is emphasised. This approach has the capacity to render the inequalities that women face based on their geographic location, educational level, economic status, or ethnicity visible. Secondly, it is imperative to transcend the mere access to productive resources. In addition, measures centred on technical training, engagement in decision-making processes, and the symbolic acknowledgement of women's leadership are imperative. Thirdly, multisectoral interventions that integrate the areas of education, health, economic development, and organisational strengthening are recommended. This

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coordination facilitates processes of sustained empowerment. Finally, the importance of developing policies through dialogue with rural communities is highlighted, with particular emphasis on the active incorporation of women's voices and knowledge in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs.

From a pragmatic standpoint, the research proffers recommendations for institutions, social organisations, and community actors. Firstly, it proposes the enhancement of women's organisational capacities through the provision of ongoing training, the establishment of cooperation networks, and the delivery of technical support. These actions facilitate the consolidation of sustainable collective leadership. Secondly, it is recommended that awareness-raising strategies be implemented with a view to transforming social perceptions that delegitimise women's leadership. The objective of this initiative is to cultivate a community culture founded upon recognition, equity, and participation. Thirdly, it is imperative that interventions are devised with consideration for women's occupational demands and familial obligations. The report calls for the introduction of measures such as flexible work schedules, childcare support, and the rotation of organisational roles. Furthermore, the necessity to encourage the involvement of young women in community leadership roles is underscored. This measure has been shown to promote generational renewal and ensure continuity in organisational processes. Finally, it is recommended that successful experiences of rural women's leadership be documented and publicised. This action has the dual benefits of both reinforcing recognition and serving as a pedagogical tool, as well as a means of public advocacy.

Limitations

It is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of this study when interpreting the results. The methodological design of the systematic review was reliant upon access to specific academic databases, which restricted the inclusion of research found in other repositories, technical reports, or non-indexed literature. This limitation resulted in a reduction of the coverage of documented local and community experiences outside the formal academic sphere. The majority of the selected studies employed qualitative methodologies, which facilitated a profound comprehension of the processes; however, this also impeded the identification of replicable patterns or broad comparative relationships. Moreover, the interpretation of leadership and empowerment was influenced by some dominant theoretical and institutional approaches, which may have restricted conceptual diversity. These limitations do not refute the study's contributions; rather, they underscore the necessity for future research to adopt mixed-methods designs, encompass greater territorial diversity, and more directly incorporate rural voices in the construction of knowledge.

It is imperative to acknowledge the methodological and conceptual limitations of this study when interpreting its findings. The present study made use of a systematic review of articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, a strategy that excluded scientific output from institutional repositories, technical reports from international organisations, and grey literature. This approach served to diminish the capture of community experiences not published in traditional academic formats.

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Furthermore, a marked bias is evident in the geographical representation of the documentary corpus: the available literature is predominantly concentrated in South Asian regions (such as Pakistan and Bangladesh) linked to the impact of microfinance, with limited scientific production on rural leadership in Latin America or Sub-Saharan Africa. This geographical polarization has the effect of restricting the generalizability of the findings to rural contexts, which may have dissimilar land tenure dynamics, legal frameworks and political-cultural structures.

Lines of Future Research

The findings of this research provide a foundation for the proposal of new lines of inquiry that expand upon, deepen, or overcome the limitations of the current study. Empirical studies are recommended for the purpose of directly analysing the leadership trajectories of rural women in diverse geographic contexts. It is imperative to accord priority to regions that are underrepresented, including but not limited to sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and rural areas of the Andes and the Caribbean. This approach has the potential to enhance the comparative knowledge base, facilitating the identification of cultural, social, and institutional patterns and particularities. The necessity to advance intersectional approaches is also raised. A rigorous examination is required to analyse how variables such as gender, ethnicity, age, social class, geographical location and educational level interact in the construction of leadership. The integration of these dimensions facilitates the visibility of multiple inequalities and a more profound comprehension of the forms of agency exhibited by rural women. In addition, the exploration of the manner in which leadership is shaped in relation to climate change, migration, and rural digitalisation processes is recommended.

Another priority is to study the longitudinal effects of initiatives aimed at strengthening leadership. It is recommended that the sustainability of these practices be examined, in addition to their impact on communities and their link to individual and collective empowerment. This methodological approach offers empirical insights into the structural and symbolic transformations instigated by leadership. The proposal further calls for the expansion of participatory methodologies, with the objective of integrating rural women into all stages of the research process. This methodological approach has been demonstrated to engender a more precise understanding of the subjects' experiences, knowledge, and meanings. In the field of research, there is a growing appreciation for methodologies that facilitate the collection of authentic, first-hand accounts. Such approaches, which include community ethnography and the systematisation of lived experiences, along with the utilisation of visual narratives derived from the leaders' own voices, are recognised as valuable assets in the pursuit of comprehensive and authentic insights. Finally, it is recommended that programmes and interventions aimed at rural women's leadership be systematically evaluated. This evaluation should encompass both quantitative outcomes and qualitative transformations pertaining to autonomy, recognition, and alterations in social roles. The insights derived from these evaluations have the potential to enhance public policies and the efficacy of civil society actions, thereby contributing to the promotion of greater gender equality in rural areas.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Human Participants

This study is a literature review and did not involve human participants or the collection of primary data from human subjects. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not applicable.

Originality Note

This manuscript is an original work and has not been published previously or submitted for publication in any other journal.

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The authors did not use generative artificial intelligence or AI-assisted technologies in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

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