Overcoming Barriers to Women in Organizing and Leadership

REPORT TO THE AFL-CIO EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
MARCH 2004
FOR THE PAST 25 YEARS, women have outpaced men as new members of unions, and organizing campaigns in which women are a majority of the workforce have been more likely to succeed. Working women make up 43 percent of union members but 55 percent of newly organized workers.

Yet women sometimes are reluctant to become involved in organizing because of both practical and more deep-seated problems. And, despite the growth of women as union members, women are significantly under-represented as leaders throughout the union movement and public opinion research shows women’s favorable attitudes about unions are eroding.

These are the key findings from the research commissioned by the Executive Council Working Women’s Committee to explore the factors deterring women from joining unions or becoming more involved as leaders and activists and subsequent recommendations developed by committee members and women leaders from dozens of unions.

Women Joining Unions
Women’s positive views toward unions have declined since 1999. We have to fight to bring back a higher level of base support for unions among women workers.

- Focus on the issues of priority to working women.
- Integrate women’s programs and concerns into the core agenda of the union.
- Recruit and retain more women organizers.

There is a clear road map for reaching working women. Women respond strongly to traditional women’s economic issues—

- equal pay, work and family and control over work hours.
  - Recast traditional bargaining issues as work and family issues in bargaining fights.
  - Create a women’s focus in our electoral work by targeting swing women voters with messages on key issues.
  - Deliver a message to women by focusing on issues women care about and showing women’s faces.

Tap into working women’s sense of independence and self-reliance. Women like the notion of unity but worry about losing their individual voice.

- Focus on how unions help women make their own decisions and be more effective on the job.

Women see problems in the workplace but don’t think unions can deliver. They want proof.

- Emphasize our successes by highlighting concrete examples.
- Show positive action rather than portraying workers as victims. Use examples of worker strength.

Women think of unions as being made up largely of men and don’t think unions have professional or white-collar members.

- Demonstrate the union movement’s diversity and show union women in a wide spectrum of occupations, including white-collar workers and professionals.
- Refer to ourselves as “unions” or the “union movement.” Women think the reference to “labor unions” means blue-collar workers exclusively.
- Appoint, recruit and elect more women to leadership positions at all levels.
**Women in Union Leadership**

There is a lack of commitment from unions. Many unions haven’t developed plans or mandates to increase women’s representation as leaders at all levels.

- Establish mandates and policies to increase women’s participation and leadership in unions.
- Make sure women participate in all union events, not just women’s events.
- Appoint women, including women of color, to positions with core responsibilities, not as tokens.
- Expand union executive boards and decision making units to include more women.
- Establish equity positions for qualified women or create quotas, as is the practice in unions in other countries.

Unions often don’t provide work and family programs to help women, especially young women, balance many responsibilities.

- Provide child care at all union events. Hold meetings at times when women can attend.
- Develop such family-friendly policies as family leave or child care so women leaders can fulfill both their union and family responsibilities.
- Make structural changes. Keep organizers within a region so they can go home at the end of the day, or at least every weekend. Merge contracts and bargaining units, combining resources and staff to reduce local leaders’ workloads.

Many unions lack effective women’s structures and programs to help women develop the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to become leaders.

- Create such structures as women’s departments, caucuses and committees to address the concerns of women members and foster leadership skills among women activists. Focus on issues of concern to working women and adhere to the core agenda of the union—organizing and political mobilizing.
- Adequately staff and fund women’s structures to implement programs successfully.
- Educate and “activate” women members through conferences and trainings. Include women as panelists and workshop leaders.
- Hold smaller, advanced leadership trainings for women. Focus on mobilizing skills, such as running an organizing or political campaign, running a local and bargaining training.

Women often don’t have support or mentoring to help them rise as leaders and maintain their positions.

- Identify women activists and women in local leadership and “bring them along” by providing individual leadership development.
- Develop mentoring relationships with potential women leaders to help foster their leadership skills.
Women are nearly half the workforce and are disproportionately employed in growing industries. For the past 25 years, women have outpaced men as new members of unions, and organizing campaigns in which women are a majority of the workforce have been more likely to succeed. Today, working women make up 43 percent of union members and are a critical source of growth for the union movement: Fifty-five percent of newly organized workers are women.

In August 2002, the AFL-CIO Executive Council recognized that despite the apparent readiness among women workers to organize, unions are confronted by two stubborn problems that threaten our ability to grow and thrive. Firstly, organizing campaigns are difficult to win and women sometimes are reluctant to become involved in organizing because of both practical and more deep-seated problems. Secondly, despite the growth of women as union members and the increase of women at lower levels of leadership, women are significantly under-represented as leaders throughout the union movement.

This report summarizes research the AFL-CIO has conducted in the past year and a half on women in unions and subsequent recommendations from the AFL-CIO Executive Council Working Women’s Committee and women leaders from dozens of unions on how to address these important concerns. Based on opinion research, Part I of the report examines the factors that affect women’s decisions to join a union or become involved in union campaigns. Part II of the report explores the factors that affect women as they become more involved in their unions and take on leadership positions. It is based on interviews with women in leadership.
OUR ANALYSIS of AFL-CIO opinion polling conducted since 1997 found that women understand the power of collective action and generally have positive attitudes toward unions. Overall, two-thirds of women polled see unions as playing an important role in society. Women, regardless of race, age or educational attainment, agree that employees are more successful in getting problems resolved at work as a group. They also overwhelmingly favor workers over management in disputes.

Union election campaigns are more likely to succeed if the workforce is majority female or if the lead organizer is a woman, according to a 2003 study by Kate Bronfenbrenner. In units with a majority of women, the average win rate in union elections is 62 percent, compared with 35 percent or less in units in which women are the minority. Win rates are especially high—83 percent—in units with 75 percent or more women of color. Finally, the win rate for women organizers averaged 55 percent, compared with 42 percent for male organizers. The average win rate for women organizers of color was as high as 72 percent.

Yet, unions are losing ground with working women. Women’s positive feelings toward unions have declined since 1999, while men’s positive views have increased. Women worry about losing their individual voice in unions. Increasingly, women think unions tell their members what to do, rather than perceiving that members make their own decisions—there has been a 14-point drop on this question since 1999. Women are more likely to view unions as ineffective. In 2003, 53 percent of women polled thought unions were ineffective, compared with 44 percent in 1999. Thirty-eight percent of women polled in 2003 felt positive toward unions, compared with 42 percent in 1999, while men’s positive views toward unions increased by 12 percentage points over the same period.

Women’s Perceptions of their Jobs and Unions: Findings from Focus Groups

In February 2003, Lake Snell Perry & Associates conducted seven focus groups in Baltimore, Atlanta, Chicago and Oakland with working women—union and nonunion—of diverse racial backgrounds and occupations. The goals for the focus groups were to develop a better understanding of how working women perceive their jobs and workplaces, to find out what working women think of unions and determine how we can better communicate with them.

Overall, the focus groups found that many women liked the people they work with, the satisfaction of helping other people through their jobs and the job they do. A number of women, particularly nonunion women, disliked the pay, lack of benefits and heavy workload. They thought they were working more for less money. Some women also said they worked hard to prove there was no difference between them and the men at their job, but men got more respect anyway.

Among nonunion women, the first things that came to mind when they heard the term “labor union” were things unions do for workers—such as providing “job security” and “protection” and helping secure raises—but also corruption. Nonunion women thought unions fought for members and for better benefits and pay. However, both union and nonunion women
doubted unions could deliver all they promised. When asked about union members, many women thought “labor unions” were made up of men, particularly in such traditionally male jobs as manufacturing and hard, physical labor. White-collar nonunion women were surprised when told that half of union members were professional and white-collar workers.

When the nonunion women were asked whether they would join a union, they were divided. They wanted proof that the union could deliver on its promises. Such traditional women’s economic issues as paid family leave, equal pay and work hours resonated with these women as the strongest reasons to join a union. They agreed that such recent legislative successes as paid family leave in California and child care subsidies in New York City were convincing reasons to join a union. Although they responded positively to these issues won through lobbying, they did not see lobbying in the abstract as a benefit to joining a union.

The women in the focus groups also responded positively to such themes as unity, clout with the union and language about workers uniting in one voice to stand up for themselves. As one woman explained, “One worker is ignored (but) it’s impossible to ignore thousands of voices shouting together, which means it’s strength, you know, in numbers, more than just one.”

However, many women feared losing their individuality by joining a union. Self-reliance and individualism resonated among these women, and many said they had the responsibility to take care of themselves and their families and it was not different on the job. As one nonunion woman put it, “I depend on me, myself and I.” They worried about losing their individual voice in a union, didn’t want to have to go along with the majority and feared others would make decisions for them. Many nonunion women also were worried that their boss would fire them if they joined a union, even after they were told that would be illegal.

Some women reacted negatively when they thought they were being singled out—even for help from their union—because of their gender. They felt left out of unions and wanted more attention given to traditional women’s economic issues, and would like to see more women in unions and as leaders. However, they were sensitive to tokenism and didn’t want to be pandered to. They also thought that some women’s issues such as child care or equal pay shouldn’t be relegated to women only. One woman asserted, “It’s an assumption that it’s only a woman’s issue. It’s not a man’s issue and it should be a man’s issue.”

In addition, women of color were wary of having race used to sell the union, even though they appreciated the union’s efforts to fight discrimination. As one woman explained, “Don’t think I’m going to join you just because you put the words ‘woman of color’ in there. You know, we just don’t do anything. We’re a little smarter than that.”
Recommendations for Communicating with Working Women

In response to the background research from opinion polling data and the focus group findings, members of the Executive Council Working Women’s Committee had individual recommendations that emerged from discussions over the past year. These recommendations are summarized below.

**Invest in reaching out to working women.**

Women’s positive feelings toward unions peaked in 1999 and since have declined, while men’s views toward unions have become increasingly positive. Just as in politics, we have to fight to bring back a higher level of base support for unions among women workers.

Unions must invest in reaching out to women workers. Union leaders must make a commitment to restore base support for unions among working women and integrate women’s programs and concerns into the core agenda of the union.

For example, in this election year, low-income white women are a big block of swing voters and sensitive to economic issues. Since 1996, white women cannot be considered Democratic base votes. We need to make sure our political mobilizing programs that target women focus on jobs and the economy to bring them back.

Many “women’s issues” should be viewed by unions as working family issues. For example, unions should include equal pay when discussing the economy in general. The average family loses $4,000 a year because employers don’t provide equal pay.

Within the union movement, we need to publicize the success rates in organizing women and especially women of color, and the high success rates in organizing by women organizers. Unions must develop programs and policies to recruit—and retain—more women organizers.

In addition, women’s structures—such as committees, departments and caucuses—and programs must be funded and staffed adequately to be effective. These structures and programs can train women to become activists and organizers for organizing and political mobilizing campaigns. Furthermore, women’s structures are essential to staff and implement effectively any plans that integrate women’s issues into the core agenda of the union.

Work and family issues also should be recognized at the Executive Council level. For example, creating a Work and Family Work Group of the Executive Council would help focus our work on these issues. Alternatively, we could place a greater emphasis on work and family issues for the AFL-CIO as part of the work of the Executive Council Public Policy Committee.
Unions should work with women’s organizations on shared concerns and encourage them to include workers’ rights as one of their demands and principles. For example, during the Safeway strike, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and the AFL-CIO engaged the National Organization for Women (NOW). Conversely, unions need to integrate women’s concerns into their programs.

Focus on the issues that are a priority for working women. There is a clear road map for reaching working women. Women respond strongly to traditional women’s economic issues—equal pay, work and family and work hours. Focusing on the issues women care about is key to our success.

Unions need to deliver a message to women by showing women’s faces and the issues women care about most. Women respond to traditional “women’s” economic issues and notice when images and pictures of women are missing from materials, brochures and magazines. They do not, however, respond well to being overtly singled out as women. For example, information from the union about paid family medical leave doesn’t need to lead with phrases like “as women…” but should include images of women workers.

In addition, we can recast traditional bargaining issues as work and family issues in bargaining fights. For example, the CWA strike against Verizon in North Carolina focused on excessive forced overtime and Verizon’s demands for givebacks in family benefits, and it won strong support from the community. As a key strike issue, the union workers were able to retain their emergency family medical leave provision to take family members to and from hospitals when they are admitted.

Unions also need to maintain a “signature” or major campaign on a work and family issue at all times. The fight against the Bush administration’s attacks on overtime pay highlights an important work and family issue that resonates with low-wage and professional workers, men and women.

Furthermore, we need to communicate union strategies and victories on work and family issues, such as California’s paid family leave legislation, to our members and to working women during organizing campaigns. Unions also should highlight equal pay victories through legislation at the state level and promote Equal Pay Day. The AFL-CIO could hold regular work and family conferences to highlight bargaining victories and strategies and develop a union activists listserv to share ideas on work and family and equal pay issues. These activities should include contract negotiators, bargainers, researchers and activists—not just women.
Connect with working women's individualism and independence. There is a definite streak of independence, self-reliance and individualism in working women that we need to tap.

Unions need to focus on how we can help women make their own decisions and help them be more effective on the job. Women like the notion of unity but are afraid of losing their individualism. Our message should not be that the union will take care of their problems or that the union will speak with one voice, but rather that the union will bring strength to their voice. Our Voice@Work message also should be informed by this concern.

Messages such as “I know I make a difference on the job, and my union backs me up,” or “I balance lots of demands from work and family, and my union helps me do that,” would be effective.

Emphasize they are the union. Women think of unions as helping with wages, benefits and job security. However, they don’t understand how unions work, and therefore see unions as a third party.

We need to educate working women during organizing campaigns about how unions work and emphasize the role they can play in the union. It is important that these independent, individualistic women know that they would make the decisions in their union. Unions should showcase the various opportunities for members to participate—women’s committees, bargaining committees and leadership trainings. Changing how we portray conflicts as being between workers and management as opposed to between unions and management also would reinforce the point that unions are the members.

Many union members and working women receive little information about the benefits of being a union member and how a union works. There is a need for a thorough member and public education campaign. Committee members suggested providing workshop guidelines to affiliate women’s representatives for discussions on such issues as how unions work or how to set up a Working Women’s Committee at a local. Also, a short presentation on the findings from this research on attitudes of nonunion women could be made available to affiliates, central labor councils (CLCs) and state federations to facilitate discussions about how to reach out to working women. We can update the “Why Unions?” brochure and collect sample publications from affiliates to do educational work through affiliate women’s programs.
**Show women that unions bring results.**

Women see problems in the workplace but don’t think unions can deliver. *They want proof.*

Unions at all levels need to **emphasize our successes** by highlighting concrete examples. We need to point out recent examples of successes, like paid family leave, child care subsidies or family centers. In addition, we should stress that unions are social change and empowerment organizations rather than just delivery systems for benefits.

Unions should **show positive gains and action** rather than portray workers as victims. Several nonunion women in the focus groups recalled the UPS strike and striking laundry workers as positive examples of worker strength. The AFL-CIO can collect success stories regularly from affiliates through the women’s representatives and make issue updates and success stories available to affiliates for use at union events and in a toolkit.

Unions also should try to use the media, especially free press, to show unions in a positive light. Union leaders and staff must recognize that the media often highlight negative, sensational stories about unions or the heat of a conflict but not the resolution, and they should work to get positive stories in the media. Alternatively, unions should consider paid advertising campaigns.

**Demonstrate the union movement’s diversity.**

Women think of unions as being composed largely of men and don’t think unions have professional or white-collar members.

Our communications should show union women in a wide spectrum of occupations to let women know white-collar workers and professionals have a place in unions. For example, union fliers on protecting overtime pay could use examples of women workers in retail as well as in health care.

We should **refer to ourselves as “unions” rather than “labor,”** or as the “union movement” rather than the “labor movement.” The women surveyed thought the reference to “labor unions” meant blue-collar workers exclusively. Many of the women in the focus groups thought that “labor unions” referred solely to unions for laborers.

Union leaders could appoint, recruit and elect more women and women of color to leadership positions at all levels. **Members and the public need to see union diversity in leadership**—representative of our membership—on television, in newspapers and magazines and at rallies and events.

Unions also should try to get stories about working women and women in unions into women’s magazines to educate women in general about the diversity in unions.
Highlight the issues, not the process. Issues motivate women. Talking about the process or institutions turns them off. Women picture politics and bargaining as back-room deal making, but they respond very positively to winning new rights and benefits.

Unions must put what we are fighting for in the spotlight—not that we are a political organization. What we fight for should outshine where we fight. In addition, we should demonstrate that our actions are about people, not about power and influence.

For example, unions can create a women’s focus in our electoral work, including a significant effort for this year’s elections, by targeting swing women voters with messages on such key issues as control over work hours, paid family leave and equal pay. Just as with other political materials, the materials targeting women could compare voting records of candidates on issues of concern to working women, but using women’s faces and their language. Similarly, a message poster about the issues, but with women’s images and language, would be effective.
IN JANUARY 2004, the AFL-CIO conducted a series of interviews with women in leadership positions, both elected and appointed, at 18 unions. The goals of these interviews were to identify problems or barriers impeding the integration of women into leadership positions, highlight best practices or activities that were effective in advancing women and develop recommendations to increase women’s leadership in unions.

Overall, the interviewees tied diversity to the long-term survival of their unions. As our members become more diverse, our leadership must reflect this change to respond to our members’ needs and to increase our membership. Most interviewees expressed a sense of urgency about advancing women. They thought that unions—and union leaders—needed to “wake up” and recognize that women no longer are a small minority in most unions. Even the interviewees in male-dominated unions agreed their viability was dependent on bringing in new members by diversifying their membership.

However, the interviewees had mixed responses about whether their unions recognized the problems and challenges of integrating women into leadership ranks. Some unions, the interviewees reported, weren’t concerned with the lack of women in leadership. Of the unions that did recognize a problem, there was “too little being done about it” or it wasn’t a priority. Many interviewees, especially from unions with a majority of women members, acknowledged the challenges of advancing more women of color and young women into leadership positions. However, many interviewees reported on new approaches and innovative policies to encourage activism among women and advance women leaders.

Barriers Inhibiting Women from Entering Leadership Positions

The most commonly identified barrier was the lack of commitment from unions to address the concerns of women members and to encourage women to become leaders. Many unions haven’t developed plans or established mandates to increase women’s representation in leadership positions at all levels. The interviewees said that women leaders faced a great deal of “push back” from male leaders, as if encouraging women to seek leadership positions would “force men to give up something.” As one interviewee put it, “my union president would rather piss us (the women) off than piss off his (male) friends” by ignoring the glass ceiling in his union. Leaders themselves need to understand—and make clear to their members—that “having women in leadership positions doesn’t mean establishing a ‘good old girl’s network,’ but encouraging qualified leaders who will move the movement forward with new ideas and new ways of doing things.”

Secondly, interviewees identified the lack of work and family programs in unions as a barrier inhibiting women from becoming more active and becoming leaders. They noted that unions often were “anti-working family” and hadn’t established policies to help balance work and family needs, making it difficult for women, especially in international-level staff and leadership positions. Furthermore, male union leaders don’t recognize that women are balancing many responsibilities, whereas many male leaders have wives that “stay at home.”

Thirdly, the interviewees cited the lack of effective structures and programs to help women develop the knowledge, skills
and experience necessary to become leaders. Although several unions offer conferences and trainings specific to women, many interviewees thought the programs could be more effective and successful if they were better staffed and funded. Others explained that women’s departments were skeletal structures with little resources, programmatic objectives or responsibilities. One interviewee explained that women’s programs and departments subsisted on marginal issues, not on the core economic issues of the union. “We’re chewing on candy instead of meat and potatoes.”

As a result, the programs and structures often become “holding pens” for women members and women’s issues, while allowing the union’s leadership to consider completed their duty to women members. The interviewees called for trainings and structures like women’s departments, caucuses and committees that would integrate women into the core of the union, rather than keep them marginalized. As one interviewee from a majority-male union explained, “we cannot wake up one day to find 50 percent of our membership to be women, (and we) have done nothing to train them.”

Fourthly, many interviewees pointed to the lack of support networks to help qualified women rise as leaders and maintain their positions. With so few women in top leadership positions, women cannot assume they will have support or mentoring to “help them along.” They often don’t have the “confidential help they need—someone who can give them a pep talk, someone they can call for advice or support, even in the middle of the night.” In addition, women’s attitudes about their own talents and capabilities often prevent them from running for elected positions. Although many women are leaders in school or community organizations, they don’t feel qualified to sit at the table with the “big boys” in their union. “It is hard to get elected, and even when we get elected, it is hard to be taken seriously.”

Unfortunately, many women leaders face isolation and tokenism “as the lone woman at the table full of men.” The perception that there is room at the table for only a limited number of women can make them recognize rising women leaders as competitors rather than allies. As a result, women may not necessarily help other women along. The problem is compounded for women of color who sometimes choose between advancing women’s issues or racial issues within their unions.
Recommendations for Advancing Women Activists and Leaders

The interviewees had overall recommendations for increasing women’s leadership in unions. These recommendations are summarized below.

Commitment from top leaders to advance women.

The most common recommendation among interviewees for increasing women’s participation and leadership in unions was a “mandate” or “commitment” from the union’s top leaders. International leaders are in a position to send a very powerful message to members, saying “yes, women matter” by establishing policies and implementing programs to “welcome and encourage women in all levels of leadership.” The goal is to have a representative portion of women participate in all levels and capacities within a union, not tokenism.

Top leaders need to establish policies that instruct their locals and districts to make sure women participate in all union events, not just women’s events. They should monitor lists of national conference attendees, speakers and panelists to ensure that women are represented. “If an attendee list has very few women, then the international needs to send it back to the local and have them look deeper.” Women’s representation at these events should be tied to the locals’ funds or conference budgets so that locals cooperate. Some internationals directly offer scholarships for women activists to attend national conferences and events.

Leaders also must change their language and terminology and refer to women as equals using appropriate terms. For example, union presidents shouldn’t be referred to automatically as “he” and a union gathering should not be addressed as “brothers.” Leaders—both male and female—also need to be vigilant and not refer to women as “girls” or “ladies,” but as “sisters,” “women” and “activists.” Leaders must understand the “isms” and keep away from red-flag words as well.

Support from top leaders—especially male leaders—also can prevent trainings specifically for women from being seen as divisive by male members. Male leaders can stress to members that the goal of programs specifically for women isn’t division, but rather to address the concerns of women members and integrate women into the core activities of the union—organizing and politics.

Finally, the interviewees urged top leaders to set an example and appoint women as leaders and hire women on staff at the international level. If a department director, assistant to the president or executive board position is open, and a qualified woman is available, then it is the leader’s duty to hire that woman for the position as a sign of commitment to advancing women.
The interviewees recommended that union leaders develop mentoring relationships with potential women leaders and help foster their leadership skills. Grooming future leaders from the union’s rank and file is crucial to the long-term survival of the union. Leaders who have risen through the ranks have a better understanding of how the union works and may be more in touch with the membership. At the international level, unions also need to encourage and assist in training and mentoring of women at local levels.

Leaders at all levels need to identify women activists and women in local leadership and “bring them along” by providing individual leadership development. The interviewees recommended that mentors encourage women to take the next step—become more active, join a bargaining committee or run for an officer position—and “step out of their comfort zone.” Once they take that first step, it becomes much easier for them to increase their involvement.

As a mentor, leaders can expand protégés’ union experiences and knowledge by inviting them to meetings and trainings, introducing them to other people in the union, helping them network, providing them with speaking opportunities, including them in the decision making process and giving them advice.

Almost all the interviewees had formal and informal mentoring relationships with many women activists and leaders.

Interviewees said appointing more women and women of color and expanding union executive boards and decision making units were the most direct and effective methods to integrate women in leadership positions. Most look to the AFL-CIO expanding the Executive Council in 1995 to include more diverse leaders as an excellent example. “Deliberate, constitutional change to bring in women” into national vice president positions, for example, also makes a powerful statement to rank-and-file members—that unions are listening and value women.

Several unions have nearly doubled the size of their boards in order to appoint diverse individuals, and then have the appointees elected at the next convention. By expanding boards and appointing more women between conventions, union presidents can “make a bold statement, showing their commitment to advancing women.” Unions also can establish equity positions for qualified women and minorities. Often, executive boards and decision making units are composed of local leaders, most of whom are men. Expanding decision making units also can enable a union president to appoint people other than local leaders, like organizers and researchers, who have a great deal to contribute and can bring diversity to the board.
However, these positions for women must be “real, and not just tokenism.” An interviewee recalled that when she was appointed to an international position, she was told that she “was a token and not to do any work.” Another interviewee from a male-dominated union explained that when a woman was chosen for a newly created leadership position, her responsibilities included bargaining assignments, giving her an “opportunity to show the work she was capable of.” Interviewees from unions with predominantly women members said that their members thought they deserved to be a leader because it was “their turn” or elected women to office because it was “fair” or they were “nice”—not because they were qualified.

Several interviewees recommended that, in order to facilitate women’s participation in union leadership positions, unions needed to establish quotas like those of unions in other countries. The goal would be proportional representation. Typically, unions in other countries require that 30 percent to 50 percent of leaders are women, with incremental increases over several years. Similarly, international union federations also have representation requirements to ensure women’s participation. Another interviewee suggested a quota system for convention delegates to ensure women are represented, similar to the Democratic Party’s requirement that 50 percent of convention delegates are women.

Develop structures for women and priority issues for women.

Such structures as women’s departments, caucuses, councils and committees not only energize women members by addressing their concerns, but also foster leadership skills among women activists. Many unions with a women’s structure see it as a network to disseminate information and educate members on the issues. Establishing a structure specifically for women shows that the union recognizes women’s concerns and is committed to its women members. “Unions have to care about their women members and show that they are important to the union. That’s how you get more women involved.”

Women’s structures generally are responsible for surveying women members to identify the key issues of concern; creating plans for addressing and integrating issues of concern to women into the union’s agenda; tracking women’s participation in core union activities, primarily organizing and political mobilizing; developing local women’s structures; coordinating women’s conferences and trainings; and monitoring women’s participation in leadership at all levels.

However, in order for a women’s department, caucus, committee or council to be effective, the structure needs to be staffed and funded adequately. The interviewees pointed out that although many unions have structures targeting women, they are underfunded and understaffed and it is difficult to implement programs successfully. Often, women’s departments, for example, are composed of one staff person and one support person, or women’s programs
are under the directive of an assistant to the president who coordinates work with various departments, but doesn’t have staff to “make things happen.”

Interviewees also found that combining unions’ civil rights and women’s rights programs “does not work.” “Women need their own identity. The intention isn’t to be separate, but just (to be) recognized.” Incorporating women’s programs into civil or human rights departments also overextends staff and resources.

Many interviewees recognized that establishing women’s structures, especially in male-dominated unions, was seen as divisive or discriminatory. Several noted receiving comments from male members like “where’s the men’s department?” However, the interviewees maintained that the goal wasn’t to be separatists, but rather “to motivate women to get involved, get them qualified, so that when an elected position opens up, a qualified woman is prepared to fill it.”

Women’s conferences and trainings generally include workshops on parliamentary procedure and Robert’s Rules; organizing committees; shop steward responsibilities; public speaking; bargaining; equal employment opportunity (EEO) and Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) procedures; and organizing and member mobilizing skills to help women understand how unions work and give them the tools to participate in their locals and to be vocal in meetings.

Several unions hold smaller, advanced leadership training seminars for women, which they deem highly effective. These seminars focus on advanced mobilizing skills, such as running an organizing or political campaign; legislative and media training; and running a local, including finances and LM-2 training. Many advanced trainings also include intensive bargaining training with mock-negotiation sessions. National staff and leaders generally identify participants for the advanced trainings. Women members who attend advanced trainings feel they are being recognized for their involvement and become more energized.

The interviewees agreed that, in order for women’s conferences to be most effective, they should include only women. However, if men are invited, they should be encouraged to listen and observe. One union’s women’s structure
invites men to attend women’s conferences, but according to the structure’s constitution, men can’t make motions.

Many unions offer leadership development trainings and conferences for all members, not women specifically. The interviewees suggested that unions **increase women’s opportunities for attending these general events.** In their experience, they found that local leaders—who were mostly men—attended, or “they invite their friends or political assets” to attend the general trainings. To facilitate women’s participation, international unions could identify specific women activists to attend, ask locals not to send the same people as the year before, provide scholarships for women to attend or require locals to send a diverse group to these events.

The interviewees also stressed the importance of including women as panelists and workshop leaders in all trainings and conferences. Not only does this give women members the opportunity to hear from women leaders, but it also gives women presenters a chance to develop their speaking skills. A few unions hold courses taught entirely by women activists. As a result, women gain leadership experience as they learn more about the union’s structure.

The interviewees recommended that women’s conferences be developed around the core agenda of the union—organizing and politics—rather than focus on issues not core to an economic agenda, such as breast cancer. Conferences focused on organizing and political mobilizing help integrate women into crucial union work and also assert the value of women’s programs to unions. An interviewee described how her union uses its women’s conference during election years to train women in member mobilizing. Modeled after the political program, the women’s conference trains women to talk to other women in their workplace on issues of concern to working women, register women to vote and run a get-out-the-vote campaign in their workplace.

If women members are most interested in issues other than core economic issues, then a women’s conference can connect those issues to the union’s broader objectives. “If the goal is to develop women activists and leaders, then having workshops on breast cancer in isolation isn’t enough—unions need to tie these issues to politics or organizing to be most effective.” If women are interested in breast cancer, then a union can connect these issues to politics—such as the Bush administration’s failure to increase funding for breast cancer research—or collective bargaining. Interviewees recommended not including sessions like “how to pack a suitcase” in women’s trainings because they only further marginalize women’s programs.

The interviewees were very concerned about keeping women’s conferences from becoming “stale.” The key is to prevent the same women from attending every year so that unions aren’t training the same women over and over. Some unions ask women who have completed the training to seek out other women in their locals and invite them to attend. Others ask local leadership to identify a different group of women every year.
Some interviewees mentioned the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) as an effective place for leadership training and “developing union-building skills,” especially because women felt comfortable in trainings for women led by women. However, others felt that by sending members to CLUW conferences, union leaders considered their responsibilities to women members as complete and they could “check it off their list.” A few interviewees said that union leaders perceived CLUW as a “safety valve” for women activists to vent steam and take pressure off their union to address their concerns.

Develop work and family programs and policies.

The interviewees recognized women’s work and family responsibilities as one of the largest barriers preventing women from becoming activists and leaders. As a result, unions—even majority female unions—don’t have a representative number of women, especially younger women, participating in the union.

To increase women’s participation as leaders and activists, unions need to help by providing child care, holding meetings at times when women can attend and in environments safe for children so women can bring them along. For example, one union has several locals with many younger women leaders who invite members to bring their children along. Attendees take turns holding a baby if a mother needs to lead the discussion. Another interviewee explained that her union provides child care—not just at women’s events, but at all union conferences and conventions. “And good child care—with food and fun activities like trips to the zoo. It helps us get women to our events and gets them educated and energized.”

Unions need to develop family-friendly policies to enable women leaders to fulfill their union responsibilities in addition to their family responsibilities. The interviewees pointed out that many male union leaders had the support of spouses who were stay-at-home parents. “If unions want more women in leadership positions—especially young women—then we need to develop family-friendly systems and structures to address the needs of women.” One interviewee pointed out that her union had no system for family leave or child care for its own national staff.

Union apprenticeship programs need to address work and family needs in order to increase women’s participation in unions. For example, an interviewee pointed out that apprenticeship programs don’t offer family or pregnancy leave options, so if a woman gets pregnant, she would have to leave the program.

Unions also can make structural changes to make it more possible for women to assume organizing and leadership positions. A full-time organizing position, for example, is very demanding and unions frequently have difficulties recruiting and retaining women organizers. Organizers often are sent all over the country for long periods of time, making
it extremely difficult for women who have families. As a result, one interviewee reported her union now is keeping its organizers within a region so that they can go home at the end of the day, or at least every weekend, to spend time with their families. Another union with small locals has found ways to merge contracts and bargaining units, combining resources and staff. This has reduced the local leaders’ workloads and enables more women to hold elected positions.

**Measure the accountability and effectiveness of programs.**

The interviewees were deeply concerned about the accountability of programs targeting women. Effectiveness and success weren’t “just about good evaluations from attendees,” but about results: Did more women hit the streets in political campaigning or in organizing campaigns? Are more women participating in their locals? Are executive boards more reflective of their membership? Similarly, a union’s plan to bring more women into leadership positions cannot be about tokenism. “Don’t give women positions in charge of nothing. Make sure that their job is real and give them real responsibility.”

Structures and conferences and trainings should not become “stale,” “stagnant” or “complacent.” Unions must regularly survey women members and track their participation to develop programs that address their needs. Using issues women members care about in trainings integral to the union, like organizing and political mobilizing, ensures that women will be in the “forefront of their unions’ agenda.” In addition, women’s structures and conferences must constantly seek out new women to “activate and get out to talk to others.” If the same women attend every year, the union is re-educating the same women who “just end up talking to each other and bitching.” New women will want to attend if the training and content is truly valuable and helps them succeed.

Similarly, women members and women leaders should demand more from their top union leaders. Leaders need to be held accountable for addressing the concerns of women members and advancing women in leadership roles. They should lead by example and invest in women’s programs; integrate women and women’s issues into the core agenda of the union; ensure that women participate in conferences and conventions; and appoint women and women of color to their executive boards and staff—not just as tokens, but to reflect their membership.
Part I: Public Opinion Polling Data

The data available on women and unions comes largely from AFL-CIO public opinion surveys conducted every two years. This data bolsters the findings from the focus group research. In particular, women think of unions as being able to help with wages, benefits and job security. However, women see unions as being for men, realize the lack of women’s leadership in unions and do not see unions as being able to deliver. As the focus group research found, this data also suggests that traditional women’s economic issues motivate women, including work and family issues, workplace rights and equality. Finally, there is a definite streak of independence among working women—as highlighted in the issues they identified as reasons for joining a union and observed in the focus groups.

Generally, the data is broken down by such factors as gender, race, income, age group, labor force participation, region of the country, educational attainment and union membership. However, the sample sizes for women of color were too small to be reliable.

Women Have Positive Attitudes Toward Unions

Overall, about two-thirds of women see unions as having an important role in society. This has been increasing slowly since 1997.
Additionally, a slight majority of women see unions as innovative and able to change with the times. Men are divided.

There has been a steady increase since 1997 in the number of women who say employees are more successful in getting problems resolved at work by acting as a group.

Women, regardless of race, age or educational attainment, agree that employees are more successful in getting problems resolved at work as a group.
Women overwhelmingly favor workers over management in disputes. This has remained constant since 1999. Women also favor workers more than men.

However, We are Losing Ground with Women Workers

Women’s feelings toward unions have declined, while men’s positive views have increased 9 percentage points since 1999.
Women increasingly say they think unions tell their members what to do, rather than thinking members make their own decisions. The feeling that union members make their own decisions is down 14 percentage points since 1999.

**Chart 6: Decision Making in Unions**

Women increasingly see unions as ineffective.

**Chart 7: Effectiveness of Unions**
Women think that protecting individual rights and uniting to improve the lives of everyone in their workplace are the most important reasons for more workers to join a union.

Women, more than men, think the single most important reason to join a union is “to protect individual workers’ rights on the job so they cannot be taken advantage of or discriminated against.” Sixty-nine percent of women identified this reason as somewhat or very important.

Other important reasons women identified were to “gain a stronger voice on the job on safety, fair treatment and ways to get the job done” and to “unite to improve the lives of everyone in their workplace.” Again, women felt more strongly about these reasons than men.

**Chart 8: Reasons for Joining a Union, 2003**

- **Reason 1:** Protect individual workers’ rights on the job so they cannot be taken advantage of or discriminated against
- **Reason 2:** Gain a stronger voice on the job on safety, fair treatment, ways to get the job done
- **Reason 3:** Unite to improve lives of everyone in their workplace
- **Reason 4:** Unions stand up for all working people on health care, Social Security and a higher minimum wage
- **Reason 5:** Unions help balance the influence of Big Business and work for laws protecting workers
Part II: Increasing Numbers of Women as Union Members

The data available on the increasing number of women joining unions comes largely from Kate Bronfenbrenner’s research at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations, in particular her recent research examining trends in organizing victories through both certification elections and voluntary recognition campaigns. Her research shows that women have accounted for the majority of new workers organized each year since at least the mid-1980s and suggests the face of the union movement is changing rapidly. According to Bronfenbrenner, “if women continue to outpace men in new organizing efforts, whether by accident or design, in the very near future, the overwhelmingly male leadership of the American labor movement will face a membership that is majority female.”

The number of women workers has increased steadily and continues to grow.
In 1950, only one-third of the U.S. labor force was female; by 2003, that proportion was approaching one half (46 percent).

Women’s participation in unions also is growing.
Fifty-five percent of all new workers organized are women.

More than half of all private-sector organizing campaigns today are in industries and occupations in which women make up the majority of the workforce.

Between 1990 and 2000, the number of union women increased by one half-million, or 8 percent. The increase in union membership between 1990 and 2000 was greatest among African American women, who now account for half of all African American union members. In fact, African American women is the only demographic group to account for a larger percentage of union membership (7 percent) than it does in the workforce as a whole (6 percent).

| Chart 9: Union Members by Race and Gender, 1985–2002 (in millions) |
|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| All Workers     | 17.0    | 16.7    | 16.4    | 16.6    | 16.1    |
| Men             | 11.3    | 10.6    | 9.9     | 9.6     | 9.3     |
| Women           | 5.7     | 6.2     | 6.4     | 6.7     | 6.8     |
| White women     | 4.5     | 4.9     | 5.0     | 5.2     | 5.2     |
| Women of color  | 1.2     | 1.3     | 1.5     | 1.5     | 1.5     |
Union election campaigns are more likely to succeed if the workforce is majority female or if the lead organizer is a woman.

In units with predominantly women, win rates in union elections average as high as 62 percent, compared with an average win rate of 35 percent or less in units in which women are the minority. Win rates are especially high—82 percent—in units with 75 percent or more women of color.

While overall union activity is fairly evenly divided between units in which women are in the majority and those in which they are in the minority, elections won by unions tend to be highly concentrated in units with a majority of women.
The win rate for women organizers averages 55 percent, compared with the average win rate for male organizers of 42 percent. The highest win rates—89 percent—are found in units in which women of color predominate and in which there is at least one woman of color as lead or staff organizer.

| Chart 12: Win Rates of Organizing Staff in NLRB Certification Election Campaigns |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| **Staff resources**                              | **Win rate when** | **Win rate when** |
|                                                  | present (%)       | not present (%)  |
| Organizer ratio at least 1 to 100 workers        | 44%              | 46%              |
| **Women**                                        |                  |                  |
| **Lead organizer female**                       | 53%              | 42%              |
| In units with 75% or more women                  | 62%              | 63%              |
| In units with 50–74% women                       | 63%              |                  |
| In units with 25–49% women                       | 14%              | 32%              |
| In units with less than 25% women                | 36%              | 35%              |
| **One or more female organizers lead or staff**  | 49%              | 41%              |
| In units with 75% or more women                  | 61%              | 65%              |
| In units with 50–74% women                       | 50%              | 42%              |
| In units with 25–49% women                       | 46%              | 20%              |
| In units with less than 25% women                | 23%              | 39%              |
| **People of Color**                              |                  |                  |
| **Lead organizer person of color**              | 58%              | 41%              |
| **One or more organizers of color, lead or staff** | 50%              | 40%              |
| **Women of color**                               |                  |                  |
| **Lead organizer woman of color**               | 69%              | 43%              |
| In units with 75% or more women of color         | 89%              | 79%              |
| In units with 50–74% women of color              | 67%              | 60%              |
| In units with 25–49% women of color              | 75%              | 46%              |
| In units with less than 25% women of color       | 44%              | 38%              |
| **One or more women of color, lead or staff**    | 59%              | 41%              |
| In units with 75% or more women of color         | 89%              | 70%              |
| In units with 50–74% women of color              | 65%              | 55%              |
| In units with 25–49% women of color              | 50%              | 48%              |
| In units with less than 25% women of color       | 35%              | 39%              |
However, in predominantly female units, only 42 percent of campaigns have a female lead organizer, and 65 percent have at least one female organizer working as a lead or staff organizer for the campaign. More than one-third (35 percent) of the campaigns in predominantly female units have no female organizers on staff.

In units with 75 percent or more women of color, 64 percent have at least one woman of color working on the campaign, but only 32 percent have a woman of color as lead organizer. The percentage of campaigns with women of color as lead organizers drops below 10 percent for all units with less than 75 percent women of color in the unit.

Only 8 percent of the campaigns in predominantly male units and 12 percent in mixed gender units have a female lead organizer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart 13: Lead Organizer Racial Background by Gender</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Lead Organizers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>White non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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Interestingly, the win rate for single mothers with dependents averaged 63 percent, compared with an overall win rate for female lead organizers of 55 percent.

Sources:


