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**“GENDER, POWER AND THE WOMAN QUESTION IN  
TRADE UNIONS”**

**GLU Alumni Gender and Trade Unions Research  
Group**

## Introduction

Increasingly women around the world are joining trade unions in greater numbers than previously however, this increase in membership is consistently at odds with women in leadership positions in trade unions. Women's lack of representation in trade unions is significant for a number of reasons. Workers remain the focus of attack from employers and are forced to carry the burden of failures of private capital. Women carry this burden disproportionately to other sectors of the labour market given their unpaid caring responsibilities. In a period of sustained ideological attack, trade unions cannot credibly maintain their important place in the global community as agents of social change if internal decision making bodies do not reflect the basis of their constituency.

As agents of change it is vital for trade unions to disrupt traditional male hegemonic control of unions. Women [mainly] have been discussing these issues since the 1970s women's movement. Writers such as Yates (2006) and Kainer (2006) provide a range of analyses and perspectives for unions to reconsider views held about women in the labour market and in TUs. Such feminist work challenges long held assumptions such as women's aversion for union membership and organisation and their lower ability to deal with hostile situations that served as justification for their absence in union leadership.

This is a paper about woman and power in labour movements; about both their power deficit and prospects. It briefly discusses gender power relations in labour markets in the face of globalisation, moving to examine how these are replicated in relation to trade unions through the dynamic relations of structure and culture. It aims to contribute to the development of alternative internal power structures of trade unions to better reflect the organised and unorganised. The paper focuses on women in trade unions and explores factors influencing their subordinate roles in unions when their labour market participation rates are similar to men. The study draws from both quantitative and qualitative methods from a triangulation of multiple measures. The techniques included in-depth archival research of union documents and other literature, mini-surveys, interviews with key informants and ethnographic participant observation.

The study is an exception from many previous studies by its strong global ethnographic characteristic transcending five continents: Africa, Asia, Australia, Latin America and Europe. It is an on-going research project, which started in 2009 conducted by trade union researchers embedded in the trade union movement at different levels from 11 countries<sup>1</sup>. The researchers

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix for list of unions covered by country

are insiders directly or indirectly linked to trade unions or trade union inclined research institutes and or university departments in their respective countries. As researchers, therefore we are active participant observers yet the demands of our positioning call for a certain distancing that make us outsiders. The unique combination of these seemingly contradictory positions provides us a vantage point to intimately understand the power and gender dynamics within the trade union movement. We are thus writing about the trade union movement mainly from the standpoint as participant observers both from the inside and outside.

The research has been a process of interrogating gendered norms and practices in trade unions taking our starting point from the general social situation and women's peculiar location in the labour market. Group members in addition to their varied positions within the trade union research nexus operate within the feminist position that insists on connecting theory to practice. Our participation in this research group has affirmed our political commitment to feminist change agenda. In others, our presence provided the needed impetus for alterations in union gender practices.

In the next section of the paper, we draw on models of power from Bradley, and call for an inclusive politics of difference from thinkers such as Fraser and Young. We report on research evidence on gendered trade union structures, on measures to move towards more gender equality within unions, and finally explore a range of strategies for women in unions.

### **Gendered Labour Markets: theoretical and conceptual debates**

Women's participation in the labour market is influenced by historical treatment in both paid and unpaid work. Theoretical developments around gender, as well as race and sexuality, have stressed the fragmentary and fluid nature of subjectivities insisting that identities are constructed by, and embedded in, the different places, spaces and times of particular lives. Gender is embedded in organizational structures, through the design of work organizations, for instance in job-grading, career ladders and methods of recruitment and selection, which have been shown to privilege those skills and work histories that are typically associated with male workers (Halford and Leonard 2006, p.2). Gender relations therefore refer to the sum of social norms, conventions and practices which regulate the multifaceted relationships between women and men in a given society at a given time.

One pervasive trait of gender relations across different cultures consists of the power asymmetries between women and men. While gender is an ideological and cultural construct, it

is also reproduced within the realm of material practices, and in turn influences the outcomes of such practices. It is widely recognized that gender relations play a systematic role in the division of labour, work, income, wealth, education, productive inputs, publicly provided goods and the like. Gender biases in social life are transmitted through a variety of institutions, such as the family, markets (labour, finance) and the State as reflected, for example, in fiscal policy. Gender relations therefore permeate all aspects of economic, social and political life, making economies and societies gendered structures. (Çağatay and Erturk, 2004,p.5).

Trade unions have developed in concert with the workforce which for a greater part of modern history followed a Standard Employment Relationship (“SER”) developing the notion of an ‘ideal worker’. The ideal worker in industrialised nations socially, politically and legislatively constructed has instituted a model worker free from encumbrances. In this context, the ‘unencumbered’ worker is the favoured type of employee who is protected in the labour market. This construction is grounded in the male breadwinner/female caregiver dichotomy that is influential in many industrialised nations (Broomhill & Sharp, 2005; Young, 2005; Cass, 1995). Recent developments in western industrialised countries have resulted in a fundamental restructuring of the workplace to undermine the SER model. In its place several so called flexible and less typical forms of employment are instituted ostensible to free workers and allow them room to manipulate work schedules and attachments to their benefit. The reality has been work forms that challenge the very notion of trade union organisation.

The changing nature of the SER demonstrates that women have far higher membership numbers than are reflected in trade union leadership roles and, more recently are generally increasing their membership of unions in far greater numbers than men (Pillinger, 2010; Yates, 2006 and 2010). The fact that this increase in numbers have not resulted in a corresponding expansion of women in union leadership demonstrate that a male hegemony in trade union leadership exists.

Much of the union renewal research concludes that unions have lost legitimacy and are seen as oligarchical ‘regimes’ and thus resistant to change (Dufour and Adelheid, 2010; Voss 2010; Voss and Sherman, 2000). In essence, shifting the gender frame within which unions operate allows unions the space to use resources to also impact more broadly in the pursuit of gender equality issues thus enabling unions to position themselves as important social actors on behalf of oppressed women and diversity groups in local and global communities.

A corollary of reframing the use of power and resources within unions provides an opportunity for unions to challenge historical conceptions of power. We know that women's membership of trade unions is not consistently reflected in their presence in union decision-making bodies (Pillinger, 2010). Feminist scholarship has argued for a more inclusive, equity based trade union agenda to transform trade unions and thus influence social agendas (Kainer, 2006; Kirton and Healy, 1999). A significant element necessary to orchestrate a shift rests in reconsidering the practice of democratic decision-making processes within unions.

Evaluations of union gender democracy usually focus on the persistence of male dominance and conclude that unions are embedded in a system of power relations that lends support to the status quo by ordering union structures and operations to serve male interests (Costello & Stone, 2001; McBride, 2001; Deslippe, 2000; Creese, 1999; Curtin, 1999 in Britwum, 2010, p.7). Disrupting this traditional approach is fundamental to building union solidarity across the genders. Scholarship on trade union renewal strategies provide trade unions the opportunity to democratise decision making, broaden their constituency bases and, continue to pursue socially progressive agendas.

Ledwith (2009), draws on Gramsci's conceptualisation of two main ways to subvert and transform the dominant hegemony: war of manoeuvre, or revolution, and war of position, a long struggle across the institutions of civil society (Strinati 1995). Such a war (of position) is a strategy developed over an earlier period, a state of permanent revolution (Gramsci in Showstack Sassoon 1982). Ledwith quoting Mitchell (1971) suggests that for feminists and sister-travellers who are interested in developing a counter-hegemony of inclusive politics of justice and difference, this is part of our 'longest revolution' (2009).

Analysing features of organisational power as a means to break down hegemonies assists in the development of counter-hegemonies. Acker (1990) argues that organisational power is not gender neutral and that gender assumptions form the basis upon which organisational power is constructed. Recognising factors that join forces to create an environment that appears to have genuine democratic process at its core provides the space systematic change. Acker argues that five factors work in concert to create organisational structures skewed to valuing the masculine. These are the gender division of paid labour which sees men in greater numbers of decision making roles; masculine imagery that reinforces a socially constructed view of power and strength; interactions between men and women, women and women and men and men and the social structures such interaction reinforces; social identity constructed through social

expectation and, and the transference of such structures into organisational structures (1990, pp.146-147).

Transversal politics is a means of recognising that notwithstanding diversity and differences of class, sexuality, ethnicity and race, disability, age, and so on, women also share a position of gender subordination. Moreover, there will also always be areas of commonality where their interests meet at a particular point of time, in struggle – a Gramscian ‘compromise equilibrium’ (Showstack Sasson 1982 in Ledwith, 2009, p.278). In Yuval-Davis (1997) women and diversity members from different constituencies may remain rooted in their own membership and identity, but simultaneously are prepared to shift into a position of exchange with those from different groups and group interests in pursuit of a common agenda. This can be seen as a new form of democracy which can develop new political projects that cross and transcend old barriers. Such coalition ties into ideas and practices of women’s community unionism, illustrating the strength of working across the range of interests and groupings, as appropriate, developing open systems, links, and alliances, while ensuring the central core, the vanguard of movement activists remains rooted in strong (and transforming) institutions of organised labour (Ledwith, 2009, p.278).

Social movement unionism as one such strategy recognises the value of forming horizontal alliances with other social movements, organising the traditionally unorganised and adopting direct action as a means of raising the profile of worker action in the public milieu whilst simultaneously disrupting entrenched vertical leadership regimes (Voss, 2010; Voss and Sherman 2000). This approach to democratic decision making provides the space for diverse groups of workers to be included in decision making process of unions and to pursue social and economic justice for workers and reframe union legitimacy (Dufour and Adelheid, 2010; Kainer, 2006).

Levesque and Murray (2010) using Lukes (2005) work distinguish the effects of two approaches to the exercise of power, “power to” and “power over”. In this analysis “power over” seeks to influence a party regardless of that party’s agency or interest (Levesque and Murray, 2010, pg.335). In contrast a “power to” approach seeks to position power in the individual to exercise their own agency, regardless of whether the impacts of such exercise furthers or disadvantages that persons or other people’s position. Levesque and Murray argue for shifting the framing of the exercise of “power to” to a “capacity to” approach and constructing a fresh approach to exercising the use of union resources in order to empower workers (ibid, pg.335).

Bradley (2007) extends a gendered analysis of power by situating masculine accumulation of resources as a reference point from which to conceptualise alternative democratic paradigms. Bradley argues that the cumulative effect of men controlling positional power, economic power and symbolic power acts as a regime that continues to obscure women's ability to participate in democratic processes on an equal footing (2007, p.189). Bradley argues that rather than becoming 'overwhelmed' by the concentration of these crucial forms of power in the male domain, women's empowerment can be achieved by using this model to challenge gender relations (2007, pg. 189). Examining the development of hegemonies provides an avenue to explore the unequal position of men and women in trade union leadership roles and offer opportunities to identify strategies for countering male hegemonic control over trade unions. Ledwith (2009) and Acker (2001).

Fung and Olin Wright (2001) in their study of five community decision making bodies demonstrate that an alternative decision making approach that "deepens" democratic processes is possible. The premise of this approach to decision making is to broaden inclusivity of community members in decisions affecting them. The authors refer to this approach as "*Empowered Deliberative Democracy*". In essence, this approach, involves engaging people with technical skills, community commitment and access to resources in a consensus based decision-making process. As a reform process the authors set out a number of conditions to be met (1) focus on specific problems; (2) involve ordinary people and (3) deliberative development of solutions (pg.17). The authors recognise that agents with self interested agendas are able to pursue specific agendas however, setting a governance framework that devolves public decision making authority to empowered local units, creates formalised units that are horizontally accountable and creates institutions to support local units operate together to deepen the democratic process. Such an approach they argue encourages greater participation of many players thus integrating myriad views and introducing both practical and technical skills in an accountable decision making process.

The inclusivity argument is furthered in Iris Marion Young's work regarding "deliberative democracy" (Young, 2002). Young argues a deeper democratic process can be achieved by approaching decision making by considering elements of inclusion, equality, reasonableness and publicity (ibid, pg.23). Whilst recognising these are 'ideal conditions', the theory advanced by Young nevertheless provides a conceptual framework for re-thinking democratic decision making and participation (ibid, pg.29). Intrinsic to this process is reframing traditional

definitions of ‘democracy’ and developing democratic processes that create an environment where all ideas are discussed and debated. The model promotes the need for participants to recognise the importance of public interactions in discussion which necessarily implies an open and dignified exchange between participants.

### **Gender Roles in Union Structures and Decision-Making**

This section discusses findings from the research and explores the persistence of gender subordination in trade unions, and measures to challenge and change this. The statistics on trade unions and gender presented from a variety of countries across the globe though useful for comparison is problematic. Not only did we draw them from different sources in each country, in some countries they are not available at all. This has meant that in certain countries we draw our statistics direct from trade unions self reporting. From this perspective, the statistics presented in this paper offers very minimal comparability of the cases. Trade union data and statistics is always very difficult to compare across nations given that this may be drawn from different sources each with its own problems and errors (Viser 2006). This study faced a similar challenge. Statistics provides a very useful context to explore the changing character of the role of women in trade unions. However, the numbers only do not tell the story about the social and political struggles confronting women in the unions (Briskin 1983). To address this challenge, we adopted a triangulation of methods utilising individual and group interviews that allowed an interaction with women in union leadership positions.

Our findings reveal striking similarities in women’s presence in the public space as well as the labour market affirms the pervasiveness of gender discrimination and the complacency of all social institutions in the production and reproduction of gendered social orders. Trade unions as our discussions in this section will reveal provide yet an added terrain for the construction of the gendered orders. Our discussions as explained earlier was informed by our position that a deeper understanding of trends in unions gender power relations serve as a vehicle for transformational change.

We begin our discussion of the research findings by exploring the locations of women in the labour market in the respective countries. Later we examine union densities and women union membership. Union representation has both a quantitative and qualitative dimension. Membership in unions therefore can provide meaningful gains for working women if it leads to a constant promotion of their interests. Women’s presence in trade union leadership therefore, underscores the levels of interest representation that unions accord their members in their



decision-making processes and structures. We examine in the later part of this section, women leadership role in the unions noting the positions they hold and the functioning of union equality structures set up to promote the interest of their marginalised membership particularly women.

### **Women's labour force participation**

Table 1 demonstrates that women work mainly in public sectors, 'caring', and 'servicing' in what are known as the 5Cs – childcare, catering, cleaning, cashiering, clerical. This is work which mimics the sort of skills and experience that women are expected to bring to the labour market from their domestic role - education, health and social work, hospitality/hotels, restaurants, retail [shop workers], sewing. Much of this work is also in the public sector in the various countries in our study. However especially since the financial crises since 2007-8-9, public sector cuts impact especially harshly on women. Not only in terms of jobs, but also as the main users of services, in their own families, and especially health sector.

*Insert Table 1 - Gender representation in labour markets.*

First, women lose access to 'good' jobs that are found in the public sector. Second, those who remain are often faced with an increased workload and thus have a diminished job satisfaction and quality.<sup>2</sup> Third, the social productive needs that are no longer met by the state (i.e. having been privatized) are downloaded to the family and are (re)privatized. This work is then typically done by women for 'free' through "volunteerism." Thus, just as the demands made on the family are increasing, their ability to meet those needs is under attack.

Part time work is also common among women, and women frequently have two or more part time jobs, all low paid, and with little security. It is also well known that there is a pay premium for trade unionists who work under collective agreements compared to those who do not. Our studies confirm the peculiar gendered nature of labour markets. The data below show differences between women and men's labour force participation in terms of full time and part time employment. Though definition of full time and part time varies on each countries, it is evident that a huge gap in the rate men employed in full time vis-à-vis women. Except for South Africa where a high 44.5% women participation rate in the labour market. It is clear that where women position themselves in the labour market as data reveal that in the industrialized countries such as

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<sup>2</sup> "Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism" entry in *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* (London: Routledge, 2000), 364.

Australia and UK a high percentage of women in comparison with men are in part-time employment.

Women's union membership appears to be guaranteed by their presence in public workplaces. However their overwhelming presence in part-time public work serves to offset what advantage that working in a public sector affords to their union membership. Thus gendered labour market segmentation has a contradictory impact on women's trade union densities in that their presence in the public sector labour as part-time work dampens their union densities (Table 2). In all countries covered by our research, women union densities were lower than men's ranging from a low of 8% in Korea to a high of 46% in Australia where female presence in the public sector is high (Table 3). Labour force participation, where and how workers are placed in the labour market underscores their likelihood to be union members. As employment trends under pressure from globalisation norms for smaller governments and spending cuts in response to financial crisis erode public employment and institute in its place flexible forms of employment, women's union densities stand threatened.

*[Insert Table 2. Employment in Public and Private Sector by Country here]*

### **Women in union decision-making structure**

Data from countries studied indicate women's absence in trade union structures and decision-making. Women, our statistics reveal are missing in trade union leadership positions, few were reported to hold high leadership positions. All the unions discussed presented a similar picture irrespective of women's union membership proportion. Thus, trade unions with women as majority members are just as likely as trade unions with women as minority to have few women in leadership positions (Table 3). Despite the fact that CUPE and ZIMTA had predominantly female membership women were a minority in union decision making. The CUPE was the union in our cases that had the highest proportion of female membership (67%, see Table 3) yet women formed 51% of conference delegation and held 13% of union leadership. In ZIMTA women were 33% of the national executives and formed 27% of conference delegates. CUPE's gender profile is weak even among Canadian unions. A report of the National Women's Task Force which compared Canadian unions in terms of women's representation at the executive level ranked CUPE eight out of nine unions. CUPE and ZIMTA reflect the position that female absence in union leadership has more to do with union structures and processes, and less with women's absence from the paid work force, the traditional location of trade unions (Table 3).

**[Insert Table 3 *Women in Trade Union Decision Making* here]**

There were instances where women's leadership proportion was slightly higher than their membership (Table 3). This was the case of the GTUC and KCTU (Table 3). These were proportions that had been achieved through affirmative action provisions. Women were however the minority in conference delegations in all the unions studied.

### **Women's Participation in Union Leadership**

All the country data presented show women did not hold high union office. The only exceptions were Korea and Zimbabwe where women showed some presence in high union leadership. In terms of positions at the confederation level women held the position of vice-president in the Korean and Zimbabwean unions studied. Women in leadership positions were more likely to be treasurers or organisers (CONTRAF/CUT, ZCTU and KCTU) (Table 4). As organisers and union educators, they shared these positions with other men. These non-elective position however, they conformed known gender stereotypes of women's traditional educational role.

**[Insert Table 4 *Women in Trade Union Office and Decision Making* here]**

### **Union Equality Structures**

All the unions covered had in place some form of equality structures, in seven out of the nine cases presented, the structures were women's equality committees. In two instances, women's issues were targeted under equal opportunity clauses. Thus, CONTRA/CUT and CONTRAF/CUT had equality structures that focused on women in addition to other forms of inequality like race, ethnicity and disability (Table 5). The recurring structure however was the national women's committees. The women's committees were present at all levels of union decision making, operating from the confederation to the industrial or national unions (Table 5). National or industrial unions also had in place women's structures at the regional or provisional levels through to branch and locals. Other women's structures in place were the national women's conferences.

**[Insert Table 5 *Existing Forms of Trade Union Equality Structures* here]**

The existence of women's equality structures does not guarantee an automatic promotion of women's interest in their trade unions. It was in only two instances (CONTRA/CUT and KCTU) that the structures were found to be effective in enhancing women's representation in their unions. In the case of CONTRA/CUT, the women's structures had been able to pressurise the inclusion of equality provisions in all collective agreements of the union. For KCTU the promotion of women's structures at the level of the confederation has filtered down to all the affiliate industrial unions. The women's structures in the remaining unions however, is best captured in the pronouncement of one interview where they were described as 'moribund and cannot challenge the male hegemony in the union. Most do not function nationally – no meetings are held.' The ineffectiveness was attributed to the fact that the 'Women's structures have no budget'<sup>3</sup>.

Measures to improve women's representation in union activities were yielding varied results. Successful measures identified included affirmative action provisions like quotas and special seats, for women in union decision-making structures. Others mentioned were the creation of women organs in the form of women's committees backed by gender policies and units (Table 6). The varied impact of equality measures highlight the presence of barriers raising questions about union equality structures. Our findings revealed that barriers to women's participation in union decision-making were located in external and internal factors. The first set of internally located factors was related to union norms and practices derived from wider beliefs about gender capacities and appropriate gender behaviours. The frequently recurring barrier identified was patriarchal cultural beliefs that assigned union leadership as a male preserve. Females were deemed not to be real union leaders. Some identified male resistance and hostility to women's leadership role (Table 6). In the case of ZNUT for example the practice of holding union meetings outside work hours and in locations other than the workplace were factors that hindered women's participation in union decision making. This practice has resonance with the origins of trade unions in the colonial history of Zimbabwe. Other internal barriers were located in union structures like constitutional provisions, absence of union support structures.

**[Insert Table 6. 'Openings and Barriers for Women in Their Unions' here]**

Gender roles were fingered as strong barriers to women's representation in union decision making. Women's low interest in union activities was blamed in the case of the GTUC on low

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<sup>3</sup> Report from Zimbabwe, and Zambia

inclination to identify themselves as union members. That unions have recognised the need to tackle gender democracy deficit is a significant step. The institution of gender democracy structures, however can only serve as symbolic power if they fail to translate into sites for tackling male hegemonic hold over unions.

### **Union bargaining agenda for gender**

The above statistical analysis tells us that women's presence in trade union leadership roles is diminished in relation to women's presence in the labour market. We are interested in ameliorating the working lives of women including contributing to the development of collective bargaining agendas that better reflect the needs of all workers. In this section of the paper, we explore factors influencing the collective bargaining agenda for women workers using preliminary research findings from contributors within the Research Group. We are concerned almost entirely with workers in formal sectors since often those in precarious and informal work, operate beyond the margins the legal framework of employment rights and protections - including collective bargaining. Even in the best organised situations, the labour movement is today painfully aware of the insufficiency of legislation and is now witnessing attacks on remaining union strongholds in public sectors, and the collective bargaining process itself.

There is much evidence that collective bargaining has been slow to respond to women's issues, and indeed, in some countries the legislative framework has been ahead of trade unions. Even so without vigilant and committed unions it is all too easy for employers to avoid their obligations. Moreover, without committed women in unions and especially in lead positions in bargaining teams, labour movements are not inclined to put the bargaining agenda for gender high on their priority lists. The purpose of this section of the research therefore was to establish what sort of collective bargaining agendas were pursued by trade unions in our study, who was doing the bargaining, and what the outcomes were. Our discussions are based on findings from three case studies carried out in Canada, the Philippines and Turkey.

### **Canada**

As indicated the Canadian research covered CUPE. CUPE's efforts at bringing women's issues in union bargaining agenda were the result of an internal process initiated in 2005. The 16-member National Women's Task Force (NWTF) spent two years in discussion with over 7,000 CUPE members via surveys and face-to-face consultations about the "status of women in our

workplaces, society and within the union.” The outcome of this process was document titled the *Strengthening Our Union: Final Report of CUPE’s National Women’s Task Force* presented at the 2007 CUPE National Convention.<sup>4</sup> The significance of this report was its *54-point recommendations* grouped under the six categories below:

1. Bargaining to support women
2. Applying equality throughout the union
3. Education and training for women
4. Leadership development for women
5. More effective union meetings and ways to involve members
6. Creating a more representative union structure

A follow-up event in 2009 was a National Bargaining Women’s Equality Conference in Montreal, Quebec with the twin goals of building “bargaining strength to advance women’s equality” and setting “achievable goals on bargaining issues for women.”<sup>5</sup> The report, “Recipes for Setting the Table: Getting What You Want in Bargaining” highlighted five areas considered “critical for women’s equality”<sup>6</sup>:

1. Minimum living wage for all members and improved benefits for all members including part-time workers
2. Retention of full-time jobs in the public sector
3. Pension plan membership for all members
4. Improved provisions to provide work/life balance
5. Elimination of violence and harassment in the workplace

As the name of the report suggests, CUPE creatively provides a recipe for achieving equality in these areas by providing an ingredient list of information (e.g. “a bowl of facts”), addressing what should be done on the particular issue at the workplace level and concludes the report with recommendations as to how to build collective strength. A valuable accompanying resource, “Recipes for Setting the Table: Collective Agreement Language” is a collection of actual union contract language collected from various locals on issues affecting women such as “child rearing and pensionable service,” “violence in the workplace,” “employment equity” and “flexible

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<sup>4</sup> Available at <http://cupe.ca/nwtf>.

<sup>5</sup> Canadian Union of Public Employees, “Setting the Table : Bargaining Women’s Equality Conference” webpage, <http://cupe.ca/bargaining/nbc>

<sup>6</sup> Canadian Union of Public Employees, “Recipes for Setting the Table: Getting What you Want in Bargaining,” (National Bargaining Women’s Equality Conference, February 2009) [HTTP://CUPE.CA/UPDIR/RECIPES FOR SETTING THE TABLE.PDF](http://cupe.ca/updir/RECIPES_FOR_SETTING_THE_TABLE.PDF)

hours.”<sup>7</sup> CUPE has in addition, produced a series of materials under the title “Bargaining Equality: A Workplace for All” to assist members in addressing equality issues in their workplace. A significant aspect of the materials is under the caption ‘Duty to Accommodate’, is the focus on employment equity issues such as disability, harassment and violence, of particular concern to groups of marginalised women like Aboriginal and LGBT workers.<sup>8</sup>

CUPE therefore set out specifically to address questions of women’s interests in union bargaining by collecting the required information on women’s workplace situation. It utilised the findings to set the framework, determine the goals and targets and produced the supporting environment in terms of skills and documents to back the practice. This elaborate system suggests that union bargaining agenda for gender should receive a significant boost.

### **Philippines**

In the Philippines, on the other hand, advances in the promotion and protection of women’s rights has been the result of several factors, namely: a strong women’s movement, numerous legislations promoting gender equality and rights of women (e.g. law on anti-sexual harassment), and a strong ILO gender and women’s rights program. The Global Gender Gap Report 2009 of the World Economic Forum ranks the Philippines 9th out of 115 countries with the lowest gender gap index. This ranking was however a slide down from sixth in 2008.

Findings from our research in the Philippines revealed that women were a minority in union bargaining comprising only 20% of the teams. About 70% of the unions covered had no provisions to ensure that women were represented on their bargaining teams. However, women’s absence did not deprive them of the chance to influence the content of issues covered in union bargaining. Women’s active participation in organising drives ensured an increased likelihood for their demands to feature in union bargaining agenda.

The key findings were that the top three items on women’s list of demands were maternity leave, pay equality and menstrual leave. The downside was that these three priorities were also among the top six items, which were most likely to be traded off for other bargaining proposals. Unions tend to focus more on wage increases and other direct economic proposals in the collective agreement. In addition, those involved in the negotiation are mostly male and not quite aware of the importance of the gender/women-related proposals.

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<sup>7</sup> Canadian Union of Public Employees, Recipes for Setting the Table: Appendix: Collective Agreement Language (National Bargaining Women’s Equality Conference, February 2009) <http://cupe.ca/updir/AppendixA-Contractlanguage.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://cupe.ca/bargeq>

Employers were highly likely to resist agreeing to provisions that they saw as costs, such as menstrual leave, special leave for women, day care services and facilities, pay equality, breastfeeding facilities and maternity leave beyond what is provided by law. Except for reproductive health and protection against sexual harassment, all other gender/women-related proposals in collective bargaining were always traded off by the union for other bargaining proposals. Protection against sexual harassment and to a lesser extent reproductive health and equality of opportunities for training and education, are likely to be less costly and offer opportunities for direct payback. It will therefore be in management's interests to resist or at least not encourage, women onto bargaining teams. There are many unions that have strong gender equality programs pursued at the workplace. Reproductive health is one of the issues that some unions are pursuing among their national agenda.

The case of the Philippines shows the strength of union commitment against the presence of women activists in ensuring that women's issues brought onto union bargaining receives employer approval. Unions have to commit to the additions and provide the framework for the pursuing the women's interests to the end. Thus, where union organisational structures did not support inclusion of women's issues as a matter of course and this meant the women's issues were easily jettisoned when they were considered a hindrance to others considered union's issues.

### **Turkey**

The Turkey study took the form of an interview-based study of gender in the collective bargaining process in the health sector, where women predominate. In Turkey, there is a framework of legal rights which covers protection for pregnant women, maternity leave for female workers, nursing/breastfeeding paid time off. In addition, workplaces with over 100 women employees must have provision for babies, and for older children up to the age of six. However, the application of these provisions often falls below acceptable standards. It is therefore important for unions to be vigilant and demand women's rights. In particular, KESK, the only one of the three main confederations which is gender sensitive, and also seen as militant, has succeeded in improving on some of these legal rights. For example, it has doubled the time off for nursing for babies up to four months, and increased the time for caring for infants six months. Women had a weak presence in Turkish union negotiating teams and all but five of



the women reported that there were no women represented on negotiating teams, however there was strong support to change this.

Union bargaining agenda our findings revealed were determined by a combination of several factors. It was clear that existing legislative provisions ensured some level of coverage as was noted by women leaders in Canada; *“Management accepts gender/women-related proposals when they reflect what already exists in other collective agreements”*. The perceived costs of implementation was a disincentive and again in Canada women union leaders observed that *employers are, however, more reluctant to accept proposals (especially around childcare facilities) for workers they consider temporary’*.

The vigilance of women activists and union political will were important to ensure their inclusion on the union bargaining list. However, the case of Turkey and Canada show that union policy was the most important conditions for widening and deepening the scope of women’s issues covered in union bargaining and ensuring employer compliance.

The benefit of women’s presence in union bargaining teams went beyond securing limited interest for women alone. In Canada, where in some cases, women have dominated the bargaining committee, women union leaders commented in interviews that *“We have always had women dominate our bargaining committee. We push for women’s issues.”* They however, agreed, *“Better participation of women members contributes to a more balanced approach – not the macho table thumping or bullying tactics of some old boy union members”*. They pointed out however that recruiting women onto bargaining teams remained a challenge. *“We have three different work groups in our local and trying to manage that and get people to volunteer for the positions is hard enough without trying to implement the female factor at this time.”* Once the difficulty in getting women on the bargaining teams has been surmounted making the presence effective can be undermined *‘when elected, women bargaining team representatives are not taken seriously by the employer’* or their union leaders *“Our trustees are very ‘old school’ – they tend to treat us like ‘little women’ trying to act important – however, they’re finding out that we’re much more educated and business minded than they give us credit for.”*

An important outcome of our research project in the three country cases reported above was an important raising of awareness of women union leaders. In the Philippines, some women respondents during the course of the study discovered union policy mandating the participation of women in the collective bargaining team. In cases where such a policy was absent, both

women and men respondents had the opportunity to assess the advantages and disadvantages of having women in the bargaining team. It was apparent from the interviews in Turkey that none of the women had thought about the possible impact of having women in negotiating teams, nor were they aware that such teams might be gender balanced. The women had commented that research had been helpful; the questions had helped them think about gender issues more than they had ever done previously.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has traversed a number of issues relative to the position of women in trade unions. Our statistical analysis tells us that whilst women are present in large numbers in trade unions, their presence in trade union decision making bodies is not reflective of membership numbers. We have attempted to overlay this data with an analysis of various forms and models of power in an effort to unravel the paradox of the statistical analysis. We have also incorporated different theoretical approaches to decision making within democratic membership groups to provide alternative paradigms within which to deepen participation of trade union members. We examine gender power relations and gender equality measures within union decision-making structures in this paper. We noted our interests in exploring strategies both successful and unsuccessful and the outcomes that account for present forms of inequality. We believe that strategy success or otherwise provide useful lessons in securing greater gender sensitive strategies for unions. In exploring gender power in union decision making we noted the impact of a strong women's group working to ensure the reflection of their interests in union agenda. Though women's vigilante actions were important few were aware of the need to police their unions. Their space for operating effectively was not always guaranteed. Our research however as the three case studies revealed opened up the debate in several unions where there was no discussion. In this case our goal to effect change has seen some measure of success. Whilst we have concentrated on gender in this paper, we would like to extend this work to other underrepresented groups in trade union decision-making structures.

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