

## UNRAVELING THE BARRIERS WOMEN FACE IN PARTICIPATION IN TRADE UNIONS:

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**Abstract** This paper attempts to do an in-depth study of the reasons that prevent the entry of women participation in the employee unions and leadership positions. The study adopts a multimethod approach by conducting qualitative interviews as well as quantitative surveys. Data was collected from female trade unionist of two major central trade union organizations namely CITU and AITUC. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the members. Qualitative data were subjected to content analysis. Results indicate that Patriarchy & male dominance, attitude of union members towards women workers, organizational politics, personal responsibilities and feeling of self-efficacy were main barriers to women occupying key position in union offices and so the issues concerning women remains behind the bargaining table. The paper also provides descriptive analysis of women membership in CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Union Organization) in 25 states of India. Women membership in CITU at different levels is also stated in this paper. Despite of increasing membership of women in unions affiliated to CITU and AITUC from less than seven percent in 1980 to 31 percent in 2011 in CITU and having ten conventions by All India Coordination Committee of Working Women (AICCWW) of CITU, issues concerning women workers are yet to be addressed properly at the bargaining table.

**Keywords:** Barriers, Patriarchy and Women Union members

**Introduction:** Women's participation has always been necessary for the success of social and economic development of the country. In every sphere of life, realization of true potential of women is required and so must be done with the trade unions. By engaging and encouraging more and more women for joining trade unions can be an initial step towards their empowerment. From the last few years, issues concerning working women have been given attention. Trade unions are organising women and making them understand the benefits of unionising. In spite of putting efforts by trade unions, women face various types of obstacles in participation of unions. Women have always been disadvantaged whether it is labour market or trade unions. Issues concerning women workers have not been given importance in the union demands.

During the past few years, unions in India have expressed an increased concern for the problems of working women. Unions are recognizing a need to involve more and more women in unions. Many Indian central trade union organisations began to give greater emphasis on issues concerning working women such as equal wages, equal employment opportunities, maternity benefits, separate toilet facilities, crèche facilities and transportation facilities etc.

Many unions have formed working committee of women workers to address the problems of working women. Every year they organise conferences to address women issues and make necessary changes in their stated policies. Educational programs are also being conducted by the trade unions to make women aware about their rights and laws.

In spite of putting efforts by the unions, women remain underrepresented in unions in general and at leadership positions in particular and this has been noticed by both the present and potential union members. The lack of women unionist has been inferred as lack of sincere interest in equality and issues concerning women workers.

The rectification of under-representation requires entry of more and more women in union leadership. There are various reasons of women not being able to outnumber men in unions. Our study explores the reason of under-representation of women in two central trade union organisations, CITU and AITUC. Participation Of Women In Aituc And Citu: In the Indian context very few studies have been done so far to know the barriers Indian women face in the context of joining trade unions. Even though the membership in both the trade unions namely, AITUC and CITU have increased from the past years but still it has not reached as per their proportion in workforce. Women membership accounts for 29.54 % of the total membership of the central and state unions in India as per the data provided by ministry of Labour for the year 2012.

The under representation of women in unions and at leadership positions is generally attributed to obstacles women face in joining unions. As far as barriers are concerned, there are many, social, psychological and cultural barriers are prominent ones. The existence of patriarchal system in unions also hampers the participation of women at leadership positions. Few examples of unions prove the existence of patriarchy. In a union of Anganwadi

workers, in which only women workers are there but at the leadership positions are with men only.

The participation of women at local level will have an impact on reaching more valuable jobs. The experience and confidence gain at the local level helps in getting leadership positions at unions. There are few steps women must follow to reach at the top positions in unions. Sincere and regular attendance at union meetings, Be an active member at working committees, be appointed and elected at union offices of greater importance.

#### Review of Literature

There are various factors which influence women's participation in trade unions.

*Lack of awareness about TU benefits:* Education is one of the social factors that influence women's participation in trade unions. Women do not join trade unions as they are not aware of the probable benefits of joining unions. Very few awareness programs are conducted to make the women labourers understand about the need for women's participation and the benefits of joining TUs.

An ILO/ICFTU survey found that the most common reason for women not to join unions was that they did not understand how trade unions could help them. Another reason was that women did not have time to participate because of family responsibilities.

*Patriarchy in trade unions:* In a study by Dean H.(2006), The culture of a trade union (as of any organisation) is composed of its norms, values and regular behaviour and traditionally this culture has tended to reflect its male officers and membership. However in today's society and in order to be relevant to the membership as a whole, unions must adapt their culture to better suit both genders.

According to Ledwith (2012), the enduring hegemonic masculine culture of trade unions continues to outweigh the extensive gender and diversity structural work developed in recent decades. Trade unions are no different from other organizations. They are, as (Wajcman, 2000) has commented, 'fundamentally constituted by culture and the informal norms and every day cultural practices are rarely gender neutral'.

Reasons advanced as to why women do not join trade unionism membership and leadership include: the male-dominated culture or activities of the union or the hostile reactions from male members discourage women from joining and that women are said to lack confidence to join unions or to aspire to leadership positions (ILO-ICFTU Survey, 2000).

The patriarchal system of trade union is the real barrier for joining women in trade unions. It defines men as the standard for humanity and women as something slightly less than that, and therefore robs us all of our full humanity. Patriarchy is what makes women believe that they are supposed to serve the

needs of men, and encourages men to accept this as their due (Andibo, 2012).

Patriarchal system has not left the mark in trade unions only but in other sectors as well it is observed as barrier for female leadership. In an educational setting, research in the Shaanxi province of China indicated that the underlying patriarchal values made it very difficult for women to transcend entrenched attitude to women and take on senior management roles in school. (Marianne and Coleman, 2002)

Kirton (1999), emphasized in a qualitative case study of senior union women in the fifth largest UK trade union, Manufacturing, Science and Finance (MSF) that women's experiences and perceptions of the union were often tainted with feelings of frustration, disillusionment and anger. The study found union women commitment to be threatened by characteristic sexism of the dominant masculine culture. Evidence of the sexist language and behaviour and of sexual harassment was found.

According to Kofi Asamoah, General Secretary of Ghana, Trade union congress, the reason why women do not fight for positions in the various trade unions is because most people, particularly men have negative perceptions about them and doubt their leadership capabilities and this tend to dampen their enthusiasm. The few women who brave the odds to survive and succeed are intimidated, discouraged and discriminated against and called all sorts of names. A research on "The status of women in trade unions in Africa" has revealed.

The low proportion of women leaders is argued in most cases to be a reflection of inequalities and injustices in society and working life as a whole (Billing and Alvesson, 1989). Therefore, our primary concern is ethical; that is, women can be regarded as a discriminated group, which have not the same opportunities as men in a career context and in attaining managerial positions (Lamsa and Sintonen, 2001).

*Domestic and job responsibility:* In general, women overwhelmingly hold lower level positions compared to men in working life. Moreover, women leaders still lag behind male managers in income and in their ability to balance work and family responsibilities (Lämsä & Sintonen 2001). For example, Brett and Stroh (1999) show in their study in the United States that male managers increased their salaries by 65 percent during the latter 5-year period of the 1990s, whereas female managers increased their salaries by only 54 percent during the same period.

*Stereotyping:* Some of the societal issues also act as an inhibitor to involvement of women in trade unions as it perceives that the role of women is in the house not outside the boundaries of home. The orthodox behaviour of parents and in-laws also prevent females joining trade unions.

Several Australian writers have articulated the "sexism position" by providing historical evidence of men's view that women should not work outside the home for money (Summers, 1975; Dixon, 1976). This resistance to women entering the labor force in Australia was particularly evident prior to the Second World War (Baker and Robeson, 1981).

In one of the studies by Andibo (2012), regarding women's participation in trade unions, findings of the study reveals that women are viewed as equally efficient and even more committed. The widespread view and opinion is that they are moody. Such stereotyped ideas that persist about women and their abilities, preferences and roles may serve as a barrier to women's participation in union membership and leadership.

One of the reasons advanced as to why women do not participate in union membership and leadership is that stereotyped ideas persist about women's abilities, preferences and roles (ILO – ICFTU Survey, 2000).

*Union structure:* According to Venkata Ratnam (2002), trade union environments are usually male dominated because of reasons like the, 'Twenty four hour job' participation in union is perceived as twenty four hour job, 'Timing for the meetings' as the meetings are usually held at nights, 'The infrastructure or place of meeting' the physical place where meetings held are usually away from office, 'Sexiest language/ abusive conversation' language used during the meeting, 'No encouragement for women' and 'Very less interest in women's issues etc.

*Women's interest:* The attitude of women towards trade unions also signifies the importance of participation of women on trade unions. Female part-timers are less likely to unionise, and if an integrated perspective is to be encouraged, as Walters argues, then women's attitudes should, in part, explain their lower rates of unionisation. Differences between industries may account for some of the contrasts. Women in retail may work more standardised hours than women in catering and ancillary divisions (Tomlinson, 2005).

The interest to learn and understand trade unions activities also impacts women's participation rate as women generally do not take much interest in unions' activities and have 'let the males do' kind of attitude.

*Lack of child care facilities:* Crèche facilities are not available for most of the working women including many of those in the organised sector. In the rural areas mothers are compelled to leave their small children under the care of their older siblings, often girls or neighbours. The girl children are thus compelled to drop out of school. Recently the government of India has decided to convert 5% of the anganwadi centres into anganwadi cum crèches. But

this is highly inadequate. It would cover only a very small fraction of the needy working women. Besides, the crèche workers would not be regular workers. They would be paid only Rs 3000 per month with no other benefits. In the urban areas, for most of the women working in various establishments like hospitals, schools, shops, factories etc, and to the domestic workers, no accessible and affordable crèche facilities exist.

*Fear of losing jobs:* The other important reason of not joining trade unions by women is fear of losing job. Though trade unions are made to take care of workers' interest, however some time joining trade unions may hamper the relation between labour and management. Females, who are running their families singlehandedly do not want to take any risk and avoid joining trade unions, in spite of having issues.

*Occupational segregation:*

Joshi (2007), rightly points out that discrimination against women in the form of job segregation in workplaces is another factor contributing to lower participation of women in union activities. Women are often employed in subordinate positions under the supervision of men who are in more powerful positions. Union structures too reflect occupational segregation creating barriers for women's advancement to leadership positions.

(The lower rate of trade union membership by women is not due to women being less inclined to join a trade union, but to the fact that they are concentrated in sectors where the rates of trade union membership are low anyway) report by ILO and ICFTU survey NOV 2000

*Research Method:* The main objective of the study is to unravel the factors influencing women's participation in trade union. The study adopts a multimethod approach by conducting qualitative interviews as well as quantitative surveys. Data was collected from female trade unionist of two major central trade union organisations namely CITU and AITUC. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the members.

The sample consisted of 41 female union members and 13 men union leaders. In-depth interviews were conducted of nine senior female union members - Amarjeet Kaur, AITUC, Padmanabham (CITU), Tapan Sen (CITU), Hemlata (CITU), Ranjana Nirula (CITU), Sindhu (CITU), Deethi (NTUI), Amarjeet Kaur, AITUC, Sunita Iluri: ILO, India office Shyam Kali.

Qualitative data were subjected to content analysis. The interview schedule was structured around the key challenges faced by women and the initiatives taken by unions and organisations. The content analysis was done to do an in-depth analysis of the interviews. The categories of the content analysis emerged out of the available data.

A survey questionnaire was also administered which required the members to rate the potency of difficulty faced in each category of barrier. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.83 Cronbach alpha and the validity was established by three experts. Factor analysis resulted in five categories of barriers.

Results: The results of the survey revealed that the key barriers of low participation were domestic and job responsibilities (88%), lack of child care facilities (89%) and patriarchy (86 %) in trade unions. One of the respondents referred to Union responsibility as the third responsibility in addition of their domestic and job responsibilities

Women may not have time to join unions or participate in union activities because of conflicting job and family responsibilities. Participation in trade unions are seen as triple burden by them. The other important factor was lack of childcare facilities and wherever available are too expensive. Lack of child care facilities also hampers the women's participation in union as in our society, child raising is the prime responsibility of females. Out of the the eight female union leaders interviewed seven had other family members as union members. The families were politically active families where there was support to share familial and domestic responsibilities.

Another reason is the culture of patriarchy. Female Union members (86 %) felt that patriarchy was an important reason for the low participation of women. Content analysis of interviews threw of myriad images of patriarchy ranging from microaggression like jeers and taunts at their participation to actual prevention from applying to important posts.

Another barrier was the culture in unions (78%). One of the member's who had worked Coal mines and was a part of the union for some time revealed that it is difficult for women to attend meetings in the unions. Most of the meetings are held after office hours and the culture of male humour, loud behavior and assertive body language is alien to social expectations of female behavior. She also complained of not feeling comfortable amidst males who are not use to females in meetings. She finally left going to the meetings. This finds validation in the explanation given by Acker (1992) who points out that the female Identity becomes the 'internal mental work of individuals' as they consciously construct their own conceptualization of the organization's gendered structures, including persona, and the demands for gender-appropriate behaviour and attitudes. Thus Gender may be deeply hidden in organizational processes and decisions that appear to have nothing to do with gender (Acker,1992).

Walby (1997) points out that the reasons patriarchal gendering which he calls 'patriarchal regimes'. These are- household production, Paid work & attitude of the State, Male violence, social

construction of Sexuality & Cultural Institutions such as education and religion. These patriarchal regimes shape women's familial responsibilities, circumscribe their roles and mark the locations, sites and timeframes of women's participation in the workforce and within their trade unions (Ledwith and Cain, 2007)

The respondents indicated towards initiatives of unions towards gender democracy and gender mainstreaming that leadership positions still alludes them.

Another reason for low participation was self efficacy beliefs of women union members 53% women reported that they had joined the union because of closed shop compulsions otherwise union activities are a male arena. Gendered social structures and professional gendered structures perpetrate this myth. One of the respondents reported that men do not take their participation seriously and make fun of their suggestion. She was suggested by one of the senior male members that she should just relax enjoy the 'samosa' (delicacy) and tea served and sign and leave. 53% women felt that the kind of political prowess that is needed for unions is not their cup of tea.

Safety was another feature that was coming up as a barrier. Union offices, meeting timings and personalities of union leaders were reported as unsettling by women members. This was also a reason why their families did not allow them to go for the meetings. Interestingly 47 % of women did not rate this as a barrier but men reported it as a barrier.

Union politics was seen as another barrier for women participation. Affiliation to the powerful political parties was an important requisite for entry to unions and if one did not align with it she would not get entry into union offices easily.

Conclusion & Recommendations: Though women participation in trade unions is not as per their involvement in employment for various reasons however except putting efforts in overcoming major barriers to increase their participation in union activities, some workshops at union level must be conducted to make them aware about the benefits of joining trade unions and also to fight for their rights as a woman and as an employee. Gender equality audits, mentoring, quotas as well as initiatives of gender mainstreaming should be made by organisations for it to be an egalitarian world.

On the bases of findings of the study, the following recommendations were made-

1. Trade unions should encourage women participation in general and at leadership positions in particular by reserving seats for women unionists.
2. Availability of child care facilities should be of prime importance as it was found to be an

- important reason of women not joining trade unions.
3. It is necessary to focus on the needs of women as a workers and as an individual, focus should be on their rights and benefits.
  4. Continuous efforts should be made to sensitize women's issues.
  5. As patriarchy exist in trade unions, efforts should be made to position women at all levels in unions. Some seats should be reserved for women at all levels to encourage their participation.

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