

Research-in-Brief

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Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions

Amy Caiazza, Ph.D., and Casey Clevenger

This *Research-in-Brief* summarizes the findings of a larger report, *I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions*.

Women are an increasing proportion of union membership, thanks to their higher labor force participation and growing unionization in the jobs they dominate, such as nursing, teaching, and clerical jobs. As of 2004, 44 percent of union members are women (AFL-CIO 2007a), and the majority of new workers organized over the past two decades have been women (Bronfenbrenner 2005b). In some unions, particularly in the service industries, women already comprise 50 percent or more of membership (Milkman 2007).

Still, women are not proportionally represented within union leadership. Women are about 21 percent of lead union organizers (Bronfenner 2005a), and they hold relatively few top union positions, even in unions with strong female membership. In no union does women's leadership match their level of involvement (Milkman 2007).

This Research-in-Brief, which is based on a series of interviews with union activists across the country, summarizes seven strategies that unions can use to promote women's voices and leadership.

WHY PROMOTE WOMEN'S ACTIVISM?

Unions are good for women workers. Unionized women earn 30 percent more than non-unionized women, and union workers have more paid leave and are more likely to have health insurance (AFL-CIO 2007b). As more and more women work, their wages, benefits, and job characteristics have far-reaching impact on their families and communities.

Promoting women's leadership within unions can benefit them even further, by ensuring that their issues as workers are prioritized in all aspects of union work, from contract negotiations and representing individual workers to lobbying.

“I knew I could do the work. But then when you have somebody that's doing the work, and they are telling you they know you can do it, that just gives you that little extra push to go ahead. Because if I didn't have anybody to say, 'Come on, I know you can do it,' I probably would have done minimal. I probably wouldn't be where I am now.”

Women are also powerful and effective leaders who can benefit unions as a whole. For example, lead organizers who are women have higher success rates than men do; women of color have the highest rates of all (Bronfenner 2005a).

Finally, women's union leadership can lead to their leadership in other areas of public life, including politics, by building skills in talented women and encouraging them to expand their personal goals and expectations.

OBSTACLES TO WOMEN IN UNION ORGANIZING

Women experience a wide range of obstacles to their activism and leadership. Some of these issues are common to both men and women, while others are unique to women and other disadvantaged groups, such as people of color.

Fewer Women at the Top: Women's lack of visibility in leadership builds on itself. Where women have a hard time making inroads into leadership, they are less able to mentor others, serve as role models, or provide expanded supports for women. Women's lack of leadership also sends a signal that unions do not prioritize or value women's contributions and concerns, much less see them as potential leaders.

Fear of Retribution: Many workers are afraid of being fired or subjected to some other retribution at the workplace because of their union activism. For women, this fear can be exacerbated by a heightened sense of vulnerability in the labor market compared to men.

Discomfort with Conflict and Public Roles: Women activists often say they were initially hesitant to take on leadership in union work because of their discomfort with public roles. This fear is often tied to wanting to avoid confrontation and conflict.

Neglected Priorities as Workers: Both men and women want higher wages, better benefits, opportunities for advancement, and job protections. But women in unions are more concerned than men with issues concerning flexibility at work, family leave, harassment, pay equity, and respect for women workers. Unions have not always been effective at responding to women's issues and concerns.

Time Demands of Union Work: Traditionally, union activism has required long hours and substantial time away from home (Berger-Marks Foundation 2006, Simpson and Kaminiski 2003). These expectations are more manageable for workers who are single or have non-working spouses, but they are less realistic for women (and men) in an era when most mothers (and fathers) work.

Discrimination within Unions: Women also continue to face discrimination within unions themselves. For example, there is substantial evidence indicating that women have difficulty winning leadership positions outside female-majority settings (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 2005).

Lack of Awareness of What Unions Do: Many women are unaware of the benefits of joining unions (ILO-ICTFU 2001). Because union organizing has traditionally been less responsive to women's concerns, women may be less drawn to hearing about those benefits. Women's shorter work histories and concentration in less-unionized professions can also mean they have less exposure to union organizing.

STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1 Address Women's True Priorities

Unions can only succeed if they listen and respond to the concerns of the people they hope to organize. If unions more consistently and visibly address women's concerns, they are more likely to inspire their long-term, active involvement.

It is also important to use language and imagery that resonates with women. This might include, for example, an emphasis on respecting women's work, supporting families and communities, or providing balance, themes articulated by many women in our interviews. This language can inspire more women to get involved and take leadership.

2 Create and Support Formal Mentoring Programs

Many women activists can point to a mentor, usually a woman, whom they consider crucial to their success. Mentoring is most effective at supporting women's leadership if it explicitly addresses women's experiences in union work, obstacles to claiming power, and strategies for dealing with them. Women mentors can also provide a general sense of solidarity and support.

While a good deal of mentoring occurs informally, many women suggest that it could be more intentionally incorporated into union organizing as an ongoing resource for women's leadership. Such programs can foster the skills, experiences, and networks that women need to serve as effective leaders.

3 Provide Opportunities for Women to Strategize Together

Unions can cultivate women's leadership by providing women-specific training programs, conferences, women's committees, and networks at the local, regional, and national levels. Whether these programs are held in large national meetings or local strategy sessions, they can help women build skills and confidence in their union work, particularly when it is new and relatively intimidating for them. They can also help women strategize about the particular issues and circumstances facing their union work.

Some national unions have recently disbanded or restructured women's departments or offices. This has provoked mixed reactions from women activists in these unions. Some support the new approach, often arguing that women's offices lead to the marginalization of women's issues. But many worry about the long-term implications for unions' commitments to women's interests. When national unions think about abolishing women's programs, they should consider how women activists will perceive their actions, as well as the potential long-term impact on the resources available to women.

4 Put Women in Leadership

Placing women in visible local and national leadership roles within unions promotes women's activism and establishes respect for their authority. In these positions, women can serve as role models to other women and signify union commitment to women's issues. They can provide women's perspectives on union issues, priorities, and strategies and make unions more friendly to and supportive of their concerns.

Having women in leadership can also make those who might otherwise feel reticent more comfortable with leadership. In cases of locals dominated by women, or where there are women professional organizers, activists observe that women are less likely to hold back or be held back by others.

5 Highlight the Importance of Women's Contributions

Women have made important and distinctive contributions to union work. Unions can provide examples of women's current and past union leadership and hold them up as models for what union women can accomplish. This, in turn, can give women a sense that they, too, can achieve something important, particularly within settings traditionally dominated by men.

6 Provide Flexible Options for Involvement

To accommodate the conflicting demands of women's lives, unions can offer creative options and opportunities for them to get involved. As a first step, unions need to develop mechanisms for listening to what workers say they need. They must then respond to the needs women articulate. For example, women may ask for ways to participate at flexible times and places, which unions could provide through conference calls, lunchtime meetings, or work that can be done at home. They may need unions to welcome children and provide them activities or child care. They may simply need mealtime meetings with food. These and other strategies can help busy women and men participate more easily and effectively.

7 Provide Training on Mobilizing Women

Unions should provide training to their leaders and organizers on strategies that can effectively address the obstacles facing women. Despite extensive training programs, most unions do not address how issues of race, class, and gender might shape the experiences of the workers they are trying to organize. Organizers would benefit from deeper knowledge of these dynamics, in order to more effectively approach and mobilize women and people of color. Training on how to support women's activism can easily be integrated into existing programs for organizing and leadership.

WHY UNIONS NEED STRONGER PARTNERSHIPS WITH GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Feminist groups can, and should, support union women. They can provide a wide variety of indispensable resources: analysis of gender inequality, policy recommendations for alleviating it, strategy suggestions for promoting women's perspectives, and political and emotional support for women within unions. Developing stronger relationships between feminist groups and union women, particularly at the local level, could be an effective strategy for advancing women's union leadership.

Most union women, though, are unaware of the possibilities for collaborating with feminist groups. Even when they are supportive of the goals of the women's movement, local union women do not necessarily collaborate with women's organizations within their union activism—usually because they are unaware of feminist organizing around the concerns of women workers or unacquainted with feminist groups within their own communities. Many also do not see their union work as part of broader women's movement organizing.

There is a need for locally based outreach on both sides, by grassroots women's organizations to local unions and vice versa. National women's organizations and union structures can also promote community-based partnerships between their local affiliates. In general, a lack of awareness of local women's organizing among union women suggests a need for more visible women's movement activism at the grassroots level.

CONCLUSION

The strategies outlined in this report are designed to help women claim a voice of authority in an area that is traditionally dominated by men: union organizing. They are all ways for unions to provide supports, networks, and other resources that can engender a sense of empowerment among women, within unions and beyond. By claiming leadership, women can transform their lives, their unions, their workplaces, and their communities to reflect their needs.

It is our hope that unions will intentionally cultivate women's political activism and leadership through the strategies outlined here. We also hope that women's organizations will support women's union activism by cultivating stronger local ties at the grassroots. These relationships can benefit both union women and women's organizing.

ABOUT THE REPORT

This Research-in-Brief summarizes the findings and conclusions of a larger report called *I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions*. Our report and recommendations are based on a series of qualitative, in-depth interviews with 14 union activists from diverse backgrounds across the country. Seven are white, five

are Latina, and three are African American. Eight are over 50, five are aged 30-49, and two are in their 20s. Some are professional union organizers, while others are active within their locals (none are staff within national structures). They are involved in three major unions: eight in AFSCME, six in CWA, and one with SEIU. Those who are non-professional union staff work as journalists, janitors, clerical staff, horticulturalists, interpreters, nurses, and teachers.

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The Institute for Women's Policy Research
1707 L Street NW Suite 750
Washington, DC 20036
phone: 202-785-5100
email: iwpr@iwpr.org
website: www.iwpr.org