
## Integrating the equality agenda into union structures and culture, or *"I have seen the glass ceiling, and it is covered with golf balls."* [1]

This posting turns the spotlight inward to examine union structures and practices and their impact on moving forward with a gender equality agenda within the labour movement.

A. UNION STRUCTURES

- Women in union leadership

  There was a consensus that a critical mass of feminist leaders is necessary for union culture to change. Women activists look to these leaders for support and guidance, but there are still too few shoulders and too many responsibilities. The women who take on these roles face the very real likelihood of burnout.

  > *"The question of leaders – both elected and staff – is important. And part of the reason it's important is that leaders set directions, they make decisions about resources and how money is going to be allocated, what requirements are going to exist in the unions. Leaders can establish quotas or requirements for things like training programs … They can be champions."*

  The numbers of women in leadership and staff do not reflect the percentage of women in unions today. Since 2011, a slight majority of all union members in Canada are women, and the union density for women has been higher than men ever since 2004. Yet most union leaders continue to be men, even in unions that are predominantly women.

  > *"It is kind of a sad reflection of how men have dominated and do dominate … even in unions that have a vast majority of women."*

  Having men in the top positions and women in secondary levels of leadership is a widely accepted, and expected, pattern in both unions and central labour bodies.

  > *"It just seems like the girl jobs are these sort of secretary treasurer jobs and then the boys get to be the presidents."*

  This gendered division of roles is reinforced when men continue to put themselves front and centre in campaigns and convention halls, while women leaders are pushed into the background or left in supporting roles.

  While activism in the late 1970s and 1980s opened some doors for white women to move into union leadership and staff, these numbers are now declining, especially in top positions. Feminist leaders and staff from this period are retiring, and fewer are running for election. Yet it appears this loss is not recognized as a problem and unions are taking few steps to redress the trend.

  For Aboriginal women, racialized women, and women with disabilities, the picture is even worse. Racialized and Aboriginal women are largely absent from leadership and staff positions. Those who are there get little support and, in some cases, face overt hostility. Aboriginal women and women of colour are

[1] *Nancy Riche, feminist leader and retired CLC Secretary-Treasurer, was known and loved for quick and often pointed comments, such as this one. Nancy, whom we lost last year, would have loved this discussion.*

most often hired into union admin jobs. The few hired into policy/political roles are frequently on short-term contracts.

> *"Those leadership roles in our staff … are comprised mostly of women, but there are few racialized and no Aboriginal women … they are not encouraged or mentored in any way in order to reach that goal."*

- Union policies and practices

Participants observed that, despite some gains, equality is still not part of mainstream union work and has not been integrated into union structures, culture or priorities. An analysis of sexism and racism and their impact is not incorporated into policy development, and there is little or no ongoing human rights and equality training for staff and leaders. There is also no concerted effort to recruit and mentor leaders from equality seeking groups.

It was noted that few unions have employment equity policies or a clear commitment by leaders, staff, and members to follow such practices. As a result, no equality or gender lens is applied to the union's own hiring, promotions, and leadership representation. In many unions, these functions are the prerogative of the president and others already in positions of power - predominantly men - who tend to hire protégés and others "like themselves."

> *"Having an employment equity plan didn't come without a fight … but it is shifting the climate and the culture … There has to be a commitment coming right from the leadership of the union like the president; and then there has to be a commitment from senior staff for it to be able to work. And then there's got to be some staff activists … who work with their co-workers around this concept."*

Many spoke to the need for a stronger commitment to enforcing harassment policies. While unions were among the first organizations to adopt such policies, too little training and too few resources are dedicated to building harassment-free union workplaces or functions. Harassment complaints within the union are not taken seriously. Too many are swept under rug or moved aside in a procedural way.

> *"I really think there needs to be more than the token 'We have inclusiveness.' … Not just 'We have a harassment policy' echoed at every meeting … I find that a little moot. We've got to walk and talk it, right?"*

B. UNION CULTURE

- Union culture and leadership styles

Sisters highlighted the continued dominance of a male-centred union culture and leadership style, noting that not much has changed over the last few decades.

> *"I still think [the union movement] is a male structure. I think our unions, our staff jobs and the way the leadership acts is still very male defined."*

Strong leadership in the labour movement is still seen in terms of the traditional macho yelling/bullying/ table-pounding style. This is often the case even in unions with a predominantly female membership. Women, whose leadership style is more likely to be based on relationship building, communication, and collaboration, frequently cannot find a place for themselves as leaders.

> *"You need to use a certain language; you need to have a certain stance. Like there's still … that sort of machismo vision of what a union leader is as somebody who pounds the table."*

Bargaining is a core function of unions and a key point of entry for members to move into leadership and staff positions. Yet it remains male-dominated both in terms of negotiating style and process. It is not surprising that the number of female negotiators is so low.

> *"I remember bargaining back when I had young children … and I was bargaining around the clock ... you couldn't do it any other way. And who says you can't do it any other way? ... You don't have to do*

*this model of combat through the night and wear everyone down and whoever survives the longest can actually get to an agreement."*

Social activities for unionists continue to be structured around men's interests, such as after-meeting gatherings in bars or on golf courses. Women are often not invited to participate and do not really feel included when they do join in. Frequently these venues are not woman-friendly. They are costly and time-consuming, and conflict with family responsibilities. Yet many women feel pressure to adapt to this social culture in order to be taken seriously and to be successful in becoming – and staying – leaders.

*"My experience was that men often went to bars or golf tournaments together ... if you were invited you were seen as moving up ... In my experience, when I did go I didn't get too much out of the bar sessions and so, when it came to quality of time and where I could use my time best, that wasn't the first place I picked. But I paid a price for not going."*

At the same time, it is difficult for women leaders to address the issues and inequalities they experience on a personal level without coming across as "whiners".

*"What I found with most of the inequality … was that it was subtle. And when I tried to confront it … I was told I was overreacting, which I'm sure a lot of women hear."*

- Work/life balance

  It is still the case that, to be considered a "true trade unionist", activists must be available 24/7. Leadership and staff positions also require significant periods of separation from family and community, especially for those in senior roles. These expectations make no allowances for balancing union involvement with the obligations of personal life and continue to be a very real and significant barrier for the many women who still carry primary responsibility for family care. Yet women who are unable or unwilling to work this way are put down as being less committed than their male colleagues.

  *"What we found is that women are not involved in the union because the union culture is not conducive to them wanting to be involved and all that means."*

  The demands on women activists and leaders exact a heavy emotional price. Women with children and families often feel guilty. There is the stress of working in an environment that is often not woman-friendly. Many women leaders are also separated by time or geography from the support provided by community and personal networks. The isolation experienced by women in top positions is reinforced by the fact there are so few of them.

  We heard that work/life balance is a major consideration for many younger women who, while supportive of the goals and struggles of their unions, are not prepared to abandon partners, children or life to do union work in the traditional way. Some decide not to become active in their unions; others choose to wait until later in their lives. Either way, unions are losing out on the contributions these members have to offer.

  *"The challenge for us is how do we see women taking on greater responsibilities in the labour movement and still juggle the whole family…That's one area we need to put some thought to with the younger women, with women in those child-bearing years, and saying there's a place for them."*

C. UNION HIERARCHIES

- Equality Activism

  By its nature, equality activism means challenging the status quo. Yet the move towards centralized decision-making means the space within our unions for such debates is more and more limited. This culture also means those who take up these causes often find themselves targeted and branded as disloyal and disruptive, then moved off to the sidelines.

  *"There's such a lack of understanding of debate as something that could actually move forward or be a progressive way of exchanging ideas. Instead it's seen as a challenge to the current leadership."*

We heard that work on equality issues is definitely not seen as "the road to leadership". In fact, those women who want to move into union leadership or staff positions often avoid working on "women's issues" since they perceive that being identified with such work is a barrier to success.

> *"I certainly feel that the women who are being targeted are the ones that were more explicitly feminist and not sort of soft-shoe feminists."*

This lack of openness to diverse opinion and creative ideas is alienating. As a result, many women, in particular racialized and younger women unionists, choose to be active in community and social justice organizations which are less hierarchical and welcome their involvement and voices.

> *"I find the labour movement a very, very alienating place to be. And one of the reasons I'm attracted to more community work and putting my energies into that right now is that it's a safer place to be, it's a more engaging place to be, a much warmer place to be than the labour movement is."*

- <u>"Class" of members</u>
  Another emerging issue is a perceived "class structure" within our unions. This is a particular challenge for those that have expanded beyond a particular sector to become general workers unions. Women and racialized workers are more often located in the job categories which are "lower class/lower paid" and this intersection reinforces already existing barriers for these members of equality-seeking groups. They find it more difficult to participate fully for reasons of time and money and are generally not as well represented in union structures and leadership. There is also a perception that their contributions and ideas are not taken as seriously.

> *"Unions are organizing more now in the service industry so we have a lot more women that are beginning to organize. But there's no opportunity for them to become trained, to become part of the whole union, to become part of the institution of the union."*

SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

> *"I do think the structures are a big problem … There's so many barriers to us moving a feminist agenda, moving an equity agenda, moving a progressive agenda, because of the structures."*

- How do women leaders and activists cope with working in a masculinized culture? What "strategies' for survival and change have been effective?
- What spaces exist for women leaders and activists to talk about the issues they face?
- What alternative ways are women finding to be active and have influence in their unions if they are not taking on leadership roles?
- To what extent are union women's committees the places to initiate challenges to the dominance of male-centred culture in the labour movement?
- How does the existing culture impact the role of unions in addressing gender equality issues in bargaining, health and safety, and member representation? Does advancing equality in and through the labour movement depend on changing this culture?
- What would an inclusive, non-hierarchical, democratic style of leadership and organization look like? Are there models in community groups or in labour organizations internationally?
- Can you think of examples of feminist and equality activists challenging union hierarchies and culture? What are they doing? How successful are they?
- Are women activists – especially younger and/or racialized women - abandoning the labour movement for community organizing? What will their absence mean for challenging/changing union culture?
- Feminist unionists in the 1970s and 1980s often participated in community based women's organizations as well as their unions. How would you describe the situation today?

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The project on *Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada* is co-ordinated by Linda Briskin, Sue Genge, Margaret McPhail and Marion Pollack. This summary is based on conversations with 44 union women, activists, leaders and staff from across Canada. Please contact us at<lbriskin@yorku.ca>. 