

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Female Empowerment in Mauritian Trade Unions: A Contemporary Analysis

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Abstract

This paper aims at identifying why female representation is weak in trade unions in Mauritius. This could be a phenomenon common to developing nations whereby the role of women might have apparently been limited in society. There is female anticipation on way in developing economies and Mauritius is no exception to it. Concerning trade unionism, it has been long time associated with the macho role where men constituted more than 80% of union membership and maintained dominance since the early days of trade unionism in Mauritius. The context has changed over the years following the industrialization of the economy and the development of sectors like textile, tourism and the services areas where women have been able to secure employment and earn a living. Despite high female representation in these areas, women are unfortunately limited in their participation as trade union members. The article wants to see why women are not given the chance to join trade unions not only as ordinary members but rather as important players within unions. It firstly aims to analyze why women have been barred from empowerment in joining unions and having important positions. The paper, through a scientific study, then moves forward with potential strategies that unions could undertake to ensure better female representation hence empowerment. This philosophy could do justice to the female workforce which comprises nearly 52% of the population with a high rate of female workforce (55%) among the working population.

Keywords: *Empowerment, Mauritius, Trade Unions, Women.*

Introduction

This research paper analyses the issue of female representation in trade unions in Mauritius. Although there are a variety of opportunities to encourage gender equality namely through the effort of the Government of Mauritius, non-governmental organisations like Gender links, women are still weakly represented in trade unions. This accounts for a low profile of the female workforce in society while they represent in countries where women make up a large proportion of union members, they are not well represented within union leadership. Women are only about 21 percent of lead union organisers [1]. In the Mauritian case, only 12% of women are unionised while some 191, 800 women held a job in 2011 and accounted for 35.7% of the Mauritian employed population [2]. Mauritius is a signatory to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1997 SADC declaration on Gender, which calls for the better representation of women in legislatures. The Sachs Commission Report highlights the 'invisibility' of women in politics, and by extension in Parliament. The latter describes this state of affairs as 'a grave democratic deficit' and blames the present electoral system, which 'will never do justice to the true role of women in society and will never

enhance the empowerment of women' [3]. This view is also shared in trade unions where less than 30% of the female employees were unionised. Promoting women and their perspectives more visibly within unions can benefit them even further by ensuring that their issues as workers are prioritised in all aspects of union work, from contract negotiations and representing individual workers to lobbying and other political work [4]. Because unions shape policy and practice in both economic and political life, having women at the table has broad implications for their well being, their autonomy, and their rights as workers [5]. Research also suggests that women are powerful and effective leaders who can benefit unions as a whole. For example, women lead organizers have higher success rates winning certification elections than men do; women of colour have the highest win rates of all [5].

The Research Questions and the Hypothesis

Based on interviews with union representatives and female workforce in Mauritius, the research explores three main questions:

- What is the existing strategy of accommodating women in trade unions?
- How can trade unions give more empowerment to female employees for better union representation?

- What new strategies can be developed to accommodate women in trade unions?

In line with these key issues, there was a need to find a statistical relationship between female empowerment in unions in Mauritius and their impact on union performance. The question was formulated as follows:

Is there a Statistical Relationship between Female Empowerment and the Bargaining Power of Trade Unions in the New Employee Relations' Context?

Null Hypothesis: Female empowerment will have no effect on the bargaining power of unions. Therefore, the difference in gender hardly matters on the bargaining power of unions implying that female members do not materially add to the improvement of collective bargaining in unions.

Alternatively, when there is better female engagement, either through empowerment or co-option, trade unions benefit from a more balanced approach to bargaining probably through innovative ideas, more subtle form of bargaining or the development of more engaged and constructive form of bargaining in a more and more evolving context.

The Need for Better Female Representation in Trade Unions in Mauritius

Whether it comes from Mauritius or abroad, gender representation in trade unions is always debated in different forums. The broad picture that the public usually gets is the "macho" orientation of unions which traditionally appears to be male-dominated with charismatic leaders. This explanation usually comes from the fact that men have traditionally been considered as breadwinners and women have been limited to household chores or ordinary positions in the office. Everywhere else in the world, women and young workers are still underrepresented in trade union structures and leadership positions [6]. However, for some time now, a generational change is taking place which, so far, has largely remained unnoticed. The argument here would be how women would be better represented in today's employee relations context and how well they could contribute to their union.

The barriers that women face in accessing union leadership are similar to those they face in major occupations, especially male dominated ones [7]. Whether women from certain types of occupations are better able to surmount the barriers (i.e. Do some jobs prepare women better for life inside

unions?) would be a question that could be usefully explored in the research.

Women have emerged as the flexible labour force par excellence in the highly competitive labour intensive sectors of the global economy, leading to their growing presence in paid work in many regions of the world [8]. While worldwide women have increased their share of the world's labour force, are more evenly distributed across the sectors than they were in the past and have made some advance in the limited number of managerial and administrative jobs in developing countries, gender hierarchies in the labour market have proved resilient [5]. Making women aware of the benefits of trade union membership, trade union representation in the workplace, and collective agreements, are also important tools in the efforts to close the gap.

Trade Unions' Reaction to the Problem

It is important to find out how trade unions adjust or prepare themselves in the contemporary employee relations context. The outcome of the research finds out how the public and private unions adapt themselves to an evolutionary context. The researcher finds it relevant to search out how both local and international unions expect to prepare themselves in the current situation.

The Issue of Representation

Unions will have to broaden their membership base beyond the formal sector to include the many millions of workers in the informal small business sector. The point for African trade unions is that far too many workers in the small business sector are currently not unionised. They present an enormous potential for membership growth and the poor conditions of employment in large parts of the informal sector can only be improved through a combination of protective legislation and unionisation.

African unions will also have to pay far more attention to gender issues and become organisations that are relevant for and responsive to the needs of women workers [9]. The same applies to young workers who often regard trade unions as irrelevant to their interests.

Research on Female Empowerment

Empowerment of union members has been quite a popular debate among unions in the Mauritian workplace. It has been stated that the issue is better focused on women who have minimal roles to play in unions and are not actively involved as members. To some extent, this could be a practice

that discourages an increase in union membership and avoids the diversity element among unions.

In recent times, women have come to the forefront of employee relations where they have been discriminated but attempted to raise their voices against such malpractice. This matter can be nuanced since women may be more fearful to join unions in order to avoid work-related problems. On the other hand, it may sensitise union leaders to consider the importance of giving more opportunities to women through empowerment.

The Research Methodology

The research methodology was based on stratified sampling approach. Two types of unions were selected-one type from the public sector unions and the second type from private sector unions. Members from these unions were employees both from public and private Mauritian companies. Their age group was 23-55 with more than 50% coming close to the median age group in Mauritius (32) at 2012. There was no major choice about the location of the respondents while the respondents were discriminated at 50:50 based on the Mauritian population configuration. Regarding sample percentage, 70% of respondents came from public unions while 30% came from private unions taking into consideration the respective representation of employees in the different employment sectors. The sectors were mainly comprised of white-collar jobs and a lower rate of blue-collar jobs.

In these research tests, 70 respondents from the public sector were identified and 28 from the private sector. All employees were unionised and this showed greater interest from respondents to answer the set of questions. The questions that follow in this section attempt to see how well women could be empowered to access to better involvement at work.

Respondents' Views Concerning the Encouragement of Women to Join Unions

Respondents were asked to state their views regarding the encouragement that women received to join unions. Four options were given with their relative scales: *Not at all-1, a little-2, Fairly well-3* and *Very well-4*. The results are displayed below:

The weighted mean of each type of union or organisation is calculated, Mean value of A was $M = 2.49$, Mean value of B was $M = 3.00$, H_0 : mean value of A = mean value of B, H_1 : mean value of A

Table 1: Views regarding womens' encouragement

Option	R _A	Scale	R _B	Scale
Not at all	9	9	2	2
A little	30	60	9	18
Fairly well	19	76	14	42
Very well	12	48	13	52
Mean		σ	n	
A: Public	2.49	0.93	70	
B: Private	3.00	1.05	28	
SE of Means A and B	0.227	Z Value	-2.24	

\neq mean value of B., Standard deviation A was $S = 0.93$ and Standard deviation B was $S = 1.05$.

Standard error of both means were 0.227, $Z = -2.24$. The score for a two-tailed test at the 5% level is 1.96. As the calculated Z score of -2.24 is beyond this value, there is a significant difference between the two means, and the possibility of an error which might be a Type-I error. The null hypothesis was however accepted. The variation was pronounced since public sector employees found the encouragement weak while private sector employees contrasted by stating that the encouragement was very strong. The null hypothesis was accepted with the F-test supporting that variances showed little significant differences.

Respondents' views Concerning how well Women Participate in Unions

Respondents were asked to give their views regarding how well women get along in union activities. Four scales were chosen: *Not at all-1, A little-2, Quite well-3* and *Very well-4*. The responses are displayed below:

Table 2: Extent of female engagement

Option	R _A	Scale	R _B	Scale
Not at all	7	7	2	2
A little	41	82	13	26
Fairly well	13	39	9	27
Very well	9	36	4	16
Mean		σ	n	
A: Public	2.34	0.83	70	
B: Private	2.54	0.84	28	
SE of Means A and B	0.187	Z Value	-1.07	

The weighted mean of each type of union or organisation is calculated, Mean value of A was $M = 2.34$, Mean value of B was $M = 2.54$, H_0 : mean value of A = mean value of B, H_1 : mean value of A \neq mean value of B. Standard deviation A was $S = 0.83$ and Standard deviation B was $S = 0.84$. Standard error of both means were 0.187, $Z = -1.07$. The score for a two-tailed test at the 5% level is 1.96. As the calculated Z score of -1.07 is within the limits, there is no significant difference between the two means. The findings confirmed that women were a little performing in unions.

This view could be associated with their low level of involvement and their minimal role that they actually play. In private unions, respondents also suggested that they played their role quite well (32%).

Respondents’ Ranking of the Effort Leaders can do to Favour Women Integration in Unions

Respondents were asked to rank in order of preference the effort that leaders would undertake to better represent women in unions. Options were ranked as follows: *Option 1=4, Option 2=3, option 3=2 and Option 4= 1*

The revised ratings are summarised below: Public

Organisations –A

Option	Rating	1	2	3
Offer them more responsible positions		45	42	4
Increase female membership in unions		69	12	15
Deliberately offer them key positions to create a balance between both sexes in unions		48	12	15

Private organisations –B

Option	Rating	1	2	3
Offer them more responsible positions		42	14	1
Increase female membership in unions		15	4	3
Deliberately offer them key positions to create a balance between both sexes in unions		18	2	6

Each option was added and averaged (divided by 3 since there were 3 classifications). The table below shows the rating of options with their averages.

Table 3: Rating issues

Rating Average	Public	Private
Offer them more responsible positions	30.3	19
Increase female membership in unions	32	7.3
Deliberately offer them key positions to create a balance between both sexes in unions	25	8.6

The observations were slightly contrasting depending upon the specific nature of each sector. For example, increasing female membership was highly rated among public respondents. The argument that gained more acceptances was offering more responsible positions to women in unions. Both categories of employees found the effort worthwhile since responsibility would go in line with authority while women could gain more respect in unions. The fact that private sector respondents were apprehensive of increasing female membership in unions means that there

might be lesser gender discrimination in their union. Co-opting women for key positions was the least accepted option in this research. The two-tailed p-value equalled 0.2268. By conventional criteria, this difference was considered to be not statistically significant.

Position in the Union

Respondents were asked to state their position in their respective unions. A large number of them stated that they were ordinary members of their union since they had sought membership only. Some 5% respondents stated that they formed part of their union as Executive members having a specific role to play. A much lower percentage considered them to hold prominent roles in their unions as leader, public relations Officer, Secretary and Treasurer. Broadly, most respondents were not actively involved within their unions but showed characteristics whereby they were interested in union matters.

Effort that Unions can do to Accommodate Women

Respondents were asked to give their views regarding the effort that unions could themselves do to accommodate women in unions. Three options were provided to them where they would select one of them.

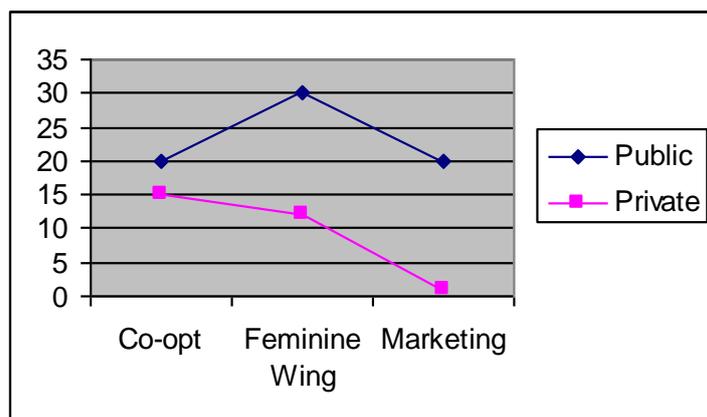


Fig. 1: The effort done to accommodate women in unions

Regarding co-option of women as members, 28% of public employees supported the option compared with 54% from private employees. Regarding the develop a feminine wing in the union and offer quotas to women to join unions, 44% of public sector employees were in favour in the same way as for private employees (43%). Regarding marketing practice to attract women in unions, 28% of public unions favoured the strategy compared with only 3% for private employees. Public unions were keener to say that there should be a feminine wing to accommodate women in unions so that they could have their due representation as members. Private sector

employees followed a slightly different path where they preferred having them as co-opted members.

Factors Influencing Women to join Unions

Respondents in public and private sectors, both 45%, stated that it was the macho-stereotype role that encouraged women to join unions since this was visible from the outset that they had a marginal role to play. 27% of public sector respondents added that it was also the outcomes of unions' actions that might force women to join unions compared with 12% of private employees. 28% of private employees might have associated ineffective leadership as a reason that could compel women to join unions compared with 18% of public employees. Disputes among male leaders were the least rated option.

Advantage gained from Female Membership in Unions

The last question in this area was a directional one since it aimed at finding out any advantage that employees could perceive from increased female membership in unions. Answers varied from the 98 respondents who participated in this survey. Popular responses were: The generation of more ideas on union agendas, the importance of having a feminine touch in contemporary unions, the commitment of women in union activities, civilised approach within employee relations, the benefit of etiquette from female collaboration, and so on.

Some answers also noted: The possibility of eliminating the chauvinist attitude in unions, the possibility of achieving better and balanced decisions through female involvement, the opportunity of benefiting from female attitudes like more tact and diplomacy in the bargaining approach. The element of sharing and equality of rights was also mentioned but few responses could mention the importance of creating more balance regarding gender representation since women represent more than 50% of the population in the country and are more widely involved at work.

Conclusion on Female Empowerment

It could be broadly accepted that respondents agreed that women have been limited in unions due to a lack of encouragement or empowerment. The findings represented contrasts at times between public and private respondents illustrating the acute values of certain answers. There might have been the risk of Type I error where the test rejects the null hypothesis. However, this could also be an incidence of the findings where assumptions regarding women's

role in unions could not be taken for granted. Broadly, women need to be encouraged and undertake more serious responsibilities in today's unions.

Trade Unions may have to accommodate women and undertake an opportunity for more female involvement in today's unions

The empowerment of union members has been raised among unions in the Mauritian workplace. The issue can be better focused on women who have minimal roles to play in unions and are not actively involved in union activities. In recent times, women's importance has become important in employee relations where they have been discriminated but attempted to raise their voices against such malpractice. The findings in this section attempt to see how well women could be empowered to accede to better involvement at work.

Table 4: Statistical summary of empowerment in unions

<u>Item</u>	<u>Mean value</u>	<u>Mean value</u>	<u>Sample ≥ 30</u>
Sub-questions that supported the main assumption	Public	Private	Z-test score
16. Encouragement of women to join unions	2.49	3.00	-2.24
17. Women's participation in unions	2.34	2.54	1.07
18. Effort done to accommodate women in unions	0.227	Two-tailed test accepted.	

Respondents were asked to give their views regarding the effort that unions could themselves do to accommodate women in unions. The test's *p*-value was 0.227. Public unions were keener to say that there should be a feminine wing to accommodate women in unions so that they could have their due representation as members. Private sector employees followed a slightly different path where they preferred having them as co-opted members.

The Commission of the Status of Women acknowledged that women's economic empowerment is necessary for equitable and sustainable economic growth and development [10]. Despite considerable progress on many aspects of women's economic empowerment through education and employment, deeply entrenched gender inequality persists as a result of discriminatory norms and practices.

In a question, respondents were asked to state their views regarding the encouragement that women received to join unions. The mean value for public respondents was 2.49 and that of private respondents was 3.00. The calculated Z-score of -2.24 was beyond 1.96 and there was a significant difference between the two means, and the possibility of an error which might be a Type-I error. However, the F-test carried out gave a p-value that was above the minimum. Since the F-test minimised the importance of the error while the Z-score showed a difference, the null hypothesis was accepted. The variation was pronounced since public sector employees found the encouragement weak while private sector employees contrasted by stating that the encouragement was very strong.

Strong measures are needed to eliminate stereotypical attitudes regarding the role of women and men in society, which limit women's participation in the labour market [5]. The role of families in early gender socialization remains critical in the elimination of gender stereotypes. In addition, opportunities should be sought to enhance the role of the media in providing a more balanced and realistic portrayal of women, including in leadership positions.

The Benefits of Increased Female Empowerment on Unions

A question aimed at finding out any advantage that employees could perceive from increased female membership in unions. Answers varied from the 98 respondents who participated in this survey. Popular responses were: The generation of more ideas on union agendas, the importance of having a feminine touch in contemporary unions, the commitment of women in union activities, civilised approach within employee relations, the benefit of etiquette from female collaboration, and so on.

Some answers also noted: The possibility of eliminating the chauvinist attitude in unions, the possibility of achieving better and balanced decisions through female involvement, the opportunity of benefiting from female attitudes like more tact and diplomacy in the bargaining approach.

Views of the Panel of Expert Opinion on Female Empowerment

The views of leaders of leaders of expert opinion are presented in this research. All experts were individually interviewed over a three-month exercise during the months of May 2012 to August 2012 depending on the availability of such experts

on the various research areas and their views are presented. All members of the panel of expert opinion gave their interpretation regarding the importance female empowerment at work. The key statements are shown below.

Expert One

- The private sector federation had already empowered women.
- The Confederation has made it a point to change its leadership every two years and make it more open for women to join senior positions.

Expert Two

- The male-dominated perception existed in public unions although issues like female empowerment would be most welcome.
- Roles have been stereotyped in the public service while there have been very minimal changes regarding more pronounced female involvement in unions.

Expert Three

- There has been some effort to better represent women in unions while their role might be still limited to secretarial positions.

Expert Four

- Female membership in unions has increased over the years since women feel their importance in engaging themselves for a social cause.
- Inertia but also certain negative clichés from women organisations that has kept them distant from joining unions.
- There was a consensus that the prominent role of women in society and their social advancement could be a positive step in bringing them to key positions in modern unions.

Recommendation

Although views can vary from the panel of expert opinion concerning better women empowerment in unions, certain views express that female empowerment is quite weak in Mauritian unions and the effort needs to be sustained. The trade union culture in Mauritius has always supported male leadership [11]. There should be the need for female empowerment as 71% of the employees in the EPZ companies are composed of women. Additionally, women are prone to discriminations, seen from the inequality of wages, which varies from 8% in the EPZ companies to 20% for the executives.

A joint ILO/ICFTU report made certain recommendations regarding how women's representation in union leadership positions could

be developed [12]. These consisted of statutory reforms of unions to provide for women's representation like reserved seats, quotas, targets, proportionality, specific targets and plans such as equality plans, awareness raising and publicity, education and leadership training among others.

The gender issue has always been a barrier to the advancement of women in society. This also reflects their position in local unions in Mauritius. With less than 30% of female representation in the Legislative Assembly of Mauritius, the imbalance looks to be clear and this perception is also felt in key positions in the private sector where there is a glass ceiling for women to aspire to key positions.

The symbolic presence of women in certain union campaigns has gained credibility in a near past.

This arose from the suspension of working women who had key positions in their unions and who also had major functions within their organisation. It is seen that their role and importance are getting valued as their popularity has made them become national figures. This could be the case of a female union leader who was suspended from the national audio-visual corporation, MBC, since August 2010.

It can be concluded that there are positive arguments that favour female empowerment in unions and this could allow for more credibility of unionisation in the future. Respondents have accepted that women's role cannot be minimised and that their due importance in unions will be a key issue for union survival in the middle of an environment still bound by scepticism and reluctance against women's pronounced participation.

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Remarks

In relation to this argument, it is recently seen that government enforces wider empowerment of union in politics and this has been proven through a 2:1 ratio of men / women in municipal and rural elections in December 2012.