



Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada

Intersection Between Feminist and Equality Organizing in the Labour Movement

“Until all of us have made it, none of us have made it.”¹

Equality-seeking groups face many challenges in working together to identify, understand and confront multiple forms of discrimination, while still ensuring their specific issues are recognized and addressed. Sisters spoke about the obstacles within the labour movement to developing an effective intersection between women’s equality organizing and that of other equality-seeking groups. Their comments focused primarily on working together with racialized and Aboriginal women, as well as younger women.²

A. DIVERSITY AND REPRESENTATION IN EQUALITY ORGANIZING

• Feminist Organizing and Inclusion

Feminism is often portrayed as a middle-class, white women’s movement that is not inclusive of other women and does not address their needs. Concern was expressed that this characterization has been used to devalue feminism and to divide equality activists within the labour movement. The reality is that “feminism” has always encompassed a wide range of perspectives on the struggle for women’s equality. And feminist organizing has also involved a much greater diversity of women than is commonly recognized, including working class women, racialized and Aboriginal women, lesbians, and women with disabilities.

“There’s been this perception created – opportunistically in some cases - that the second wave [of feminism] was exclusively a movement of white, middle class women and it’s so not true.”

Sisters agreed that second wave feminism played a key role in galvanizing union women and advancing an equality agenda in the labour movement. Then, as now, many women members and activists were proud to call themselves feminists and organize to win labour’s support for core feminist issues that affect all women, such as violence and harassment, reproductive choice, pay equity and childcare.

“Yet mainstream feminist – I mean white women’s issues – are everybody’s issues, right? Whether it’s the issue of pay equity or childcare or the right to choose, it impacts all women. It just impacts other women who self-identify from equity groups differently.”

These issues remain important to achieving equality for all women. But this does not mean all women face the same situation. Sisters acknowledged that feminist organizing has not always recognized there are different implications for women who experience multiple discrimination because of their race or culture, sexuality, class, or disability.

The sense of exclusion has been reinforced by a perception there is a closed inner circle and “club” atmosphere that is not welcoming to new activists or those from other equality-seeking groups.

“The labour movement is really a club ... And I would say within the women’s movement, it’s a club. There’s the mainstream club and then there’s the other club for racialized women or Aboriginal women or whatever category.”

Over the years, failures to take an inclusive approach have been fiercely – and rightly - challenged in both feminist organizations and the labour movement by lesbian, racialized and Aboriginal women, and women

¹ Rosemary Brown was the first woman of colour elected to public office in Canada and a powerful advocate for equality for women and for racialized groups. She later headed the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

² While women in our conversations self-identified as lesbians and as having a disability, they spoke about feminist concerns rather than the issues of inclusion and intersection facing them as members of these equality seeking groups.

with disabilities. These conflicts will be ongoing as we continue to grapple with the complex issues of diverse representation and inclusiveness in a meaningful way. New concerns will also emerge. Recently, for example, there have been important discussions about the issues for Muslim women and Islamophobia.

These experiences may seem divisive to feminist organizing both in the community and in the labour movement. Yet sisters emphasized that the process of working through these challenges has been, and remains, an essential part of deepening feminist analysis and building an inclusive approach that can bring together women of all equality-seeking groups.

- The Politics of Identity

The concept of “identity” has played a significant role in shaping our understanding of oppression. We recognize that members of some groups – for example, women, racialized persons, or persons with a disability - face personal and systemic discrimination simply because of this “identity”. By the same token, these systems of oppression also give power and privilege to others because of who they are.

“Identity” has been one of the underpinnings to equality organizing within the labour movement, including the creation of women’s and other equality committees, caucuses, and designated/affirmative action seats. Yet concern was expressed that identity politics has resulted in too great an emphasis on personal experiences and on what separates us from others. This isolation is reinforced when “identity” is seen as a simple or fixed designation rather than shifting and multiple realities.

“A particular, overly fixed view of identity or constituency has risen in the labour movement. And this starts out as being political ... identifying types of social power that are grounded in race, class, gender and ability, for example. But, in practice ... it ends up being somewhat depoliticized and becomes a sort of inwardly directed and very individual, almost therapeutic idea of talking about who you are, what you’re experiencing and so on.”

At the same time, it is important to remember that the sense of outrage that comes from personal experiences of discrimination and injustice is often a first step in recognizing oneself as a member of an oppressed group and becoming an activist. Understanding how these individual experiences are linked then provides the foundation for developing collective strategies to challenge systemic discrimination.

B. THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

- Under-Representation of Women from Other Equality-Seeking Groups

Women are still under-represented as leaders, staff and activists in the labour movement. The situation is most acute for racialized and Aboriginal women, lesbians, and women with disabilities who face multiple barriers, including tokenism, disrespect, racism, and sexism.

“As a woman of colour ... I’m saying you need people like me up here and involved. Why aren’t you getting people like me up here and involved? If you’re not doing that, how then are you representing Canada-wide and women? What is the union movement and why haven’t you got those leaders?”

Unions have not moved forward with a meaningful commitment to diversity. Minimal representation on leadership bodies and in staff positions for equality seeking groups has become a ceiling rather than a step along the way to addressing systemic discrimination in our society and our unions.

“It’s fairly challenging if you are the only person of color or the only woman of colour sitting on a leadership body.”

Women from equality-seeking groups and young women are also more likely to lose jobs in economic downturns, be in precarious work, hold two jobs and/or not be in a unionized environment at all. This severely limits their opportunities to have an active presence within the labour movement.

“As we lose jobs in Canada it’s the young people that go first, if they are so lucky to be in a unionized workplace ... So I can’t say that I’ve seen young women enter and stay in our union ... They don’t have a chance to stay and build.”

The small numbers of women from other equality-seeking groups and young women who are activists, leaders and staff means these voices have little weight - or are just not at the table at all - when decisions are made. This has a ripple effect throughout the labour movement when it comes to building a comprehensive analysis and inclusive strategies and campaigns. Without an active plan to support and engage these women, their voices will remain largely unheard within the labour movement and further diminish opportunities for effective intersectional organizing.

- Union Committees Supporting Equality Work

Most unions and central labour bodies now have women's committees and other equality committees, in addition to human rights committees. These committees were created in response to demands from equality-seeking groups for structures that would support self-organizing and activism, and they were considered important victories. Yet concern was expressed that these structures have become overly formalized and now operate largely as silos. This undermines the ability of equality-seeking members to come together around a common equality agenda or even act in solidarity with each other's issues.

"Siloning" has limited the diversity of representation on union women's committees. Women who identify with more than one equality-seeking group should be able to take part in all relevant meetings and caucuses. Too often, a woman who also identifies as a member of another equality-seeking group is forced to choose.

"Even the work that we do within unions ... there are the women's issues and then there is the issue of other equity groups ... There's been some attempts to bridge that gap but ... it was really clear to me that ... women were being asked to choose whether they were women first or racialized first or whatever other equity group."

The reverse is also true and women are often not well-represented on other equality committees. This has not served women's equality organizing well, nor has it been effective for women who also identify with other equality groups. It has limited the opportunities for these sisters to get their issues heard and to step forward as activists and leaders in the labour movement.

"Even though initially you may have had women of colour or other youth of colour, when you look at who benefitted in the long run, it certainly wasn't women of colour."

Yet it must be noted that, despite their reservations about the isolating effects of separate committees, sisters still thought that merging into one big "equity" committee would be a step backward. Equality-seeking groups continue to need separate space for discussion, and to strategize and organize around their issues.

"To a certain degree we need a space to bring equity groups together to have that dialogue, to be able to talk to women about issues that impact racialized or other women ... Yet you also need the space to self-mobilize and organize and discuss issues separately ... There needs to be a balance."

- Decline in resources

Fewer resources and less support have further undermined the role of union equality structures and made it even more difficult for women of all equality-seeking groups to come together to develop an integrated anti-oppression analysis and joint campaigns. Committees are constrained by a decline in funding and staff assistance. Sisters also mentioned a trend towards fewer conferences and training workshops, as well as reduced support for caucuses.

A significant cause of concern is the increasing competition among equality-seeking groups for already scarce resources and attention, especially in the context of the current economic and political crisis. This competition can foster a "hierarchy of oppression" and give more legitimacy to some voices than others. It was noted that competition for resources has been used as a tactic to play one group off against another. As a result, equality-seeking groups end up angry at each other rather than united to challenge a union leadership and direction that continues to leave them all invisible and excluded.

"It's like there's one pie and there's only so many pieces. And then the minority groups are going after that same piece. I've seen the competition and the stepping on each other and the game playing to get that one piece from the stronger group and not really representing workers of colour."

C. DIFFERENT REALITIES/DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

We heard that racialized and Aboriginal women as well as younger women are often choosing to organize as activists in their communities rather than inside the labour movement. This trend reflects the lack of opportunities and respect these women experience. At the same time, their absence reinforces the lack of diversity and inclusiveness in our union structures and practices, and adds to the difficulties of intersectional organizing.

“Speaking as a racialized woman, I know that racialized women have said: ‘You know what? We’re tired of being marginalized and, if we challenge the labour movement, being completely written off and having whatever we’re putting forward being completely undermined. We’re going to go work in our communities where we actually see things on the ground happening and we can build up our communities’.”

Different generations of union sisters face other challenges in working together. We heard that younger activists are concerned about work-life balance and have seen the toll activism has taken on older feminists in the labour movement. Some are also discouraged by union hierarchies and tired of banging their heads against the wall. There is a perception that younger women support women’s equality but don’t necessarily identify as feminists or get engaged in women’s equality issues. Some may think the same barriers no longer exist for women, so they choose not to focus on equality issues. For others, it may be a matter of defining feminism differently, yet feeling they are not listened to. At the same time, older feminists may also sense their knowledge and historical perspective is not valued.

“When I hear other people talk about young people I am much more optimistic about it because I see these young women activists ... who are really smart and progressive and engaged. And by and large, the majority of them would identify themselves as feminists but not quite in the same way I think my generation did and does.”

The loss of racialized and Aboriginal women and of younger activists is a loss for the labour movement and should raise red flags about the future for unions and the possibilities for real renewal and growth.

“Once we have the possibility of recognizing people’s voices, asking people to speak and opening up spaces, there’s an incredible diversity there. There are all kinds of possibilities of world views, ideas and experiences.”

SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do women’s committees present a white face? Do human rights committees, workers of colour, Aboriginal workers, workers with a disability, and LGBT workers present a male one? Where are the concerns of women who are also members of other equality-seeking groups represented?
- Are women’s committees relevant for younger women in the labour movement?
- In your view, what particular issues do lesbians or women with disabilities face inside the labour movement?
- Is there pressure to merge all equality work into one committee? What are the advantages? Disadvantages?
- Has there been an increase in tension between women’s organizing and that of other equality-seeking groups in the labour movement? How does it manifest itself? Who/what is responsible for this?
- Are there examples of equality-seeking groups coming together to advance a broad equality agenda and strengthen solidarity? What strategies can we use to develop a more effective intersection in the labour movement now?
- Equality activists in the labour movement have often been engaged with community-based organizations and campaigns as well. How effective has this activism been to building bridges between labour and community-based groups? How would you describe the current relationship between union and community activists on equality issues?