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# Discussion Guide

## *I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies that Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions*

This guide will help union facilitators lead a discussion group about how to promote women's leadership in their unions. It is based on the report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research



## Discussion Guide for

### *I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies that Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions*

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**Goals:** This guide can be used by a union discussion group leader or facilitator to help union members

- reach agreement on obstacles to women's activism and leadership in unions
- learn about the recommendations in the report, *I Knew I Could Do This Work* and
- discuss how the recommended strategies can be carried out in their unions.

**Audience:** The intended audience includes union activists at any level. This discussion guide can be used in small group sessions of about 20 to 30 participants. Examples of groups that might find it useful include

- CLUW chapters
- Women's committees
- Local union executive boards
- Regional and international education departments
- Workshops at conferences dealing with union women's issues.

**Time:** This discussion guide can be adapted to workshops from 90 minutes to 3 hours in length.

# 1. Introduction, Overview, and Icebreaker

(About 30 - 45 minutes, depending on the size of the group)

## ***A. Introduction of Discussion Leader(s)***

Discussion leaders should introduce themselves, including some information about their union experience

## ***B. Review Goals of the Session***

- *Learn the basic findings of the report*  
The Institute for Women's Policy Research recently published a report about women's leadership in the labor movement. It's called, "*I Knew I Could Do This Work.*" The report is based on interviews with women activists from around the country. They talk about why women's leadership is important to the labor movement, as well as the obstacles to women's leadership. From these interviews, the author came up with seven strategies that can be used to help promote women's leadership in unions.
- *Discuss how to apply these strategies in our unions*  
We'll talk about these seven strategies. We want to hear from you which ones make sense for your unions. Do you think these could be applied in your union. If they were, would it result in more women in leadership positions?

## ***Materials Needed***

Flip chart pages prepared in advance with the two goals listed

### **C. Icebreaker: Paired Introduction with Content-Related Questions**

#### **Task:**

Ask participants to pair up in groups of two. If possible, participants should work with someone they don't know.

Participants will introduce themselves to each other, answering the questions below. (Give them 10 minutes for this.) When everyone is finished, each person will introduce their partner to the entire group – so let them know they can take notes if they want to.

- Your name
- Local union
- Role in the union (e.g., activist, executive board member, president, etc.)
- One way in which you have benefited from union membership
- One obstacle to women's leadership in your union.

#### **Debriefing:**

Once the pairs are finished, have each pair report to the entire group.

The facilitator writes the responses (keywords only) to the questions about benefits and obstacles on the flip chart. (Note for new facilitators: Make 2 columns on the flip chart. Title one "benefits" and the other "obstacles". Write the keyword used by each participant. Make hash marks to indicate when a keyword is repeated by another participant. When finished, post the flip chart paper on a wall where everyone can see it.)

Many women will probably mention the economic benefits of union membership. Give participants the handouts with two charts on the next page to show the size of this benefit, on average, for union women.

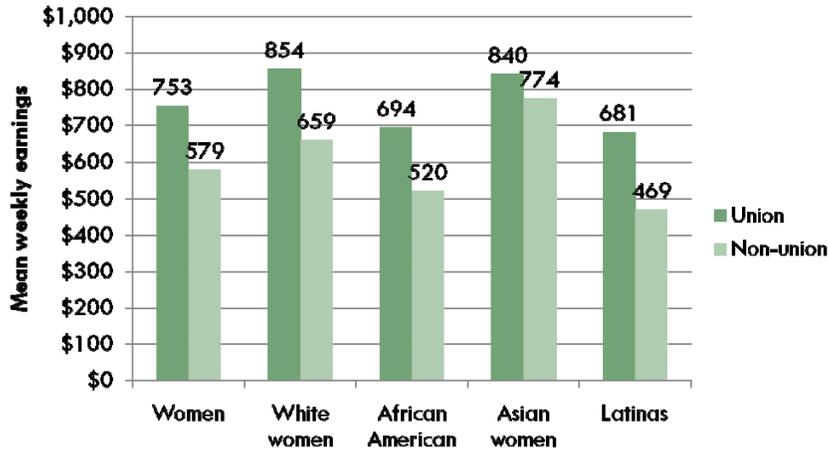
### **Materials Needed**

Flip chart page, prepared in advance, with questions at left

Flip charts and markers

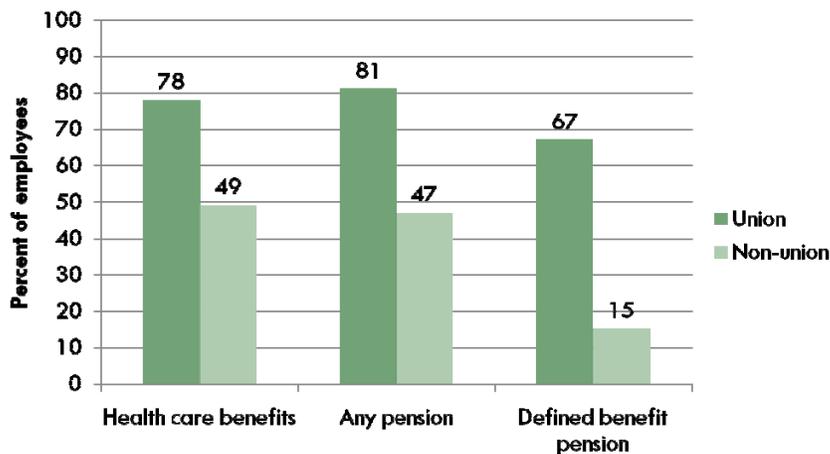
Handouts

## Union women's wages are higher



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Union Members in 2007*, January 2008.

## Union members have better benefits



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employee Benefits in Private Industry*, March 2007, August 2007.

## **2. Women's Leadership in Unions: Current Status and Obstacles**

(15 to 30 minutes, discussion leader to vary depending on time available)

### ***A. Brief lecture on status of women leaders***

The labor movement has a saying: "The leadership should look like the membership." While that's our goal, the labor movement overall has not yet achieved that. Women make up 44 percent of union members, but when you look at the top leadership, we don't see women in 44 percent of those positions.

One study (Milkman, 2007) looked at the percentage of women members and the percentage of top leaders who are women in several unions. (Top leaders were defined as union officers and executive board members)

AFT:        Women are 60% of the members  
              Women are 39% of the top leaders

AFSCME: Women are 52% of the members  
              Women are 38 % of the top leaders

SEIU:        Women are 50% of the members  
              Women are 32% of the top leaders

CWA:        Women are 51% of the members  
              Women are 12% of the top leaders

As far as we know, none of the unions in the U.S. have as high a percentage of top women leaders as they have women members. AFSCME comes the closest.

#### ***Question for the group:***

If you look at your union, do you see the same percentage of women leaders and women members?

*(Note to facilitator: focus on the level of the union the participant is in – local, region, international, etc. Participants may not know the percentage of members are women; ask them to guess. Then ask them to identify the top leaders and say what percentage are women.)*

## **Brief lecture continues**

So, what are the obstacles to women's leadership?

We've listed some already. This report identifies a number of obstacles as well. Let's see how our experience matches the experience of the women in the report

*(Note to discussion leader: For shorter session, just list the obstacles without much explanation; For longer sessions, explain each obstacle and use a quotation from the report. Sample quotes are provided here, but you could use others from the report if you prefer.)*

### **Obstacles:**

#### **1. Fewer women at the top**

If there are fewer women leaders, then women's issues can be neglected. And there are few role models and mentors available for women who are just starting out. Here's what one woman said:

*Women's issues are not going to be addressed if there are no women in the room. Just ain't going to happen. So you put women at the table and they're going to bring the issues to the discussion, but also, I believe, build the discussion equally. They're going to contribute as well to the issues of men because that's what women do.*

#### **2. Fear of retribution**

Especially when organizing a new union, people are afraid of losing their jobs. People who already belong to a union have more security – some of us might never have worked in a non-union setting, and might not know that fear. But for others, it's very real.

Sample quote:

*A lot of people fear for their jobs. That was a really big issue with supervisors, throwing all these lies or intimidation at people. People not having this sense of security in their jobs, that they could be let go, laid off, transferred out to something else that they didn't really want to do.*

***Materials needed***

Refer back to flip chart with obstacles listed, and summarize them

Write points on flip chart

**3. *Discomfort with conflict and public roles***

Many women want people to get along, to have things go smoothly. And others are a bit intimidated about speaking out and taking a public stance. To be a union leader, you have to get comfortable with those things.

Sample Quote:

*The ... big thing that I noticed is that – especially me, and where I came from and the things that I had to overcome – not wanting to step on any toes, and not wanting to piss people off... unfortunately, doing union work, you do that. You make people mad, and you just deal with it and get on with it and apologize later and everyone gets along. But it's not wanting to make waves, and it's not wanting to cause trouble. I think it's very hard for women to do.*

**4. *Neglected priorities as workers***

Some workplace issues, like pay and benefits, are the same for men and women. But others aren't. Some women find that their issues are not given as much consideration as men's issues. Here's an issue that affects women differently:

Sample quote:

*Whereas 20 years ago everyone was worrying about trying to take care of their kids at home because they were sick, now it's taking care of their parents. That's just enormous. I can think of three women on our executive board – I'm sorry, four women – that are taking care of their parents...after work daily... So that's a huge thing, trying to figure out how to assist them in taking care of their families and not losing their seniority.*

And here's an example of women getting less dignity and respect on the job:

*Not too long ago, I was at a meeting. The employers were talking about the master contract that covers a lot of staff and union officers who are primarily women. One of the men on the employer bargaining team kept asking about part-time work. Finally I said to him, "What's your issue here?" He was kind of beating about the bush. I said, "What is it that you want to do that you feel the contract won't let you do? What's at the heart of what you're talking about?" Astonishingly, [he said], "Well, you know, we'd like to get a part-time college student to work in the office, because we've got a couple of gals down there who are in their 50s, and if we could get some young good-looking gal in there to give the guys an interest in coming down to the hall." I said, "You're talking about using an employee as bait to get guys to come to the hall?" ... That was his issue. I couldn't believe it. Myself and one other woman in the room, after the meeting, she and I put our heads together and kind of fell on each others' shoulders and said, "Oh my god, we've got a long way to go, don't we."*

##### **5. Time demands of union work**

You all know how much time it takes away from family and other things to be a union activist. It's a real sacrifice. And it's especially hard for women with young children.

Sample quote:

*I was probably 46, 47 when I started the union and I just turned 50. So my kids are all older, and I was able to take off in the evening or be home late or whatever, and my kids were all okay. I know that if the union had come along at a time when my kids were a lot younger, I might not have been able to be as involved.*

**6. *Discrimination within unions***

We don't like to talk about it, but sometimes women and people of color face discrimination within unions themselves. It's not that way everywhere, but sometimes there are problems.

Sample quote:

*The things that I've experienced, I wouldn't say that they're out of the norm or would be anything that any other woman wouldn't experience, unfortunately – like not being promoted before white males, when it was my time and I was recommended by two different people to be promoted and I still wasn't promoted.*

**7. *Lack of awareness of what unions do***

The last obstacle identified by the report was that women don't always know the benefits of belonging to the union. Some of the most active women are those who grew up in union families and had parents who were active and who took them to union events. But women who don't have a union background in their family might just not be familiar with all the things that a union does.

Sample quote:

*You have to do much more education to [women] than you do to men. Now, men have heard all the myths, so you[ve] got to dispel all the myths they've heard. But women know very little about it.*

***Summarize***

Do these obstacles match the ones that we identified earlier?

### **3. Strategies to Encourage Women’s Involvement and Leadership**

(45 minutes to 90 minutes, depending on time available)

#### **A. Structured Discussion of Strategies**

We’ve identified a number of obstacles – but we also don’t want to get discouraged. Fortunately, this report identifies seven strategies that we can put in place in our unions to promote women’s leadership. I’m going to list each of them briefly, and then we’ll talk about them in small groups.

##### **1. Address women’s true priorities**

Women juggle a lot of responsibilities and need work that accommodates that. And women have other concern, too, like being treated with dignity and respect on the job. Whatever women’s priorities are in a particular workplace, the union needs to address them.

##### **2. Create and support formal mentoring programs**

Many union leaders say they were helped by a mentor who encouraged them and helped them figure out how to get things done. How can we make sure that all women who want mentors can find them?

##### **3. Providing opportunities for women to strategize together**

Some unions have women’s conferences, or women’s committees. And there are a number of places where women from a number of different unions can get together to address their concerns, including

- CLUW (Coalition of Labor Union Women)
- Women’s Summer Schools (Midwest, Southern, Northeast and Western) sponsored by the AFL-CIO and UALE (United Association for Labor Education)
- Groups for women in the building trades
- Central Labor Councils and State Federations
- Union Organizing Conferences/Legislative Conferences

#### **Materials needed**

Flip chart prepared in advance with the seven strategies listed

#### **4. Put women in leadership**

Some unions make a conscious commitment to having a leadership that looks like the member by putting women and people of color in appointed roles. They can also encourage women and people of color to run for elected positions.

#### **5. Highlight the importance of women's contributions**

Women have a lot of skills, especially organizational skills. Sometimes the union doesn't recognize that. So, making sure women get credit for what they do is important.

Another way to highlight women's contributions is to look at well-known examples, either current or historical, such as Mother Jones or Delores Huerta.

#### **6. Provide flexible options for involvement**

Unions need to work with the busy schedules women have. Whether it's providing food, toys, and child care, or using technology like email, web, and teleconferencing, the union needs to figure out a way to be involved that fits women's lives.

#### **7. Provide training on mobilizing women**

People who do organizing for the union – whether it's internal or external – need to be able to respond to the needs of the individual worker, and different workers will have different needs. Training about how to approach a wide range of people might help.

**Task:**

Ask participants to work in groups of four to six, based on where they are sitting. For each of the seven strategies, ask the group to discuss

- A. *Whether this could be done in their unions***
- B. *Whether it would help promote women's leadership and involvement***
- C. *What would it take to make it work***

*Notes to discussion leader:*

- If you only have a little time left, assign one or two strategies to each group. If you have more time, assign three or four strategies to each group.
- Tell the group to take notes and be prepared to report out.
- Tell them how much time they have (10 – 15 minutes per strategy).

**Debriefing**

Report out by strategy, beginning with the first (address women's true priorities). Ask each group that was assigned that strategy to report. The first group to report on a strategy should talk about it in detail. If multiple groups have the same strategy, the second and third reports should be shorter, focusing on adding new ideas. The discussion leader should write the keywords from each group's report on the flip chart.

**Materials  
needed**

Flip chart paper with  
3 questions listed

Flip chart paper and  
markers

## 4. Additional Tools

(10 minutes, if time available)

### A. Mini-Lecture

In addition to all the strategies and tools we've mentioned above, I have two more things to suggest

First is to work with area women's groups. Unions help promote economic justice for women. Feminist organization typically share that goal. Where you can find a local women's group with a similar agenda, you might be able to work together to accomplish goals the union couldn't achieve on its own.

#### *Question for the group*

Have any of you ever worked with a women's groups in your community? *Discussion leader: If the answer is yes, try to get a little detail, such as*

- Which group did you work with?
- What issues did you work on?
- Were the women's groups receptive to working with unions?

*Discussion leader: If the participants have not worked with any women's groups, ask them to identify groups in the community that might be appropriate. Post their list, and add these if they have not been mentioned:*

- Planned Parenthood (in addition to contraception and abortion) they offer women's health services on a sliding scale and programs on various issues related to women's health. They also have a legislative organization in each state. They can be helpful to CLUW/your union and you can be helpful to them.
- Business and Professional Women (they are Pro-Choice, Pro-ERA, Pro-Equal Pay)
- General Federation of Women's Clubs (they are Pro-Choice)
- Community/City Women's Foundations (they are often interested in many of the same issues as union women, i.e. Economic Justice, Health & Reproductive Rights, Human Rights, Political Representation and Political Action)

*Question: How would a union group approach these groups?*

### **Materials needed**

Flip chart paper and  
markers

## ***Mini-lecture continues***

While we've talked about obstacles to women's leadership in the labor movement, it's important to know that the labor movement recognizes the problem and is trying to do something about it. In 2005, the AFL-CIO convention passed a diversity resolution. It says that "we must act decisively to ensure diversity at every level and hold union organizations accountable to diversity standards." Specifically, the AFL-CIO will

- Provide training for state federation and central labor council (CLC) leaders to build a diverse leadership group
- Attract and recruit young people into the labor movement
- Require that the delegates to the AFL-CIO convention reflect the racial and gender diversity of their union's members
- Require diversity at AFL-CIO conferences and training sessions
- Make the AFL-CIO a model of hiring and promoting women and people of color
- Integrate constituency groups (like CLUW) into state federations and CLCs
- Ask unions to report annually on the representation of women and people of color in their membership, on their staff, and in elected positions at all levels
- Add representatives of the constituency groups to the AFL-CIO's General Board
- If necessary, change the AFL-CIO constitution to make this work

### ***Question for discussion***

How can we use this resolution to increase the ratio of women and people of color in leadership positions in our unions?

## ***Materials needed***

Handout of diversity resolution, from your packet or available at

[http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/thisistheaficio/convention/2005/upload/res\\_2.pdf](http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/thisistheaficio/convention/2005/upload/res_2.pdf)

## Closing

We've talked about a lot of issues today. We've discussed the economic benefits of union membership for women, as well as the obstacles to women's leadership in unions.

I want to leave you with these two thoughts:

- First, unions need women's leadership. We can add a different perspective, and help make sure our unions meet the needs of *all* working people.
- Second, increasing women's leadership is not just going to happen on its own. If we want it, we have to make it happen. We talked about the seven strategies as ways to increase women's union leadership. And we talked about working with feminist groups and using the AFL-CIO Diversity resolution. Some of these approaches will work in some places; some might not be right for you. But we hope that you've found at least one strategy that you can take back to your union and work to create a leadership that looks like the membership.

Thanks for taking the time to work with us today.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

### ***To get a copy of the full report,***

I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies that Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions, by Amy Caiazza, Institute for Women's Policy Research: <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/I917.pdf>

### ***To get the AFL-CIO diversity resolution:***

[http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/thisistheafclcio/convention/2005/upload/res\\_2.pdf](http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/thisistheafclcio/convention/2005/upload/res_2.pdf)

### ***Selected materials for further reading***

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- Cobble, D. S., and M. Bielski Michal. 2002. On the edge of equality? Working women and the U.S. labor movement. In *Gender, diversity, and trade unions: International perspectives*, F. Colgan, and S. Ledwith, eds. Routledge, New York, p. 232-256.
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### ***Websites of interest:***

[www.cluw.org](http://www.cluw.org)  
[www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org)  
[www.bergermarks.org](http://www.bergermarks.org)