

Final research report

Women's Participation and Leadership in Education Unions: Investigating Barriers and Identifying Solutions

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TEAM

Tracey Konstant, Team Leader

Henriette Bikie, Policy analyst and researcher for Cameroon

Ann Dela Apekey, Researcher for Ghana

Damaris Wanjiru Muhika, Researcher for Kenya

Sophia Mapaze Isala, Researcher for Namibia

Fatou Seck Youm, Researcher for Senegal

Foreword

Education International (EI) defends and promotes human and trade rights. Advancing gender equality in education unions, education systems and society has been one of the most important work priorities for EI since its foundation in 1993.

Various EI World Congresses, recognising that persistent gender inequalities continue to exist in unions and education systems, have passed several resolutions urging member organisations to ensure the full participation of women in union activities, structures and leadership. EI developed the Gender Equality Action Plan and set up women's networks to advance the unions' gender equality agenda.

Nevertheless, an evaluation of the results of the African Women in Education Network (AWEN), carried out in 2018, noted that some progress towards gender equality among EI member organisations in Africa had been achieved, but women's representation in union structures and leadership remained negligible. That is the reason why EI Africa decided to carry out a study on *Women's Participation and Leadership in Education Unions: Investigating Barriers and Identifying Solutions*.

Women's full representation and leadership are a prerequisite for making our unions more democratic, inclusive and stronger. The findings of this research do not only provide an overview of the current situation of women's participation in education unions, they also highlight the numerous barriers faced by women in their quest to participate more actively in union structures and occupy leadership positions.

Understanding the different social factors, cultural and structural barriers in society and within our trade union movement as well as those related to women's individual circumstances, is of paramount importance in addressing gender inequality in education unions.

The findings and recommendations of this study can help us tackle present and future challenges and move the gender equality agenda in our education unions forward.

We therefore recommend this study to all the EI member organisations in Africa.

Dennis SINYOLO

Regional Director, EI Africa

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Acronyms

AWEN	African Women in Education Network
C190	ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment, 2019
CBA	Collective Bargaining Agreements
CCT	Coalition Of Concern Teachers Ghana
EI	Education International
EIRAF	Education International's Africa Region
FECASE	Federation Camerounaise des Syndicats de l'Education (Cameroon Federation of Education Unions)
FESER	Federation des Syndicats de l'Enseignement et de le Recherche (Cameroon Federation of Education and Research Unions)
FGD	Focus group discussions
GEAP	Gender Equality Action Plan
GNAT	Ghana National Association of Teachers
GS	General Secretary
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
KNUT	Kenya National Union of Teachers
KUPPET	Kenya Union of Post Primary Education Teachers
LGBT+	lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and other
NAGRAT	National Association of Graduate Teachers
NANTU	Namibia National Teachers 's Union (NANTU)
RESAC	Central Africa Women in Education Network
SAES	Syndicat Autonome de l'Enseignement Supérieur (Senegal Autonomous Union of Teachers of Higher)
SAWEN	Southern Africa Women in Education Network
SELS	Syndicat des enseignants libres du Sénégal (Union of Free Teachers of Senegal)
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
(SNEEL-CNTS)	Syndicat National des Enseignants du Sénégal (Senegal National Union of Teachers of Elementary)
SUDES	Syndicat Unique et Démocratique des Enseignants du. Sénégal (Independent Democratic Union of Senegalese Teachers)
SYNTESPRIC	Syndicat des travailleurs des établissements privé (Union of workers of private education establishments in Cameroon)
SYPROS	Syndicat des enseignants du Sénégal (Teachers ' Union of Senegal)
TEWU	Teachers' and Educational Workers' Union
UASU	Universities Academic Staff Union
UDEN	Union Democratique des Enseignants (Democratic Teachers' Union of Senegal)
UTAG	University Teachers Association Ghana
WAWEN	West Africa Women in Education Network
WNEA	Women's Network in Eastern Africa

Executive Summary

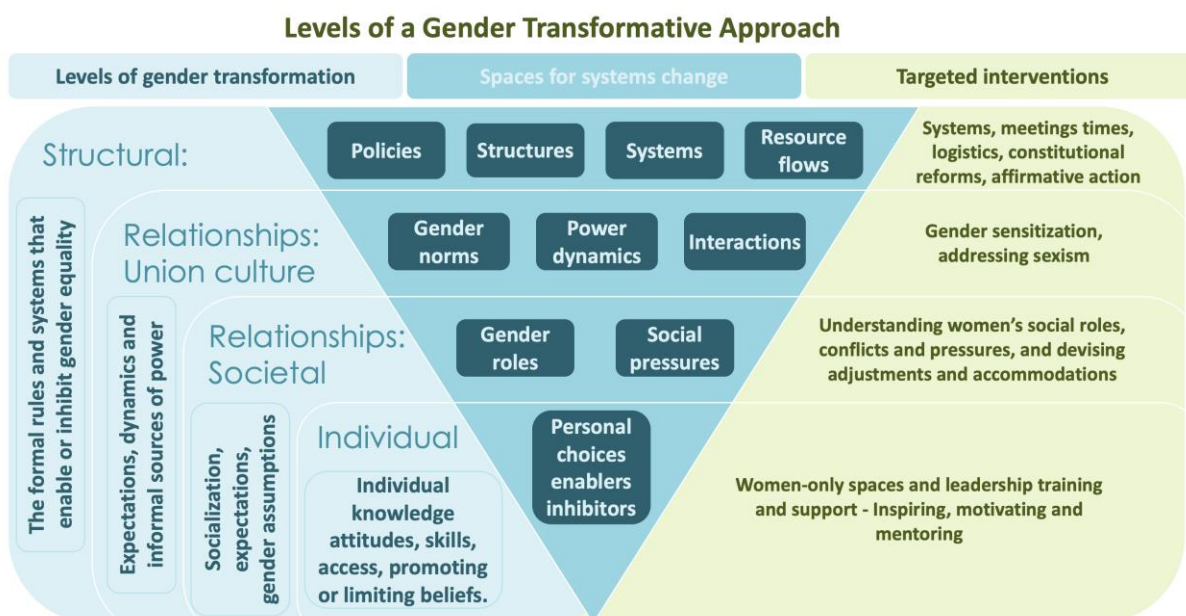
INTRODUCTION

The Education International (EI) 2011 Resolution on Gender Equality notes that despite women generally outnumbering men in education union membership, progress in women’s participation in union leadership is slow and uneven. EI is the world’s largest sector-specific Global Union Federation, representing hundreds of member organisations and millions of teachers and education staff, the great majority of whom are women. EI also supports and closely partners with women’s networks across all of its global regions, including the regional network, African Women in Education Network (AWEN), and four subregional networks.

THE AFRICAN WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT

In order for women to be heard, understood and their specific needs and experiences to be prioritised in unions, they need to be well-represented in leadership and negotiation. This research aims to better understand the slow pace of reform and the glass ceiling facing women in union movements. We sought the advice and insights of male leaders and women leaders and members in affiliated unions, women’s networks and EI, on how best to support members and affiliates to become more representative of their largely female membership.

A gender transformative approach offered a framework. The situation for gender equality and access for women was analysed in terms of i) union structures and policies; ii) union culture and internal relations; iii) social constructs in society at large; and iv) individual women’s decisions.



The study was undertaken in five countries (Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Senegal) with seventeen of EIRAF’s eighteen affiliated unions. Of the 162 participants in individual interviews or focus group, 81% were female. Demographic data on the numbers of women in leadership positions at different levels were obtained from ten of the participating affiliates. Twenty three policies (e.g. constitutions, gender policies, CBAs) from EI and eleven affiliates were analysed against a gender lens (i.e. are they gender blind, responsive, mainstreaming or transformative). A targeted literature and internal document review was conducted.

FINDINGS

Most of African society is patriarchal. Even in less traditional households, most women are the primary home-makers, whether or not they are formally employed, and men are likely to take major family decisions. While a great deal of progress is still needed, there have been global developments in women's rights, financial independence, education levels and gender equality, including in Africa. More women are entering into political and economic leadership. Sporadic increases in female representation in leadership were noted in the 2018 AWEN evaluation of EIRAF affiliates' gender reforms. Some structures, in some unions, had reached gender parity; while in others women's representation was negligible.

Although there is no routine system in most unions for monitoring the numbers of women and men in different structures, we were able to collate some examples of gender disaggregated demographics in union structures. Overall in these examples, 6% positions are occupied by women through open election, and another 23% are filled by women through affirmative positions.

The SOCIAL FACTORS that enable and obstruct women in union leadership

Socialisation

Gender dynamics in union leadership are profoundly affected by socialisation of both men and women; the expectations of society, family, in-laws; and personal fundamental values and beliefs. Discussion of these social norms has tended to be the focus of discussion on women in union leadership, and can deflect the conversation from deeper introspection into the culture and structures of unions. Nevertheless, social norms are powerful, and are one of the major influences on women's entry and experiences in union leadership.

A woman is admired for being the child-bearer and child-raiser; being nurturing and supportive; and managing her household. Women are expected to be submissive and invisible. An outspoken, or worse, 'militant' woman is completely unacceptable in much of African society (and indeed in many societies). A woman may be described as 'crude' or 'abrasive' for being firm, clear or angry. Disapproval from a family, and also from other women in their social circles, is a major hurdle for women trying to make their own choices.

These stereotypes extend to workplaces and unions, where women are also imagined to be nurturing and gentle, and better-suited to supporting roles, rather than to taking on leadership themselves.

Permission and marital conflict

Many women described the importance of having their husband's approval and permission to participate in union activities, and many of the women leaders we spoke to communicated with their families and won their support. There are also, however, successful women leaders who have pursued their union commitment despite their husband's objections, and marital conflict is a common theme. Respondents shared that union leadership frequently leads to divorce for women due to jealousy and imagined infidelity, a sense of family neglect, or social embarrassment. Risk of divorce is a major deterrent not only because of the loss and personal trauma – but because of the social stigma and loss of status of being an unmarried woman in African society.

The additional burden of women's unpaid work

The triple burden of work, domestic responsibilities, and unionism was one of the largest obstacles to women's involvement in leadership. Balancing these was critical for succeeding in leadership. This balance was achieved through compromise, sacrifice, and a loss of sleep, money and leisure. Women think carefully about whether they want to work as hard as this. Instead of acknowledging the level of effort expected, some male union leaders see women's unpaid work as a weakness and a distraction, concerned that they might have less available time.

UNION CULTURE: Women leaders' experiences in unionism

Sexism

As an extension of society, unions are generally patriarchal, with both men and women bringing their perceptions of women's inferiority and male superiority. Study respondents shared how unions are strongly male dominated, both in leadership numbers and in culture. Men find it difficult to be led by women, and difficult to look up to or trust a woman in a position of authority. In a profession so heavily dominated by women educators, the election of men as representatives speaks volumes for the trust that women themselves place in men to lead and uphold their rights. The number of women in leadership is gradually increasing, although women remain fewer and less influential.

Intersectionality

Intersectionalities of age, disability, ethnicity, and sophistication all further affect women's access. Age impacts on acceptance and credibility in two ways: firstly in the credibility and authority of a young person, who needs time to work through the union ranks; and secondly the profound impact of women with young children or plans for a family.

Proving her worth

Women need to prove themselves to a far higher and more consistent standard than men. Their energy, availability, service and responsiveness are a reflection of their worth, and successful women leaders offer all of these in abundance – and must do so to be respected and deemed worthy. Until they prove otherwise, there is a widespread notion that the position of Treasurer is suited to women – against a stereotype of women being fastidious, honest, conscientious and able to manage fine detail. Women are assumed to be unable to be outspoken, articulate leaders.

The violence of election campaigns

The gloves come off on the campaign trail through outright sexist insults for the purposes of electioneering. Campaign attacks against women are frequently sexist and sexualised, taking the form of intimidation, dismissiveness, objectification and ridicule. Few people are undaunted by the risks of these attacks, although they can be countered by focusing on the morally and professionally superior arguments of union roles, the rights of teachers, and demonstrated acts of service.

Union cultural shifts that confront sexist attacks, creating a trend among male influencers that makes sexism demeaning for the men themselves should gradually discourage this behaviour.

Playing the game

Women leaders usually entered leadership having been approached and asked to lead, often by men – and generally as a result of their visibility and credibility among both members and leaders. Union leadership seems to operate in 'camps' – a group of leaders who cooperate to support an agreed person for a position in an election, and then continues to work closely as a group. They may share a

set of values, have a common vision for the union, and trust each other to work together in a united team. As a respected member of a camp, a woman can win a place at the very top. Reaching top leadership positions, for either males or females, is therefore about garnering support from within the elite where the votes for the final selection are made.

Issues of corruption, personal agendas, deal-making and campaigns funded by politicians or employers remain unspoken in unions where these practices might exist. Where corruption is taking place, women are more likely to be 'naïve' of the underlying forces, and may be excluded or manipulated by agendas they are not fully aware of.

Styles of conflict

Fear of conflict extends beyond electioneering, and women feel very uncomfortable with employer intimidation and reprisals. Unions' reputations for militance is daunting for most women. To the extent that unions can engage in ways that are effective, but more palatable for women, union activism might be more accessible, and unions could market themselves better to women. Creative strategies to confronting workplace concerns that are led and designed by women might change how unions protest, and might offer a fresh and invigorated engagement style.

THE STRUCTURAL LEVEL: Union structures that enhance or obstruct women's leadership

Political will for gender reform

The many opportunities to improve gender equity through union structures and processes depend on political will and sincere commitment. Many union leaders expressed a strong political will for greater gender equity. Existing leaders have considerable power over the rules. The agreed logistics, timing and flexibility around how unions work can exclude women. In addition, electoral processes can become extremely convoluted, excluding any newcomer without the sanction and support of a male-dominated network. These systems might be developed in ignorance or thoughtlessness, rather than active exclusion – and women need to be able to influence when, how and where union processes take place to enable their participation.

Affirmative structures and policies: Gender Coordinators and Women's Representatives

Affirmative positions make a substantial contribution to women's presence in union structures. Many unions have Women's Representatives or Gender Desks at all levels as positions for which only women can be nominated. Some unions are more ambitious and have policies for parity and gender balance at different levels – some in top leadership, others in school representatives. The effectiveness of these systems depends on political will and genuine power invested in those positions.

Women's Representatives often form Women's Wings, Women's Committees or Gender Committees from branch through to national levels. In the more gender transformative unions these committees are fully recognised by the constitution, and are formally responsible for agreeing on and presenting recommendations to the National Executive. In less transformative unions the Women's Committees may not be formally recognised, and do not integrate with mainstream structures – or, rarely, the Women's Committee is seen by the leadership as a direct threat, and strongly discouraged from functioning.

Do Women's Committees and affirmative action lead to women's representation?

Affirmative action has the potential to greatly contribute to women's representation in different ways, including enabling their progress to mainstream elected positions, as well as influencing the union

agenda and priorities through women's perspectives. Influence is more likely if the Gender Coordinator position is entrenched in the constitution; where there are formal systems that ensure that women's positions are influential in the National Executive; and where institutionalised women's structures have a clear mandate and a budget. Affirmative positions also often give women the skills and encouragement to campaign, compete and reflect on whether they want to pursue mainstream union leadership, depending on how well the union embraces women's participation and addresses structural and cultural barriers.

Gender in policies, CBAs and constitutions

EI has been highly influential in the adoption of women's structures into unions, alongside many unions strongly promoting and upholding this drive from within their own gender equality drive. There are spaces in which compliance alone leads to inactive, unsupported, ignored and unfunded structures. Based on a review of the constitutions we received, almost half of unions have revised their policies to show their full commitment to gender equity, and several more constitutions were said to be under revision. Constitutional reform does not guarantee gender equity – but it is a critical first step, demonstrating political will and organisational attention, and creating obligatory systems and structures.

Workplace representation and protection of teachers' rights

Most people join a union for workplace protection and representation. Advocacy with management and employers is part of the ongoing, case work of unions. Unions that show their relevance for individual issues in the workplace are more likely to attract members.

Women's perspectives in collective bargaining agreements (CBA) are critical for relevance. CBAs need to reflect the specific issues and needs of women, and be formulated by women, for women. Women's perspectives are also needed in all matters regardless of whether or not they are seen as 'women's issues'. Women's active, substantial involvement is critical to articulating and understanding demands that are correct, relevant, sensitive, and promote solutions that are well-designed and beneficial. In practice women are not routinely in CBA negotiation spaces, and certainly not participating equally – something which greatly reduces the effectiveness of unions for female members.

Addressing SGBV

SGBV is not a women's issue. Indeed, it is most often a men's issue. Nevertheless, since it profoundly affects women, Women's Committees are at the forefront of addressing the problem of SGBV and sexual harassment of both staff and students in the education system. Alongside an EI research study and campaign on SGBV in the sector, many Women's Committees are working together to demand ratification and domestication of ILO C190 in their governments.

Confronting and responding to SGBV is challenging and important for unions. This is partly because perpetrators are often union members, have friends among leaders in these male-dominated organisations. There are accounts of unions taking strong and effective measures against members who are perpetrators, and systems and policies are gradually emerging from the most progressive unions.

In our research, we did not hear any accusations of SGBV, sex-for-favours or sexual harassment within union politics. However, the scenario of leadership 'camps', alongside the regular sexualisation of women who compete for leadership, would suggest that there is high risk of sexual exploitation in union structures and processes.

INDIVIDUAL enablers and obstacles

The account above does not paint a picture of accessible or easy journeys for women in union leadership. Despite the difficulties, many women have placed their life's work and superlative effort into becoming successful, influential and well-respected leaders in union movements.

Motivations

Unions provide networks of social and emotional support – a professional network of fellow-teachers, who understand each other's unique experience as women in the profession, and in society. Women also become active members, and then in leadership, because they support their union's aims.

Holding back – women's personal reluctance to enter union leadership

Even where parity is part of a union's policy, finding enough women to fill these positions can be difficult. The many challenges shared above, from risk of humiliation and divorce, to prioritisation of limited time and finances, to self-limiting beliefs and internalised patriarchy, all contribute to women being restrained in their union participation. These personal limitations provide the strategic focus for women's training and experiential motivation in leadership.

Women's strategies, qualities and skills in leadership journeys

Individual strategies were shared by women leaders on the qualities they cultivated, and their strategies for coping with the many tensions that some of them have faced, and the barriers they had to overcome.

Develop a thick skin: Name-calling and bullying are all electioneering tactics. A woman needs to be extremely resilient to insults, including sexist and sexualised attacks. Sexist arguments are an opportunity to demonstrate higher professional competence.

Be dedicated and responsive: Members want to be well-represented and supported. They want their rights and needs clearly, honestly and firmly promoted. Women leaders tend to be especially attentive to community, relationships and service and are passionately committed to their work in service of the union as a whole, beyond women or women's issues.

Be visible – gather a following: Union campaigning depends on being visible. While expensive campaigns provided platforms for would-be leaders to speak; actions speak louder than words.

Balancing the roles – women are managers: Whether fair or not, the reality for women in leadership and professional roles is that they are balancing multiple roles. Women leaders developed systems that enabled them to manage these roles, sometimes while travelling.

Bring the family into support: Women are far less likely than men to take life decisions without consulting their family. Respondents advised that women should invest in communication, persuasion and negotiation at home, ideally winning the trust, support and encouragement of their spouse and family.

SUGGESTIONS: What can unions do to grow women in leadership

Structural reform and implementation

Unions that are most committed to achieving equity have strong political will and are open to discussing multiple ways of increasing women's participation.

Begin with the simplest – the practical barriers to participation: Remove the basic structural barriers around logistics and practical arrangements. To achieve this, women need to take the lead on practical arrangements and logistics.

Integrate reform into structures, affirmative action and constitutional regulations: Structural enablers are the cornerstone to gender reform. Gender transformative unions have carefully considered, mandated, constitutionally supported structures and affirmative positions – with clear flows of influence into decision-making. They have women’s representation in all spaces.

Shifting union culture

Culture is not static, and men and women who might have been steeped in patriarchy are able to reconstruct themselves and their societies with time, personal growth and positive inputs.

Union education: General training, membership and organising should all actively pursue proportionality – taking the far higher numbers of women in the profession into account.

Gender awareness growth: The acquired prejudices of patriarchy become anchored in the deep beliefs of both men and women. Men and women can learn about gender together, confronting social stereotypes and negative cultural practices, and sharing their different perspectives, challenges and experiences in patriarchal societies and male-dominated unions.

Facilitating self-realisation for women and addressing disadvantage: The term ‘capacity’ carries complex connotations. Women in this study stated clearly that socialisation, expectations and the excessive demands of their unpaid work do indeed impact on their confidence – sometimes to an extreme. It takes a great deal of confidence to lead, especially in a male-dominated society and organisation, where the qualities needed to lead are actively socially discouraged.

Mentors, often woman leaders with a female assistant, are able to guide upcoming women through union operations, offering their example as confident influential leaders, while demonstrating the practical, day-to-day processes of services and union politics.

Well-designed women-only spaces can provide a context where women safely explore and grow their own sense of power. Supported and facilitated personal development can help women to review their self-limiting beliefs; set their personal goals; observe other women in leadership; practice their confidence, articulateness and ability to formulate ideas in safe spaces.

While women clearly have capacity, their motivation and personal abilities to tackle many different obstacles benefit from well-designed facilitated leadership enhancement. Strategic, appropriately designed, experiential, often unconventional leadership journey ‘training’ or experiences can greatly enhance women’s power.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last decades, many women in Africa have grown to hold greater influence, self-determination and authority than ever before. This has infiltrated union processes and culture, and has been enhanced by the support of Education International and the regional and subregional Women’s Networks. There are more unions conscientiously applying affirmative action in different ways. Gradually, more women are entering into the openly contested space of mainstream union leadership.

While progress is reassuring – the point has not been reached where enough women are in enough positions of influence to both normalise their presence, and for them to consistently influence union operations. This research has aimed to share respondents' insights into ways of increasing women's participation. Against a backdrop of patriarchal society, unions have inspiring opportunities to work on their cultural norms and gender responsiveness; and on structures which attempt to level the playing field so that women are motivated and leadership is accessible.

SUMMARY OF OPPORTUNITIES

Based on respondents' feedback and analysis process, this research has highlighted opportunities to improve accessibility for women in union leadership:

- Women's structures should be funded, enabled and encouraged to deliver programmes that address gender bias, both within the union, as well as in society at large.
- Policy, constitutional reforms and strategy are needed as a foundation. These should accompany gender awareness raising in governance structures. Policies and structural reforms should be strongly influenced and guided by women – with the full endorsement and active leadership and support of all leaders, both male and female.
- Women-only programmes can be highly beneficial, offering space for reflection, education, confidence building, personal growth and goal-setting. They are also a space where mentor-mentee relationships can be formed, and where powerful and inspiring women can share.
- Gender programmes are critical for all union members, offering both men and women information, insights and awareness on gender equality, and on the impacts of their socialisation on their beliefs and assumptions.
- Unions should invest sufficiently, with political support from the highest levels, to ensure that campaigns against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and for workplace rights that affect women, are well-understood and well-supported by both men and women. They should thoroughly research and develop policies and safe reporting processes for sexual harassment and SGBV within unions.
- Monitoring – Unions have minimal objective or easily accessed data on demographics of different levels from membership to top leadership; or of the effectiveness and integration of women structures; or of the outcomes of gender equity interventions. While data are useful, the numbers alone do not necessarily reflect the situation. Monitoring also includes qualitative feedback on gender goals, policies and measures. Both numbers and the quality of gender balance should be shared with Congress, holding structures at different levels to account for policy Implementation

1 Introduction

1.1 Gender in union leadership

The Education International (EI) Resolution on Gender Equality ¹ notes that, although women generally outnumber men in education union membership, progress in women's participation in union leadership is slow and uneven. The resolution highlights the responsibility of the unions to enable full representation and participation of all members – and the collective action that would be needed to bring about gender balance.

The Resolution on Gender Equality finds practical expression in the EI Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP), which sets out EI's priorities for the work on gender equality ². The aim of the GEAP is to *“provide a framework to enable EI and its member organisations to contribute to the creation of societies in which women and men have an equal share in the distribution of power, knowledge and resources, and enjoy equal opportunities, rights and obligations which will enable EI and its member organisations to translate education unions' policies, rhetoric and activities relating to gender equality into action.”*

The 2020-2023 GEAP outlines three objectives:

1. Promoting women's leadership and participation within education unions.
2. Taking action to increase intersectional gender equality in and through education.
3. Promoting and securing women's economic empowerment.

EI Annual congresses consistently highlight and mainstream a strong commitment to addressing gender concerns and progress towards equality. For example, resolutions against the EI GEAP in 2019 committed to three main priorities: *“1) promoting gender equality within unions; 2) promoting girls' access to and participation in quality public education; and 3) promoting women's economic empowerment”* ³. This congress also highlighted better representation, including women and youth, as a key feature of union renewal. It raised the need to increase the number of women holding leadership roles, and the importance of creating safe and inclusive spaces for women from local to international levels.

1.2 EIRAF, AWEN and gender equity

As the world's largest sector-specific Global Union Federation, EI represents 383 member organisations in 178 countries and territories, providing support, education and union solidarity to 32 million teachers and staff – the great majority of whom are women ⁴. Education International's Africa Region (EIRAF) is made up of more than 100 member organisations in over 50 countries in Africa and parts of the Middle East.

¹ EIRAF 2011 Resolution on Gender Equality

² Education International. 2020. Gender Equality Plan 2020-2023. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/25125:gender-equality-action-plan-2020-2023>

³ 8th Education International (EI) World Congress meeting in Bangkok from 21st to 26th July 2019

⁴ Education International Website. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en>

EI supports women's networks across all regions, and the African Women in Education Network (AWEN) is one of the key players in delivering support for gender reform. AWEN is an umbrella network for four sub-regional women's education networks⁵. AWEN, with its sub-regional networks, offers leadership and coordination of the EI women's movement with the following objectives:

- To increase knowledge and understanding of gender equality issues among union leaders, in order to enhance political will and commitment to gender equality.
- To ensure effective internal and external communication.
- To build the capacity of women in order to increase their active participation in decision-making and leadership positions at all levels of the union.

These networks are core partners to EIRAF, and are supported to secure access of more women to decision-making positions at all levels of trade unions, the education profession and in society. Regional networks are comprised of union members, and represent their organisations in these structures, while also taking their network experiences and insights back to their unions. The women's networks implement much of the GEAP and related capacity building interventions.

2 The African Women in Leadership research project

2.1 Problem statement

EI, EIRAF and AWEN support union capacity inputs for women's equality and leadership, both in terms of addressing women rights in the education sector, as well as women's influence and position at all levels of union structures. EI encourages women's active participation in union activities, leadership and decision-making, and promotes the equal participation of women and men committed to creating internal equity in trade unions, leading to equity in workplaces, education institutions and societies.

Although progress has indeed been made in this regard, unions have not managed to manifest their aims for gender parity in leadership structures. Research in the region has found that patriarchy is firmly entrenched in unions, with control remaining with men, and few women in top positions⁶ – limitations that are not restricted to Africa⁷.

2.2 Purpose of the research study

This research aims to better understand the slow pace of reform and the glass ceiling facing women in union movements using country case studies. We sought the advice and insights of male leaders and women from all levels in unions, women's networks and EI, on how best to support members and affiliates to become more representative of their largely female membership.

⁵ AWEN comprises four sub-regional networks: WAWEN (West Africa Women in Education Network), RESAC (Central Africa Women in Education Network), SAWEN (Southern Africa Women in Education Network) and WNEA (Women's Network in Eastern Africa)

⁶ Akinsanya AO, Ajede SA & Oludeyi OS. 2014. Gender in Workers' Participation and Trade Union Leadership in South Western Nigeria. *JOLAE: Journal of Arts and Education*. 7:312-321. JOLAEVol7

⁷ Ford M & Ward K. 2021. Union Renewal in the Education Sector: Prospects for the Asia-Pacific. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/25237:union-renewal-in-the-education-sector-prospects-for-the-asia-pacific>

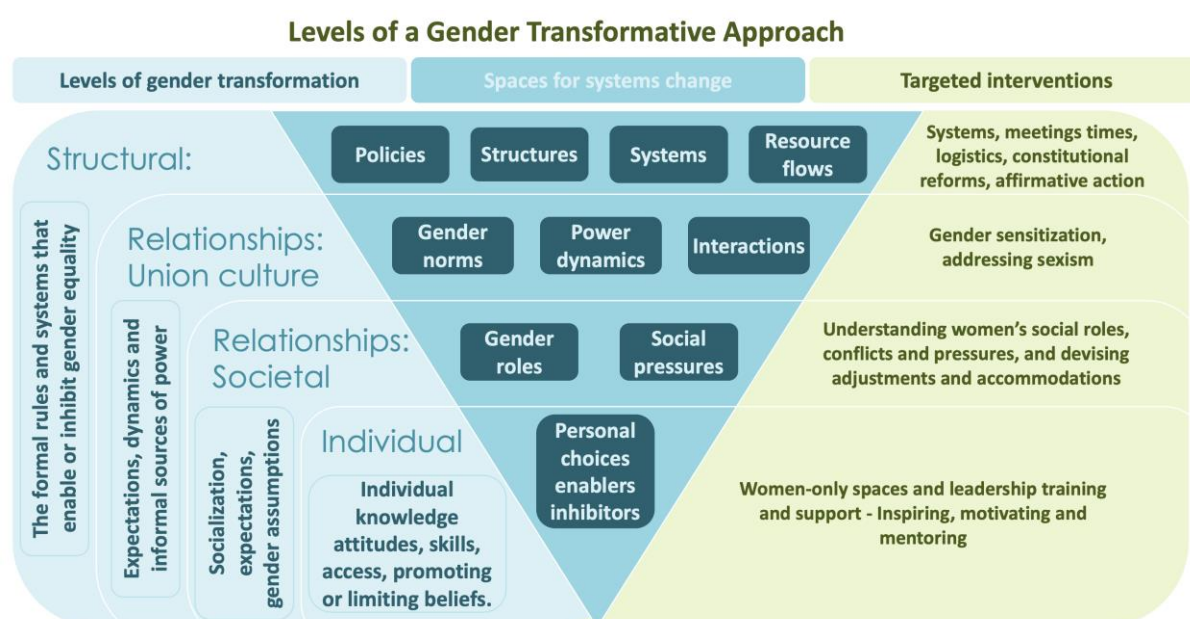
2.3 The analytical framework

2.3.1 Gender definition for the purposes of this research

Gender is defined as a male-female binary for the purposes of this study. Non-binary or transgender persons are not reflected, since LGBTI+ concerns are a source of conflict in Africa, with criminalisation in some African countries. While the implications of both sexual orientation and gender identity in unions is important and concerning, research into this topic in an African context would be very difficult, and potentially dangerous to participants.

2.3.2 A gender transformative approach

We have applied the layers of a gender transformative approach to guide our exploration of the different dimensions of gender discrimination and opportunities. We hope to ensure that a holistic and systems-based understanding of the situation is gained by analysing the situation in terms of i) union structures and policies that promote or restrict gender equality; ii) union culture and personal relationships; iii) the culture and social constructs in society at large; and iv) individual women's choices and decisions.



2.3.3 The evaluation questions

The Terms of Reference (Annex 1) and the research instrument (Annex 2) share the detailed research questions. They covered themes to understand in detail the main opportunities and barriers that women experience at different levels of union leadership, following the framework above. The questions included how unions responded to known difficulties, such as patriarchy, discrimination, the burden of women's unpaid work.

2.4 Design and methodology

2.4.1 Overview

<p>In summary:</p> <p>5 countries</p> <p>17 affiliated unions</p> <p>36 interviews or focus groups involving 162 participants (81% female)</p> <p>Demographic data</p> <p>Policy analysis: 23 policies</p> <p>Literature and internal document review</p>
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2.4.2 Desk and literature review of women's participation and GEAP monitoring

A targeted literature review was conducted on women in union leadership, particularly in Africa. In addition, we reviewed a range of internal documents, such as the GEAP, and various EI congress resolutions, as well as the 2018 AWEN evaluation and the EI Asia-Pacific study on women's leadership.

2.4.3 Demographic data

After several iterations, the Demographic Data form in Annex 3 was shared with members, and often completed through a telephone conversation – since structures and definitions vary between unions, and no single questionnaire was applicable to everyone.

Ten of the seventeen unions in the study provided demographic data.

2.4.4 Policy analysis

We analysed a selection of EI, EIRAF and affiliate policies, strategies and guiding documents – with a focus on constitutions. Policies were assessed for gender responsiveness using the gender blind to gender transformative policy scale below:

Gender blind	Gender responsive	Gender mainstreaming	Gender transformative
No attempts to address gender inequalities. likely perpetuates gender inequalities	Acknowledges gender differences but does not address gender inequalities	Includes statements around gender across the program but does not focus on gender norms or harmful practices	Addresses underlying causes of gender-based inequalities and transforms harmful gender norms, roles and relationships

A total of 23 policies from twelve affiliated unions were reviewed, including twelve constitutions (Annex 4).

2.4.5 Interviews and focus groups

Three main forms of participation were used to collect qualitative data from members, leaders and staff.

Individual interviews	Focus group discussions	Women leaders' stories
1-2 hours	2-3 hours	1-2 hours
Online	In-person at a central location	Online
High level national leaders (mostly male, some female)	Facilitated by in-country researchers	Women leaders or ex-leaders from district to national levels
EI, EIRAF and women's networks.	One per participating union	Aiming for one per union
	8-12 diverse participants	

2.4.6 Participating structures

A total of 18 unions are affiliated to EIRAF in the five countries, four of which host their respective women's regional networks. Of these only UTAG did not participate.

Country	Affiliated unions	Number of affiliates	Language	Regional Women's Network (and host)
Cameroon	FECASE, FESER, SYNTESPRIC	3	9 French	RESAC (Cameroon FECASE)
Senegal	SYPROS, SNEEL/CNTS, SUDES, UDEN, SAES, SELS	6		WAWEN (Nigeria NUT)
Ghana	GNAT, NAGRAT, TEWU, Coalition of Concerned Teachers (CCT), UTAG	5	9 English	WAWEN (Nigeria NUT)
Kenya	KNUT, KUPPET, UASU	3		WNEA (Kenya UASU)
Namibia	NANTU	1		SAWEN (Zambia ZNUT)

2.4.7 Table of respondents

		Leader / partner Interview	Leaders FGD	Woman leader's story	Members / local leader FGD	TOTALS	organisations	
Cameroon	F		23			23	3	FECASE FESER SYNTES-PRIC
	M		5			5		
Ghana	F	1		3	30	34	4	CCT GNAT NAGRAT TEWU
	M	2			8	10		
Kenya	F	1		2	16	19	3	KNUT KUPPET UASU
	M	1			1	2		
Namibia	F	2			7	9	1	NANTU
	M				1	1		
Senegal	F		36	4		40	6	CNTS SAES SELS SNEEL-SUDES SYPROS UDEN
	M		10			10		
Networks	F	2		1		3	3	AWEN SAWEN WNEA
	M							
EI	F	3				3		Partner coordinators / advisors
	M	1				1		
EIRAF	F	1				1		Manager and coordinator
	M	1				1		
TOTALS	F	10	59	10	53	132(81%)		17 unions 3 regional networks
	M	5	15		10	30		
	All	15	74	10	63	162		

2.5 Sampling

2.5.1 All affiliates

While all eighteen affiliates were intended to be included in the research, UTAG was unable to participate being preoccupied with internal matters as well as strike action.

2.5.2 Sample tracking and selection of participants

The General Secretary (GS) of each union was approached for interview, with some engaging and others delegating the interview. EIRAF provided contacts with the GSs and also with EI and the women's networks.

Either national or regional Gender Coordinators assisted in identifying respondents for focus groups and women leaders' stories. The criteria for selection below were intended to ensure that most focus group respondents were women, and that the space was conducive for open engagement.

2.5.3 Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions (FGD) were held at a convenient central location, usually in the country's main city. EIRAF provided each union with a budget for the meeting to enable at least three participants to travel from out of town, and for refreshments and any venue costs.

FGDs were intended to be more than half female, and without top leadership presence, on the assumption that this would optimise participation. Thereafter unions were encouraged to invite a diversity of different members, including members from both rural and urban areas; from primary, secondary and tertiary level if applicable; and a combination of school representatives, local level leaders and members.

This was achieved in most cases, although in the francophone countries (Senegal and Cameroon), as a result of strong commitment to participation at high levels, alongside a misunderstanding among local coordinators – the groups included senior leaders. This gave a slightly different tone to inputs. Although the great majority of focus groups seemed objective, in a few cases accounts were dominated by the leaders' perspectives. There was a tendency to be more outward-focused on society, rather than critical of union culture. As an advantage, the context and broad experiences at a national level were shared, and the high level overview was a useful angle gained from these sessions. Where internal dynamics seemed lacking, women leaders stories were particularly important for triangulation, and there was no overall difference in depth or objectivity between anglophone and francophone countries.

2.5.4 Interview and women's stories

Interviews with leaders followed a similar process to the focus groups, asking about enablers, barriers and union strategies to address women's inequality.

Women leaders were simply asked to recount their journey as unionists; their experiences with social, cultural and structural barriers and how they overcome these challenges; along with their individual motivations and advice to other women leaders.

FINDINGS

3 Women's representation

Beyond gender justice and equity, both the literature and this research highlight some of the reasons why gender equality is critical to effective unions. Women in union leadership are role models and inspiration for women members. They reassure women that their concerns are more likely to be understood and raised, and enhance women's active engagement and willingness to share their stories, needs and experiences⁹. Beyond women's concerns, women's perspectives on all union matters, priorities and solutions is key to a balanced approach, and representation is needed to ensure that a diversity of members' voices contribute.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) clearly outlines the problems of inadequate women's representation⁸: *"Problems of representation start when the less confident people have different views and needs, and the confident do not consult enough. Women workers often have different jobs, experience and needs. These differences can be overlooked. Women workers know best what their needs and priorities are. Voicing these needs has helped the whole movement to adapt."*

Critically, in addition to diverse representation, women in leadership and negotiation are able to hear, understand and convey women's specific and often intimate needs in the workplace. While the widespread problems with suitable bathroom facilities might be difficult to discuss with a male representative, women would vehemently describe their problems with other women and be far better able to demand dignified solutions. Sexual harassment and maternity concerns are primary among the workplace challenges that need to be addressed through the union.

"Women feel they need somebody who understands and can share their issues. They want someone who they can have confidence in and share their unique challenges, including marriage issues." (Focus group discussion)

"Our needs are addressed by our female leaders, which makes it easy to approach them and discuss issues with them. If these issues were supposed to be addressed by men, you can imagine how many women will approach these men?" (Focus Group Discussion)

In contrast, if the representative is male, then women are unlikely to either clearly state their needs, or take an interest in union activities or membership.

"[Male] Union leaders at the grassroots are very active. The teachers always call them in when they are in trouble – but it is mostly men. They call the union officials to get them out of trouble when they have been arrested or when they are facing disciplinary issues. Women rarely open up on the challenges they are facing." (Focus Group Discussion)

⁸ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

⁹ Caiazza A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC.

4 Context

During research one tries to turn observations into generalisations – trying to find patterns around how men, women, societies generally behave. We have attempted to understand how gender in union leadership operates, in order to ensure that global-to-local efforts to support progress are based on evidence. Clearly, generalisations are not valid for all people, situations or contexts. Women, men, unions and societies are different, especially across an entire continent. Local or personal realities make all the difference. Differences in national and local settings, different workplaces, different personalities and family dynamics, and varying union cultures profoundly affect the process of achieving a shared global goal of gender equity and realisation of women’s rights.

In most countries in this study, unions are embraced as a valuable part of society and can often cooperate with employers and governments. Strikes are legal, and demands are a legitimate way of ensuring workers’ rights. In other countries, such as Cameroon, unions are not well-accepted by government. They may be semi-legal, but are generally frowned upon. Unionists face risks, they may be militant to achieve their goals. They may experience retaliation and victimisation, and may have little recourse to justice if employers target them.

“Trade unions are sometimes muzzled and leaders sometimes arrested. This repressive environment inspires fear and this is one of the reasons why women are also less visible in the trade union movement.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Understanding context, and facilitating women to adapt their unionisation and leadership to that context, are critical to success. The results and suggestions shared in this research come out of different contexts. Each union, branch, and individual should be encouraged to consider ideas and principles in terms of how they might work in their own setting.

5 Progress with time

Although unions, globally, have not achieved equal representation for women – there has been substantial progress over the last ten to twenty years. Women’s rights, financial independence, education levels and gender equality have grown globally ¹⁰, although the gap to equal rights remains wide.

Despite much of African society remaining strongly traditional and patriarchal – modernisation and emancipation have affected African society. Women’s presence, voice and influence have increased steadily in the last few decades ¹¹. At least parts of Africa have moved with the times. Women and girls have far higher levels of education than in the past. More women are entering political and economic leadership. Being single, as a woman might be frowned upon, but women can survive independently, and so divorce has become an option. There are more women in union leadership than ever before.

“In the beginning, way back, women were never in union leadership. All the unions were led by men. Women were not involved in union activities, because of beliefs like, if a woman gets involved in trade

¹⁰ United Nations. Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

¹¹ Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa. Women’s Rights in Eastern Africa: Great Strides but Challenges Abound. https://www.osiea.org/amplifying_voices/womens-rights-in-eastern-africa-great-strides-but-challenges-abound/

unionism, then they do prostitution – and, traditionally a woman is not supposed to be outspoken, you are supposed to just listen to men. Now there are examples in almost every country in Southern Africa of a woman in senior leadership in a union.” (Network leader interview)

“Women teachers have really come out to compete for those positions, and they have been able to win even some of our top executive positions in different counties in Kenya. I believe that the ladies have now started being empowered, and they know that they should occupy that space in leadership.” (Leader interview)

Respondents and case studies in the 2018 AWEN evaluation of progress in EIRAF affiliates’ gender reforms noted sporadic increases in female representation in leadership. Some structures, in some unions had reached equal numbers of men and women, although in other spaces women’s representation was still negligible¹². Respondents in our study observed that despite the increasing numbers and powerful voices of women leaders in education unions, they remain dispersed and ‘lonely’.

The world at large has changed, especially in terms of women’s active and independent participation in the economy. Although unions are also gradually shifting they tend to be very traditional. Education unions, where women professionals have worked for a very long time, are no exception. Focus groups described how the absence of women in leadership structures is seen as normal, and is not particularly questioned – *“this is still a man’s world”*.

While the longer time frame suggests a trend, the situation has not changed substantially in the last five years. The situation described in the 2018 evaluation seems very similar to the situation now, five years later. In a coarse assessment that does not reflect subtle changes, in 2022, like 2018, leaders aim to achieve gender parity at all levels, but constitutions have not yet been amended. Both then and now, there are a few examples of strong policy for parity at the highest level – but these are not the norm.

In one example shared in the 2018 evaluation – *“There has been a process within this union, where women first competed for the special seats for women at the different levels. Lately, the number of women also contesting for leadership positions at the top has increased, and is now about 1/3 at all levels. The change is perceived to be related to AWEN, although changes in society were also said to have had some influence¹³.”*

There are certainly a few superlative unions that are strongly driving gender equality and have made significant progress. With Covid-19 delaying congresses and disrupting processes of reform, there may be rapid concrete changes in the next two years, as growing internal movements are institutionalised.

6 Women in leadership structures: Some demographic data

There is no routine system in most unions for monitoring the numbers of women and men in different structures at any level. A few do keep statistics, especially at district or county level – but given the vast numbers of different and overlapping structures, committees, sub-committees, from branch to

¹² Kästel H, Sennemark E, and Kampe K. 2018. External Evaluation of the EI African Women in Education Network (AWEN): Final Report

¹³ Kästel H, Sennemark E, and Kampe K. 2018. External Evaluation of the EI African Women in Education Network (AWEN): Final Report

national level – thorough collecting of demographic quickly becomes a time-consuming and technical task, and few unions have the human or technical resources.

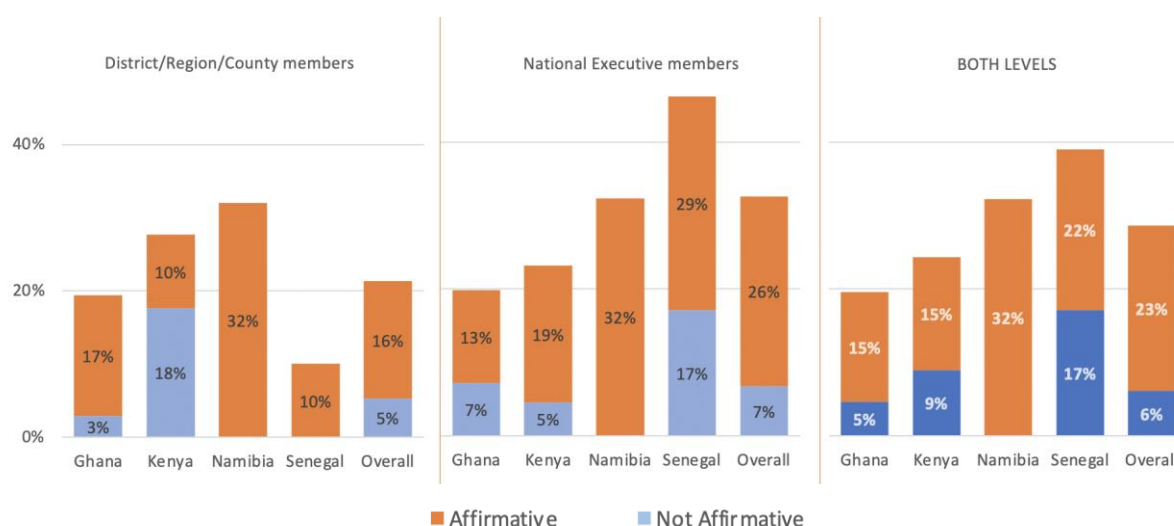
Nevertheless, we were able to obtain different, but useful demographic data from ten unions, with some giving detailed lists of the members of all district level structures. Others shared the numbers of women in their national executive, for example. We asked, where possible, for the number of women in affirmative positions and elected positions, from district to national level.

It is important not to state these averages as fact ... for example – Senegal, which has high levels of women’s participation at national level, did not provide district level statistics – and the numbers may have been higher with those data included. On the other hand, we heard that Cameroon has very low numbers of women in leadership and membership, but did not provide statistics.

As a baseline, and a data set that needs far more attention to be a good reflection, the graph below gives an impression of the situation at some levels in ten unions. It also demonstrates the type of simple demographic data that could be collated centrally to monitor progress against gender goals – although numbers do not reflect the influence or experiences of unionists in these leadership structures.

The graph below shows that at this time, overall 6% of positions are occupied by women through open election. Another 23% are allocated through affirmative positions (usually the Gender Coordinator), adding up to a total of around 29% of leadership structure positions being occupied by women.

With Senegal sharing data on especially high numbers of women in national leadership, a total of 46% of National Executive positions are held by women, among whom 29% are in elected positions. Kenya, in contrast, shared data of quite low numbers of women elected to the national executive (5%), but 18% of elected district positions being held by women. Namibia has a strong policy of affirmative positions, and has achieved high rates of women’s representation at both national and district levels through affirmative action.



	Ghana	Kenya	Namibia	Senegal
Number of unions that provided demographic data	2 CCT, NAGRAT	2 KNUT, KUPPET	1 NANTU	5 SAES, SELS, SNEEL-CNTS, SYPROS, UDEN

In addition, two examples of school or branch level were shared: i) NAGRAT, Ghana, has a policy of one male and one female school representative for parity at that level; and ii) KNUT, Kenya, was able to report 30% of school representatives being women. In addition to these, we received confirmation of two female General Secretaries in Senegal, one in Kenya, and one in Namibia.

What these data demonstrate:

- 1) An overall 6% women in elected positions is probably a best case scenario shared by unions who are aware of gender – and is therefore a very low baseline from which to grow women’s representation.
- 2) Affirmative positions are critical to women’s participation, providing the great majority of women’s representation in leadership structures. The optimal use of these positions, and engagement with the women that hold them, are key to growing women in leadership.
- 3) Data are needed. Unions should to select a few achievable indicators (something like the three indicators used here), and monitor them after each election. ITUC supports the importance of monitoring for gender management, beginning with the collection of separate statistics on male and female membership, leadership, representation and participation in all trade union activities¹⁴.

7 SOCIAL factors that enable and obstruct women in union leadership

Gender dynamics in union leadership are profoundly affected by social norms; socialisation of both men and women to these norms; and the expectations of women by society, family, in-laws, and themselves. Across society, African and elsewhere, a set of beliefs around gender is strongly promoted by religious leaders, and taught by parents and family, schools, friends, media, and virtually every source of social conditioning from the earliest age.

We offer a relatively brief account of the social norms and implications in the African societies that were described by the participants of this study. While reflecting the views shared by respondents, we do not assume that these norms are held in all spaces by all people, as they obviously are not. Similarly, while the conversation focuses on women, women’s choices, options, behaviour and experience – men obviously also face social conditions which greatly affect their beliefs, behaviour, insecurities and relationships.

A critical point to make here is that social norms can and do deflect the conversation from deeper introspection into the cultures and structures of unions. The slow progress of women as union members and leaders tends to be blamed on the powerful forces of patriarchy and social expectations, which, while these are profoundly important, can be and are overcome by women leaders. Social influences are valid, and should be understood, but they should not be used as an excuse to allow lack of representation in unions to continue: *“Culture is a convenient excuse to avoid the hard work of change”*¹⁵. Instead, they offer the rationale for levelling the playing field and compensating meaningfully for the far higher barriers that women face in achieving leadership.

¹⁴ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

¹⁵ Ford M and Ward K. 2022. Building the Evidence for Gender Equality in Education Unions: Obstacles and enablers to women’s leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region. 4th Education International World Women’s Conference. 13 – 16 June 2022.

7.1 Patriarchy

Akinsanya, Ajede & Oludeyi (2014)¹⁶ define patriarchy as *'a practice in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women'*. Most of African society is patriarchal. Even in progressive parts of society most women are secondary decision-makers and home-makers, whether or not they are formally employed. In the most conservative cultures, women are their male parent's or relatives', or husband's 'possessions', not permitted to speak, make eye contact or participate in social interaction if there is a man present.

Research in the region further shares how religious and traditional leaders strongly uphold patriarchy, regarding the objections of gender rights activists as attempts to infiltrate society with 'Western' ideologies. Most leaders from all major religions are united in their promotion of women's submissiveness and male domination.

*"Patriarchy has God on its side."*¹⁷

7.2 What is a 'good woman'?

7.2.1 Nurturing and supportive

A woman is admired for being the child-bearer and child-raiser, and taking care of an efficient and comfortable household. Society expects women to focus primarily on their families – to marry young and have children immediately. Women's professional and union progress is at least ten years behind that of their male counterparts.

"Women are expected to have a child and keep their marriage – so this limits their participation in leadership. After college you get married. Then you have a child and spend four years taking care of them. However, men are free all this time. They further their studies and cement their participation in union leadership." (Focus Group Discussion)

These roles are also strongly endorsed by women themselves, and many women want to focus on their children and families. Guilt is common, as working women negotiate their children's educational and emotional needs and their domestic obligations, with their professional lives.

"Women activists in positions of responsibility are very often accused of disrespect for culture; that they work for the reversal of roles; that they do not take care of their families at all or not enough; that they are not good wives or good mothers; that they are 'feminists' – acrid and complicated; that they are not good to marry if they are single because they are difficult to subdue." (Focus Group Discussion)

The assumption of gentle, nurturing women carries through to the workplace and the union. Women are assumed to support those in the lead, rather than taking on leadership themselves.

¹⁶ Akinsanya AO, Ajede SA and Oludeyi OS. 2014. Gender in Workers' Participation and Trade Union Leadership in South Western Nigeria. *JOLAE: Journal of Arts and Education*. 7:312-321.

¹⁷ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(7):48-55.

7.2.2 Submissive and invisible

In society, women are expected to be compliant and submissive. Indeed, one women leader stated that pretending to be submissive, and using manipulation and non-confrontational strategies are important skills in playing the union game.

“The way women have been socialised, they are expected to be submissive and passive. It is like they are there to be seen and not to be heard.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“A woman is invisible. She should not be seen in the public sphere, which is essentially reserved for men.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Of all the sources of pressure and socialisation around submissiveness – religion might demand these qualities most strongly¹⁸.

“Religion is limiting women and a lot of women are religious. The bible teaches about humility and submission of women.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Religious texts remind women of their duty of obedience and submission.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Certain cultures in Ghana do not allow women to speak, hence women from those societies do not contribute much to discussions when their male colleagues are present for fear of being labelled as rebellious and non-submissive.” (Focus Group Discussion)

7.2.3 Sweet and polite

A militant woman is completely unacceptable in much of African society (and indeed in many societies)¹⁹. A woman may be described as ‘crude’ or ‘abrasive’ for being firm, clear or angry. Unions have a reputation for militancy, and many engage in strong activism to further their cause. Unions are also considered political, and campaigning in politics is described as ‘dirty’ – which is equally inappropriate for women.

“Unions are militant, and hence a preserve for men.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Women in unions are called stubborn. They are not considered an ideal African woman. They are called iron lady or ‘mangaa’, meaning being hard-headed.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“There is the stigma of being a strong female voice in the union, where you are perceived as either having affairs with your male folks, or, as a decent woman you are not expected to join these hooligans to bang the table and ask for more money for union members.” (Researchers)

7.2.4 Facing other women

While husbands and in-laws, and even children, place pressure on women to comply with social expectations – other women in society are also powerful forces for social conservatism. Women themselves demand the qualities of home-maker, wife, peace-maker and ‘good woman’. A woman

¹⁸ Ahule BG. 2013. Gender and Development: Mainstreaming the Female Gender in Trade Union Leadership Structure in Nigeria. Journal Of Humanities And Social Science. 12(4):35-40

¹⁹ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 6(7):48-55.

who stands out from the norms of femininity faces criticism and rejection from other women with as much, if not more, vigour than from men or family.

Women who stand out from social norms face unwanted attention. They place themselves in a spotlight – not only for the positive reason of wishing to be of service and uphold the rights of their colleagues; but also negatively as they reject social norms and expectations, and are militant, aggressive and uncompliant. This exposure alone is enough to deter many.

“We face the look of parents, family, beautiful family, children, neighbourhood.” (Focus Group Discussion)

7.3 Societal sexism and women’s confidence

Not only does society cast women into certain roles, but it also extends stereotypes to infer that women are less able to fulfil leadership roles in unions. Discrimination is exacerbated by a lack of confidence, and women may buy into these social stereotypes for themselves, as well as underlying assumptions about women in general. Deep beliefs might not be conscious or spoken, but hold women back unless they are surfaced and questioned.

Even some women can be heard to imagine that women are less intelligent than men. While this idea would be readily disputed in any conversation, it has space in the hearts and minds of society.

“When I wanted to pursue a Masters Degree in Economics, I was told that even men could not cope with this course – so how much more, I, a woman? I felt discouraged initially but I took up the challenge and today I have completed the Masters.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Women reflected on what gives them and others an impression of lower intelligence. Perceptions might come from women’s lack of confidence, difficulty in sustaining their train of thought in the face of argument or aggression, whether they can engage in a confrontational situation without becoming emotional or backing down. These connect to a strongly socialised idea that the men in their lives are responsible for making the final decision on important matters.

7.4 The double and triple burden

Women are expected to fulfil the roles of home-maker, professional and unionist^{20, 21}.

“Trying to reconcile family work, professional work, and union work is like a marathon: you keep running and you don’t stop.”²²

This triple burden is one of the largest social obstacle to women’s involvement in leadership, and the women’s stories we share in this report highlight how important managing this balance has been for women who have succeeded in leadership.

²⁰ Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women’s Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women’s Policy Research, Washington, DC.

²¹ Ford M & Ward K. 2021. Union Renewal in the Education Sector: Prospects for the Asia-Pacific. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/25237:union-renewal-in-the-education-sector-prospects-for-the-asia-pacific>

²² Kennedy-Macfoy M, Gausi T & King C (2021) When a movement moves within a movement: Black women’s feminist activism within trade unions. *Gender & Development*, 29(2-3):513-528, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1978718

7.4.1 A wife and mother first

Even the most emancipated African women in this study carried the full, largely unsupported burden of domestic and child care. Women union leaders are proud of being able to i) ensure the smooth running of a household, child care and education, connecting with in-laws and maintaining family dynamics; along with ii) professional responsibilities – and iii) still be available for a heavy burden of union work, including travel. Their extended roles make women vulnerable to disasters, with women's care responsibilities and challenges in the workplace being disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic for example ²³.

Managing multiple roles is largely achieved through compromise, sacrifice, and a loss of sleep, money and leisure. The women leaders in this study are high-performing in all areas. They set up systems which ensure that food, support and care are provided for their families, finding strategies to fully achieve all of their many roles. They are likely to be continuously managing these roles. During their union and working hours – they are often conscious of whether the home was running well in their absence – checking in on those responsible for children, meals or domestic tasks, while also being available by phone to resolve any problems in their home, work or union lives.

One deterrent to women entering union leadership is whether they do in fact want to work this hard. Women are likely to be committing far more time and energy for the same level of input as men – sacrificing leisure, health, social life and other valuable parts of their lives in order to serve their unions. Although they are perfectly capable of holding multiple concerns in their minds, this does add a layer of stress to their already intense lives.

“Women’s multiple roles at home don’t give them the time needed to be trade union leaders. They are active in the union but are not interested in leadership positions.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Marital responsibilities and motherhood – caring for the young, elderly and the sick makes it almost impossible for women to make time for other activity outside their homes.” (Focus Group Discussion)

7.4.2 A member of the wider family

In-laws and relations profoundly impact on acceptance and the social constraints that face women. Disapproval from a close-knit family is a major hurdle for women trying to make their own choices.

“My membership in the union has not been easy. First, my husband did not approve of the fact that I joined the union. In addition, his family interfered and reminded me that they had paid to my family a substantial bride price. It was out of question for me to cause any trouble to my husband, since union members are seen as dissidents.” (Focus Group Discussion)

7.4.3 Her husband’s permission

Whether or not a husband gives approval and permission for his wife to participate in union activities and leadership makes a major difference to whether or not women can and will participate in unions. Husbands might refuse their wives permission to engage (and have the authority to do so), take a second wife, or encourage community and in-laws to shame their partner into compliance. The authority of the man as head of household in African societies is not easily overcome, even by the most confident and assertive of women. At its most extreme, women in abusive relationships being

²³ Aouadi E. 2022. Building the Evidence for Gender Equality in Education Unions: Using Women’s Power for Change in a Time of Covid-19. 4th Education International World Women’s Conference. 13 – 16 June 2022.

subjected to domestic violence are extremely unlikely to be union members and will certainly not be active or consider leadership, both as a result of controlling husbands, and their own loss of confidence.

There are successful women leaders who have pursued their commitment to unions despite their husband's objections. There are also many cases where husbands have been deeply supportive of, or at least accepted, their wives union activities. Many union leaders described having strong and relatively equal partnerships with their spouses; being able to convince them of the value of their roles, negotiate within their relationship, and mutually support for each other's life goals. A woman who achieves leadership is likely to be able to assert herself with her life partner, and is more likely to be in a relatively less patriarchal marriage.

The impact of patriarchy and women's lack of agency in their marriages, their domestic obligations, and dependence on their husband's permission has been well-researched in Nigeria^{24, 25}.

7.5 At what cost – divorce and union women leaders

Respondents raised the point that one of the consequences of women's active participation in union leadership or politics is marital conflict, and respondents shared that union leadership frequently leads to divorce for women. This is supported by other research, which finds that women who progress either in professional or political fields have double the rates of divorce of their male counterparts²⁶, and that a married woman may face more difficulties participating in trade union activities than a single or divorced woman²⁷.

Divorce was said to be due to jealousy and the imagined infidelity of women who travelled, and spent time with their male counterparts. It is also often due to the social embarrassment felt by a man of not having control over his wife, of her being too outspoken; as well as the direct insults against women and their families on the campaign trail. These hurts affect the women, and also impact on families which gained a reputation for being inappropriate in society.

"If you have a spouse who is not cooperative and supportive they might leave you." (Focus Group Discussion)

"If I had a husband when I was campaigning, I doubt he would have stayed around during that time. I think looking at the propaganda and everything that was being said, he would have looked at me and asked 'what did I marry?' because I was exposed as though I am a community wife." (Focus Group Discussion)

If not divorce, in some societies where polygamy is accepted union activity results in a husband taking an additional wife. This was viewed by respondents as a negative consequence of being an active unionist – and an alternative for men in societies where divorce is unacceptable.

²⁴ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(7):48-55.

²⁵ Akinsanya AO, Ajede SA & Oludeyi OS. 2014. Gender in Workers' Participation and Trade Union Leadership in South Western Nigeria. *JOLAE: Journal of Arts and Education*. 7:312-321.

²⁶ Folke O and Rickne J. 2020. "All the Single Ladies: Job Promotions and the Durability of Marriage." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 12 (1): 260-87. DOI: 10.1257/app.20180435

²⁷ Ahule BG. 2013. Gender and Development: Mainstreaming the Female Gender in Trade Union Leadership Structure in Nigeria. *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*. 12(4):35-40.

“Polygamy is a system of competition with other women to win the admiration of the family in general and the husband in particular.” (Focus Group Discussion)

The risk of divorce is a major deterrent to women in unions not only because of the loss and personal trauma – but because of the social stigma and loss of status of being unmarried in African society.

“A woman is considered accomplished when she is married. These unwritten rules are transmitted to the young girl during her socialisation.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“The last thing most women want is to lose their marriage. It is an institution that influences your status as a woman within society. If there is anything that is going to make me lose my marriage, then I prefer to let it go and save my marriage. Whereas a man will not think twice in wanting to put himself up for leadership, a woman does have certain thinking to do. When one lady travels with six or seven men to the northern part of the country for a week or two, a lot of men will not be too comfortable with that.” (Leader interview)

Female professionals in patriarchal societies have these choices to make – and tensions against the prevailing social norms seem inevitable. Where women not longer depend on their marriage for survival, divorce becomes an option, however unfortunate. Mentorship and support to women in leadership would extend to support groups and relationship counselling, and to their emotional management of difficult and often conflicted life choices.

A WOMAN LEADER’S STORY: Persistence pays off

I had been a union member for ten years when I became the Gender Coordinator in my district, with a lot of responsibility for training and organising of women. I would give time to going out to talk about the union, to lobby, every Wednesday and Saturday morning. I focused on training of activists because that was my experience.

Soon after that I was elected as the District General Secretary.

To be a woman leader is difficult, because we are caught in social, cultural and economic imbalance. Even if we are financially independent, **we are dependent on culture and habits – but when we hang on and succeed, the discourse changes.**

My home life was difficult. When I finished meetings late and asked my husband to pick me up at the bus stop, he refused – or he made me wait at the station, alone and in danger, and would scowl when he came to pick me up. I often paid more to go directly home even if it cost me dearly.

I would return home with a lot of fatigue after union activities, and then would still have to do research and additional work, both for my teaching job, and to ensure that I was representing well. I feel the satisfaction of services provided for the well-being of women in the union.

Having been an educator, researcher and union activist for almost 20 years now, I have grown in my profession, and my work is recognised in the sector. I think that a women leader must **evolve and perfect her career**, and go beyond the status of teacher. My professional success and progress is partly thanks to the union, and the experience and training I have had in leadership.

We need to fight to be accepted, fight for further education, and to reach management positions.

8 UNION CULTURE: Women leaders' experiences in unionism

Many leaders in this study, especially men and also some women, claimed that unions do not discriminate against women and that the problem is entirely due to society – and even women's own self-inhibiting socialisation. When described in more detail, however, it was clear that social assumptions, patriarchy and sexism are apparent within unions' organisational culture and in attitudes towards women.

8.1 Dealing with sexism

8.1.1 Patriarchy in union culture

Patriarchy is present and influential in unions. Indeed, research describes trade unions as “*microcosms of the societies in which they exist*” – and likely to contain the same sexism and misogyny faced in society²⁸. A patriarchal male does not leave his beliefs about women's inferiority at the union door. Men find it difficult to be led by women, difficult to look up to a woman in a position of authority, and to trust her judgement and leadership.

Our respondents shared how unions are strongly male dominated, both in leadership numbers and in culture. Women leaders remain few in numbers. They may speak out less, and if they do, they are less likely to be heard and their influence is weak. There is stigma both against women as actors and leaders, and against women as beneficiaries of female-specific policies, seen as special concessions.

“This is an African society where there's the issue of male chauvinism. The men feel that they are the ones in charge, and they are supposed to be the leaders while the women follow.” (Leader interview)

The people in power control where power can be accessed and shared. In union meetings and actions, women may be expected to be submissive, quiet and compliant, and are likely to be taken less seriously and given less airtime to speak. Women, also as a product of patriarchy, may respond by holding back from participating confidently in meetings or from strongly and firmly articulating their points. This dismissiveness, even where positions of leadership have been achieved, was also found in Asia-Pacific, where women's roles are less pivotal, and where women have less influence over decisions than men²⁹.

“Many cultures do not expect a woman to speak before men. In a meeting, women are expected to be silent unless asked to speak.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“We rarely participate because we are viewed as flower girls. Men do everything in those meetings including ordering for food, something that even society views as a duty of a woman. So we just attend the meeting to meet the quorum. Even when we raise important points during meetings they are brushed off with contempt.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Women are to look into the welfare of the men who in the meeting by ensuring there is tea and food and also by praying during the meeting and taking minutes.” (Focus Group Discussion)

²⁸ Kennedy-Macfoy M, Gausi T and King C (2021) When a movement moves within a movement: Black women's feminist activism within trade unions. *Gender & Development*, 29(2-3):513-528, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1978718

²⁹ Ford M & Ward K. 2021. Union Renewal in the Education Sector: Prospects for the Asia-Pacific. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/25237:union-renewal-in-the-education-sector-prospects-for-the-asia-pacific>

“The few women that are in leadership have no voice.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Women are not active in the union. They are on the margins. They are not influential in the union because they are almost ghosts.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Political will depends deeply on a desire to share power and enable influence, and women’s voices cannot easily be heard unless there is some capitulation of power and sexism.

8.1.2 Outright sexual harassment in electioneering

The campaign trail is the space where gloves come off, and attacks are a common part of electioneering. Depending on the culture of a particular union and the personality of a political opponent, tactics can be cut-throat at any level. For women, these campaign attacks are frequently sexist and sexualised.

Sexism takes the form of intimidation, dismissiveness, objectification and ridicule. In one union the competition for a high level position was met with, *“We are not looking for beauty. This is not a catwalk it’s real business.”* (Team analysis workshop). On a campaign trail, it is not unusual for men in competition with women to be unashamedly sexist in their self-promotion, and create fear of the imagined weaknesses and competence of women.

“The men I was competing against in a District election went around telling people ‘She’s a lady. Unionism needs strength. It needs muscles. How will she guide you in demonstrating if you have to face the police? Will she be able to stand by you?’ They even called me ‘that woman’ – ‘Why are you supporting that woman?’.” (Leader interview)

“Sometimes women get intimidated by male counterparts when they present themselves for leadership positions. This is part of the campaign tactics to win the position, but sometimes women take it as a personal attack. Those who cannot stand the competition either never present themselves for positions in the union or, if they have done so before, never want to try again.” (Focus Group Discussion)

At their most extreme, attacks on women who place themselves into competition with men frequently have sexual connotations – a tactic which humiliates, insults and directly threatens their intimate relationships and marriages.

“Women fear public humiliation and harassment during campaigns. Propaganda is used to malign them. Some are labelled as hard-headed and ‘prostitutes’ to intimidate them.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“A woman in leadership is seen as promiscuous.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Women competing for leadership enter the arena expecting sexism. This is a major deterrent for many, and few people are undaunted by the risk of these attacks. Not all women can, or want to, engage in toxic masculine environments. Faced with open ridicule and sexist humiliation many women withdraw from their electoral ambitions and find other ways to be of service. Selflessness and a very thick skin are qualities for any person attempting to lead in a competitive environment, and where these assaults are greatly multiplied through sexism and sexualisation, the appetite to join the fray is understandably low.

While sexism and personal attacks can be hurtful, and harmful to a woman's family and morale, they can be countered by focusing on the morally and professionally superior arguments of union roles, the rights of teachers, and demonstrated acts of service. Women who succeed in leadership seem to ignore personal insults, and focus on their own contributions. Despite the logic of asking how a man can hope to represent the needs of a majority female constituency, women do not generally use arguments based on their sex to convince voters. Instead they tend to focus on service and their demonstrated ability to improve conditions for their constituency, both male and female.

Union cultural shifts against the acceptability of sexist attacks, and a trend among male influencers towards sexism being demeaning and unacceptable for men themselves should gradually discourage this type of attack – until it becomes socially unacceptable. This highlights the importance of gender sensitisation and awareness-raising for unionists and leaders.

8.1.3 Other women

That a profession so heavily dominated by women educators elects men as representatives speaks volumes about the faith that women place in men. Winning the trust of women union members means overcoming both the prejudices that women have towards men being more capable, as well as any envy or resentment they might feel at a highly successful woman. Women leaders need to prove their worth to other women, serving their real and felt needs and gaining their confidence and trust.

“Women do not support each other.” (Focus Group Discussion)

In another perspective on this theme – male union leaders used this argument to deflect responsibility from union culture or leadership processes – and the complacent phrase *‘the women are their own worst enemies’* was given several times by research respondents.

“We say that women are their own enemies. When a woman is competing against a man, the women have a tendency of elect the man. That has also affected the women who want to come out and offer themselves as candidates. It is ‘African’ that women respect men much more than their fellow women. So breaking that yoke is a big challenge.” (Leader interview)

8.1.4 Assumptions about availability and commitment

The triple burden is well-known, and unionists are conscious of the demands on women's time – and mistrustful of their availability and commitment. Indeed, when union expectations are unreasonable – such as long, late or badly timed meetings – then many women may find it impossible to participate and may excuse themselves. A belief that, instead of negotiating reasonable expectations, only those able to meet the extremes of union expectations should be representatives, can exclude women with families – both in practice, and in the assumptions held by voters.

“If two people are competing, and the woman has kids, people assume that she may not have time to dedicate herself to the work.” (Leader interview)

“It is not easy taking leadership positions in the union. It takes your time and expectations are very high from members.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“The combination of demands on their time militates against women's activism in the union. They certainly join the union, but they are rarely present at meetings, at general assemblies or at congresses.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Union culture should embrace and respect (and dare we suggest, share) the multi-tasking needed for women to manage multiple roles, rather than seeing it a sign of distraction. It would also be fair to say that some women might be tempted to over-manage these roles, insist on perfection, and micro-manage where they could have delegated. Unions which facilitate the easier management of multiple roles through timing, child-care, consideration and support are far more likely to have women's representation, and to reduce the dangers of stress and burn-out in women leaders, than unions which do not appreciate this burden.

8.1.5 Women's credibility – proving her ability

“Men are defined as the standard of humanity, education and training.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Facing doubt in people's minds ranging from availability and commitment, to competence and ability, to the need for family permission – women need to prove themselves to a far higher and more consistent standard than men. Without the credibility that comes with confidence, authority and even assumptions about their intelligence, women need to demonstrate that they have the qualities that men are already assumed to have.

“Women in positions of responsibility must do more than their male counterparts to be recognised.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Women must prove themselves beyond the man to gain acceptance. A woman has to work twice as hard, so that members can gain confidence and believe that she can do it.” (Leader interview)

Other research supports the finding that women leaders need to invest more work into their union preparation, giving time to being 'two steps ahead' of their male counterparts.³⁰

8.1.6 “Women make good Treasurers”

There is a widespread notion that the position of Treasurer is suited to women – who are stereotyped as being fastidious, honest, conscientious and able to manage fine detail – but not well-suited to being outspoken, articulate or able to lead.

In a concerning piece of research, with which our findings and respondents strongly disagree – Anyim, Kuye and Ekwoaba (2012) offer a revealing lens into the kind of received 'wisdom' that women face in society. Their paper states that women's psychology should 'allow them' to hold administrative positions (e.g. Treasurer), but they should be 'restricted from' militancy. ... *“Women trade unionists may not be very good problem solvers or crisis managers or key post holders within the trade union It is a known fact that women are peace makers it would clog the wheels of progress within trade unions if women hold militant and high administrative posts in trade unions and are given opportunity to manage crises.”* (sic)³¹. The paper goes on to outline multiple sexist and obstructive stereotypes, and is an interesting source, if only to help us grapple with the rhetoric around discrimination.

³⁰ Kennedy-Macfoy M, Gausi T & King C (2021) When a movement moves within a movement: Black women's feminist activism within trade unions. *Gender & Development*, 29(2-3):513-528, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1978718

³¹ Anyim FC, Kuye OL and Ekwoaba JO. 2012. Women Participation in Nigerian Trade Union Movement: A Strategic and Socio-Psychological Viewpoint. *Journal of Management Research* 4(1):E17. doi:10.5296/jmr.v4i1.1088.

Other more gender-balanced researchers in the region share our concerns around beliefs that females' biological make up renders them 'timid and feeble', and unsuited to union leadership challenges, but supposedly less likely to be reckless with funds³².

Despite being rooted in stereotype, the position of Treasurer can be an entry point for women to the structural hierarchy, or to more influential positions in the same structure. Any position – including affirmative positions – can give women an opportunity to learn while proving their competence.

“When they've done such a good job as Treasurer, our members have gained a lot of confidence. At this point in time, we have several Chairpersons who are women in our union branches. That's a very big step. We have Secretaries. The Secretary seat many years ago was a preserve of the men. Nobody could ever have dreamed. Our ladies are doing a good job and when elections are called and women vie for the seat of the Executive Secretary, you find the men will vote for them. So cultural barriers are there, but we are getting over that.” (Leader interview)

A WOMAN LEADER'S STORY: Let service be your flag

My journey started when I had just been employed. I joined the Union when the Executive Secretary was going round recruiting. I was called by the Principal, given the forms, and he suggested I join. They explained what the union is, and its importance, and I agreed. I was a teacher at a small school which gave me opportunities. In small schools, you do almost everything, and I was given various duties, which I did with all my heart. I became a Department Secretary for my District in my job, and that was how **I was able to interact with many teachers.**

When I had been a teacher for about five years, I became interested in union elections, and registered for an affirmative position. **Being known in many schools gave me an upper hand, and I also went out and solicited for votes all over the district,** and won that election.

As a District Gender Secretary, I learned that one teacher was unwell, and was running out of money. I created an initiative to raise finances for her by moving around the schools and collecting from colleagues, and we were able to pay her hospital bills. I got to know more people in that process.

Coming up to the next election there was a women's workshop to encourage women to rise up and go for leadership positions, and stand strong to be elected – not wait for the affirmative slots. **You don't know what that workshop created in me. I came back a different lady.**

I started eyeing the position of District Chair. Because of my work in other initiatives, I had the support of leaders and teachers and won that election. It costs a lot of time and money to campaign, but in the next round the teachers started convincing me to go for the top district position of Executive Secretary. **They really supported me.** When I first announced that I was campaigning for that seat there were more men, but four of them actually stepped down and joined me. In fact, my biggest supporters and voters were men. I was vying against two strong men and it wasn't easy. It was a tough race. The whole country raised its eyebrows.

When competing, I was selling my ideologies – what I want to do. There were many challenges, but I went on strong day by day. As a woman you have many things in your hands. You are a teacher, a mother, and then you're a leader. Balancing the three things is not easy.

I also think that it helps to **be articulate and bold** – saying it as it is. Whenever I'm given an opportunity to air my views and represent the teachers, **I will come out straight and I will not mince my words.**

I want to prove to others that a women can do it, and they can also deliver – even better than men in the union.

³² Akinsanya AO, Ajede SA & Oludeyi OS. 2014. Gender in Workers' Participation and Trade Union Leadership in South Western Nigeria. JOLAE: Journal of Arts and Education. 7:312-321

8.2 Intersectionality

Several union leaders stated that they actively work against discrimination, such as ensuring that diverse members of society have equal access to membership and all levels of education are fully accepted. In one union, some meetings are held in the local language to ensure everybody can participate, and some respondents claimed that there is no discrimination against people with disabilities or young women.

While not explicit, however, multiple, layered sources of intersectional discrimination are difficult to avoid. Women whose education, social capital and physical confidence allow them to be outspoken and articulate have more opportunities in society at large, and in union leadership than those without these inherent benefits. Credibility and space at the table are just as likely to depend on age, disability, ethnicity and mannerisms in unions as in any other social space. Only one disabled person participated in the focus groups, and she was able to clearly confirm the impact of this in the union.

“They call it a double jeopardy – double tragedy. If one is a woman, and living with a disability, the possibility of you getting into a leadership role is almost nil.” (Team analysis workshop)

Age impacts on acceptance and credibility in two ways. One is the questioned credibility and authority of a young person, and the time it takes to work through the union ranks. Most of the successful women leaders we spoke to joined their unions as soon as they were employed, began to be active in their twenties, and entered leadership some time later.

Where age has a profound impact is for women with young children – largely in their twenties and thirties, up to early forties. A woman with young children or ‘at risk’ of pregnancy is not trusted to be available for union work. She is also socially obliged to be primarily concerned with child-care and strongly discouraged from ‘neglecting’ her family. The age at which women might be socially permitted to give time and energy to unionism is far later than that for men.

“The older female teachers said to a young woman who vied for a branch representative position ‘you have young children, take care of them, then consider taking up a leadership position later.’ ” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Women in leadership are mostly elderly, who no longer have young children, or divorcees or widows – people who no longer have marital constraints. Young people are not excluded, but need to learn for the future.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Another source of intersectionality which was mentioned consistently in this study is that of regional cultural difference³³. Different ethnic groups and regions within a country have profoundly different levels of oppression and patriarchy. In some areas women do not have a right to speak in front of men at all, effectively preventing them from any interaction as unionists outside of women’s groups.

“Some cultures do not allow women to speak in public when there are men around. This discourages women from such cultural settings to even consider taking up leadership position in the trade unions for fear of being labelled disrespectful and aggressive.” (Focus Group Discussion)

³³ Ali MA, Wakili SG and Liberty FS. 2021. Women empowerment in trade union movements: A strategy for national and economic development. *Journal of Economic Info.* 8(3) Doi: 10.31580/jei.v8i3.2057

Although religious messaging also strongly defined women's participation, there was no difference in the accounts of patriarchy between Christianity and Islam, the two dominant religions in the region. There were as many examples of both emancipation and oppression from both Christian and Muslim societies, and both religions were used as a source of power over women³⁴.

8.3 Unionism and conflict

8.3.1 Intimidation and employer reprisals

Employers may strongly discourage union membership and union actions. This is not universal, of course, and many schools and education departments actively support unions and are committed to employee wellbeing and shared values for the sector. Where employers are in opposition, however, they can make union membership and activism very difficult. Reprisals are not unusual, and unionists may be fired on a pretext, or their promotion obstructed. There were accounts of this extending to their husbands, especially if he worked in government. While it is seen in any sector, employer retribution was said to be especially common in private schools, where they may operate under their own set of rules.

"I am a teacher at a Catholic school. One of the managers said to me, you have the profile to lead a school, but your membership in the union is not in your advantage. They appointed the younger ones. It was less than three years before my retirement that I was appointed as Principal of a Catholic school. If I was not a union activist, I would have had this position much earlier." (Focus Group Discussion)

Although reprisals affect both men and women, and fear of losing employment and of career obstruction affect both, women described being especially concerned with the conflict that comes with reprisals. They felt that women were more likely to avoid conflict in the workplace. This is borne out by other research, with findings that fear of retaliation by employers is a major deterrent to women participation in unions^{35, 36, 37, 38}.

The unions have key roles in reducing extreme conflicts; confronting reprisals; establishing and maintaining good relationships with employers from school to national levels; and engaging well in social dialogue and tripartite partnerships. To the extent that unions can reach a point where there is less extreme conflict, while still ensuring good working conditions, women are more likely to be willing to engage.

8.3.2 Aggression and militancy

Social conditioning that assumes that unions are militant, and not suited to women is difficult for women to overcome. Going beyond the assumptions – the very real and active conflict that is part of unionism was also not always comfortable for women. Unions are responsible for identifying and confronting unfair labour practices, and holding employers and governments to account. This role can

³⁴ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(7):48-55.

³⁵ Akinsanya AO, Ajede SA & Oludeyi OS. 2014. Gender in Workers' Participation and Trade Union Leadership in South Western Nigeria. *JOLAE: Journal of Arts and Education*. 7:312-321.

³⁶ Ahule BG. 2013. Gender and Development: Mainstreaming the Female Gender in Trade Union Leadership Structure in Nigeria. *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*. 12(4):35-40.

³⁷ Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC.

³⁸ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

often and ideally be met amicably, and a union position may be stated with calm, factual and polite professionalism. This is not always the case, however, and depending on those being held to account as well as the personalities of the activists – fierce, aggressive verbal conflict are often part of a union leader’s experience. Women acknowledged that open conflict and aggression are not comfortable for most women. Furthermore, even if a woman does succeed in managing an emotional or aggressive situation as confidently as a man, she is more likely to be derided for her ferocity, while a man would be praised for his strength.

A style of union engagement that promotes aggression, outspokenness, forcefulness or individual prowess and charisma might suit women less than a style of engagement which is based on cooperation, problem-solving, amicable debate, investigation and collective decision-making. Respondents questioned whether aggression is necessarily the best primary form of negotiation. Some suggested that new negotiation skills and tactics in dialogue, communication and negotiations could be adopted. Unions that have far more women in leadership are likely to begin to engage in ways that are less militant and ‘masculine’, but equally effective, benefiting both men and women.

“We can’t continue standing on the tables when making demands for what our members need. We should learn how to negotiate using modern skills and tactics so that we don’t create a crisis when negotiation. The old skills and tactics that are sometimes used make us look like uneducated, retrogressive and not able to understand.” (Focus Group Discussion)

The tensions of workplace demands can involve conflict that makes women feel uncomfortable. Also off-putting, however, are internal conflicts that spill beyond electioneering, to in-fighting between individuals or factions in leadership structures. Membership of both men and women may drop if the union is seen to be organisationally fragmented or troubled, but respondents observed that women are particular intolerant of internal aggression or conflict.

8.3.3 Competition ingrained as culture

The electoral system used in union democracy, as in politics, is inherently competitive. It is essentially a game in which the most strategic, ruthless, convincing competitor wins – and the admirable qualities of activism, service to community and negotiation skills are only useful if they are visible to voters. Attacks may be personal, robust and hurtful – but are accepted as part of a culture of competitive electioneering, and men are less likely than women to take them to heart.

“To understand the lack of enthusiasm of women in the union, it is first necessary to comprehend the professional environment in which they evolve – an environment of competition.” (Focus Group Discussion)

8.4 Playing the game

8.4.1 Pressure, encouragement and invitations to lead

Virtually all of the women leaders described being asked to lead, often by men, and generally as a result of their visibility, track-record as union activists, ability to speak out and negotiate, and the skills and confidence that teachers or unionists feel they have to offer.

“I was pressured by teachers to join because they needed somebody who could negotiate for them” (Focus Group Discussion)

8.4.2 The behest and validation of men

We heard that would-be leaders, whether male or female, seldom strike out for leadership alone or unsupported, especially at higher levels. Women leaders described being encouraged, persuaded or strongly invited to enter into elections. While being pre-selected as a candidate might be normal practice for both men and women – the experience of receiving encouragement and validation, or not, was critical to some women’s journeys.

“Most women rely on men to validate their leadership skills before they present themselves for leadership positions. This has both positive and negative effects on them. Where they gain the support of men, they are very confident and are mostly aware of the support they can get from men as well as women. When they are discouraged by the men, they withdraw and never present themselves for leadership positions again.” (Focus Group Discussion)

8.4.3 Forming camps

Other research in the region recognises the importance of informal procedures for nominations or appointments, which rely on established male networks, and are a factor behind women’s exclusion³⁹.

Our findings are also clear that union leadership often seems to operate in ‘camps’ – groups of leaders who cooperate to support an agreed person for certain positions in elections, and then continue to work closely as a leadership group. They may share a set of values, have a common vision for the union, and trust each other to work together as a united team. The idea of a single person winning alone and on merit might apply in some cases, but often the selection process is far more political.

Reaching top leadership positions, whether one is male or female, is therefore about garnering support from within the elite, where votes for the final selection are not made by the membership at large, but by those in the top layer of governance. This means that leaders must lobby others in the senior voting structure to support them – often through phone calls, one-on-one conversations and meetings specifically aimed at winning over the votes for a leadership position. It might also mean that they form a camp, or (more likely) are invited to join an existing camp.

“I could not visit all the Branches. I didn't have the time or resources to run around and do that. I reached out to members one-on-one on the phone, and organised zoom meetings, and where it was within my reach to travel, I spent a day at another Branch. COVID-19 made that kind of communication more normal.” (Leaders interview)

As a respected member of a camp, a woman who has proven that she offers the work ethic, commitment, skills and qualities of a powerful leaders can win a place at the very top. This is not easily achieved by simply being better than the rest. She usually also needs to build a support group, lobby for her leadership goal and play the political game as well as the men against whom she is competing.

8.4.4 Dirty politics

The issues of corruption, personal agendas, deal-making and campaigns funded by politicians or employers are largely deeply buried, and remain unspoken in unions where these practices might exist. The members of these unions, and women in upcoming leadership, might be oblivious of the

³⁹ Ahule BG. 2013. Gender and Development: Mainstreaming the Female Gender in Trade Union Leadership Structure in Nigeria. *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*. 12(4):35-40.

unspoken parallel forces at play in union structures. Women were described as naïve – imagining that all unions are primarily concerned with the wellbeing of members, and not with personal profit and the acquisition of power, influence and benefits. Playing a game with a hidden layer of rules means that women may be used by clusters of men as a credible front-person, but without real power. Alternatively, it may mean that a woman is excluded and defeated without a clear understanding of the dynamics against her. It may also mean that she is fully aware and engaged, and able to operate in a corrupt setting, using perceptions of honesty to her advantage.

“In this country, the government interferes with the unions a lot. People are shying away. Union is about politics, and at times you involve yourself with something which is dirty. This is a corrupt country, I'm sorry to say. So people will think that the government, through the employer is having an opportunity to eat with the unions, from something that was supposed to be used for the teachers. So other unionists will not want to be part of a dirty thing.” (Leader interview)

Of course, not all unions have these hidden agendas, and not all leaders participate in corrupt or dishonest dealings. Where corruption is taking place, however, women tend to be at a disadvantage through not being privy to the underlying forces, and being excluded or manipulated by them.

A WOMAN LEADER’S STORY: The twists and turns in a leadership journey

My union leadership started very soon after I left university. At my first post all the teachers were older than me. They felt that they were tired, and as a young teacher I should take up the union representative position. It was not easy. I nearly declined – I was a young teacher and a young mother, and I would have to attend meetings and programmes. But these were elderly people (12 women and 2 men), so I had to agree.

Although I progressed rapidly in my career – to Head Teacher and then to District Council, I maintained my union activities. People approached me, saying that my contributions were good and they wanted me to take a District level union position – so I was elected as District Treasurer, and because of that I was also an automatic member to the Regional Council.

Under our union’s affirmative policy, the Regional Council sends the Chairperson to be part of the National Executive Committee, and another person who is of a different gender. So I was encouraged to contest, and I won the position of the Regional Representative on the National Executive. In all these cases, I never had the intention – people approached me saying ‘you can do it’.

It wasn't easy as a family woman. There were times I had to wake up at 2am to prepare my minutes and prepare food before I went to school. In the evenings when I came home to my children, the roles of women are numerous. Later I would prepare food for a week for two, for when I would not be home.

The next year we were having the national delegates conference, and people approached me to contest for the position of the National Vice President. I contested, and I lost – but I was still on the National Committee as our Regional Representative. Then, our National President resigned, the National Vice President took over, and I was nominated along with four others for Acting Vice in an election process. By this time I was the more capable and qualified, and I became the Acting Vice President. Within that same year, the President was promoted to Regional Director of Education which is a senior management position, and he also had to resign – and so I took over the Presidency of my union.

At the next formal election a lot of the men told me, *“the way you have worked for these two, three years, we expect you to take that position. If you don't take the position of the President, and you contest for the Vice, we will not vote for you.”* And so I contested and continued as President for the next four years, when according to our constitution I had to hand over.

There were older and more experienced men who could have easily contested me – but instead, they had given me their support. So the men who did contest me in the elections were not as strong, and not up to leading the union. Before you get to the national level you should have gone through the mill – If somebody is not a leader at local or district levels they can't compete.

As a group, it was decided who would be the leader, and it was no contest after that. The fact that you are a woman was not important. For them, it was because you had been capable, you listened, you reached out equally to men and women, you had been in the Union for 30 years.

From being a young teacher, I was humble. I was respectful. I interacted with everyone. A lot of teachers shared their challenges with me, and I offered advice where needed. As a leader of the Union I spent time with members. Our union offers welfare when somebody is in distress. When somebody dies, or loses a family member, we attend and prepare food.

Some people only needed somebody to listen to their challenge. So if they called me in the night, the middle of the day, anytime, I was available to listen to them, and to advise them. Where I felt I could not, I consulted and fed those cases to people who were more matured and more experienced than me. **My phone was never off. If I was free, I picked up the call. If I was in a meeting, I returned the call. And as I listened, advised or referred – I learned – and gradually I was growing in terms of handling issues.**

My family gave me their full support. In the night, my husband would escort me to the Chairman's place to look at some issues that we had to handle. **I was trying for my family not to suffer at the expense of the Union, and also for the Union not to suffer at the expense of the family. I tried to balance the equation.**

8.5 Political will for gender reform

Changes to structures depend on political will, and the power that existing leaders have can be either an obstacle or an opportunity. Electoral processes can become extremely convoluted, with unions emphasising the prerequisite for experience and training to work with them, excluding any newcomer from involvement without the sanction and support of a male-dominated network⁴⁰. Another example of direct obstruction is the system in some unions for existing leaders to review nominations, and a situation where a GS or president might directly prevail on someone to withdraw their name. In another case the leader might uphold local tradition, such as refusing access to women as leaders because of a prevailing cultural practice of women not speaking in public. Similarly a leader might state that, although women might be skilled at accounting and treasury work, this would not extend to influential financial decisions.

Existing leaders can use their authority to obstruct women's access to positions of genuine power. Regional differences in culture and patriarchy, and individual personalities, influence how much political will there is to take policy forward.

“Women are often victims of discrimination within the unions. This is because men wish to have the power to control resources and decision making, as power is traditionally male. It is hardly acceptable that a woman is the one who gives instructions. Therefore, women are more likely to occupy positions where they do not have decision-making power.” (Focus Group Discussion)

⁴⁰ Ahule BG. 2013. Gender and Development: Mainstreaming the Female Gender in Trade Union Leadership Structure in Nigeria. Journal Of Humanities And Social Science. 12(4):35-40

Unions varied, but many expressed a strong political will for greater gender equity. One leader commented that increasing attention is being drawn to the issue of gender: *“Men were never deeply insensitive or uncaring – It’s just that slowly, they’re beginning to observe.”* (Leader interview)

Similarly to EIRAF affiliates, progress in Asia Pacific against the 33% target has been impressive in some unions and some countries, but not uniformly successful⁴¹. The Asia Pacific drive has made good use of quotas, but as in Africa, the degree of political will behind such appointments depends on whether women have influential positions and meaningful voice.

Political will is critical. Uptake of the many opportunities to improve gender equity through union structures and processes depend on sincere commitment from leadership⁴². Political will lies behind proposals for encouragement, training and further affirmative positions being discussed, and taken forward through resolutions, policy or union constitutions. Where there is resistance or resentment, even the most well-meaning structures and processes are unlikely to make a material difference.

*“People at the top must lead the way to make gender mainstreaming work”*⁴³.

The good practices and achievements of the more progressive unions are discussed in detail in the following section on structural elements that enable or obstruct gender equity in unions.

9 THE STRUCTURAL LEVEL: Union structures that enhance or obstruct women’s leadership

Society changes gradually, and internal union culture depends on personalities and dynamics which are difficult to influence. The area in which federations and unions can have most immediate impact is that of structural, constitutional and policy reforms that address gender imbalance. Since reform and action are most achievable at this level, **we highlight** the good practices that were mentioned in the study, as well as the suggestions for possible improvements to practices.

9.1 Systems and processes

9.1.1 Logistics, timing and flexibility

Indirect systems that exclude women, some developed in ignorance or thoughtlessness, are often an obstacle to women’s participation. For example, rules around consideration of people’s time and personal lives might have more impact on women than men, such as habitually calling people into the office late at night for important tasks; or setting long meetings at times that are more difficult for women than men to manage; or the timing and locations for elections and meetings.

Ali, Zakuan and Ahmad (2018) observe how union arrangements, timing and logistics are planned by men, at their convenience⁴⁴. Their research found that unions often create systems involving long, unplanned and unusual work hours and extensive travel, which may be difficult or impossible for

⁴¹ Ford M and Ward K. 2021. Union Renewal in the Education Sector: Prospects for the Asia-Pacific. Education International Asia Pacific Region .

⁴² ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

⁴³ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

⁴⁴ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 6(7):48-55.

women with their range of responsibilities to manage. They observed that there are leaders who use their position to create systems to intentionally exclude others, and prolong their tenure. Men in existing positions of power may perpetuate the notion that union work requires availability 24-hours a day, and use passive aggressive behaviours to make participation difficult for women ⁴⁵.

The prevailing sense from most of our respondents was that the women's challenge was to meet the demands of union systems, and engineer their own lives to achieve what was deemed as high standards and commitment. Even among women, there was not a strong sense that the systems are unnecessarily inflexible, and could be negotiated.

There are, however, several unions which are open to hearing and addressing obstacles to women's participation, and to working out alternative practices. **Women in these unions engage to find ways of operating that are more considerate but equally effective, and potentially more efficient. Consultation and compromise should not be seen as a concession or an indulgence, but should acknowledge the value of the different roles, without being condescending to people who have family responsibilities and time restrictions. With consultation, union meetings can be held at times that enable women to participate. Child care can be arranged so that young children can be brought to meetings, and safe transport can be ensured.**

9.1.2 Positional power

Positional and constitutional power are great levellers. Unions place a great deal of power into elected positions. Respondents shared how, when a woman wins an elected position, men generally accept the results. If a woman is elected into a position, she has the authority of the position, and is not easily undermined. Sexism almost dissolves if a woman is GS, since the position itself is highly respected. Similarly, the constituted tasks for Treasurer, Chair or Organiser are clear, whether the position holder is male or female.

9.2 Affirmative structures and policies

9.2.1 Gender Coordinators and Women's Representatives

The demographic data shared in Section 6 demonstrate **the valuable contribution that affirmative positions make to ensuring that women are at least at the table.**

"Women are given very few positions in the leadership. If not for the gender position that requires a woman, maybe women will not be in positions of leadership." (Focus Group Discussion)

"Without affirmative action, women would not be represented at our union executive." (Focus Group Discussion)

While affirmative action is valuable in ensuring women's presence, political will and investing genuine power to those positions determines whether these women have influence. There were examples where affirmative positions were enabling in some unions, while in other unions they were just nominal.

⁴⁵ Ahule BG. 2013. Gender and Development: Mainstreaming the Female Gender in Trade Union Leadership Structure in Nigeria. Journal Of Humanities And Social Science. 12(4):35-40

The most widely used system to ensure women's presence in union leadership is the Women's Representative position in structures at all levels – a position for which only women can be nominated. There are generally Women's Representatives from branch through to National Executive levels, ensuring that there is at least one woman present in each structure.

“At national level, we have two slots called ‘special females’ to the national delegates conference – so that at the level of national discussions, women can add their voices. When we have more women, they can explain issues and lobby, so that if it has to go through the ballot the men will support us. Even when we represent the union at the international level, we look at women's representation. We have a Gender Coordinator who coordinates everything.” (Leader interview)

Some unions have more ambitious systems and a strong constitutional and political drive towards gender balance. The Senegalese women's union movement is one of the strongest in this sample, with a union name change from a French masculine to gender neutral wording sending a clear message to members about the seriousness of gender justice for the union.

Some structural examples include:

- Several positions reserved for women.
- Two school representatives, one male and one female, and assumptions that this will naturally feed up into leadership structures.
- A constitution that called for 50-50 parity in all committees at all levels.
- If the SG is male, the vice SG must be female, and vice versa.
- A female dominated union works toward encouraging men to participate to ensure that they are well-represented.

9.2.2 Women's committees

Women's Representatives may gather through the union hierarchy in a system of Women's Wings, Women's Committees or Gender Committees. In the best functioning systems, these committees are fully recognised by the constitution, and are formally responsible for agreeing on and presenting recommendations in the National Executive, through the national Women's Representative. With dedicated space in national consultations, the recommendations made by the Women's Committee are considered, and may or may not be adopted by the national level.

In unions that do not have this level of commitment, Women's Committees are not formally recognised in the constitution, and do not integrate with mainstream structures. In this arrangement there is no channel for formal input to union decisions. Some respondents said that Women's Committees exist only in name for compliance with EI requirement, but are not active and not funded to function.

Rarely, and in the most problematic and least effective scenario, Women's Committee are seen by the leadership as a direct threat, and strongly discouraged from functioning. Threatened leaders may ask *“What are those women doing making decisions and pretending to be leaders, when the union leaders are here?”* (Team analysis workshop). In one example this was taken to an extreme, and strong women leaders in an effective Women's Committee that was being dismissed by the mainstream union formed a splinter union for women – this unfortunate outcome contributes to problems of union proliferation and biased representation that excludes men.

ITUC confirms that integration of women’s structures into the active decision-making processes of the union as a whole is essential to their effectiveness and sustainability⁴⁶. A key function of these linkages is to ensure that all union leaders, predominantly male, are regularly exposed to focused debate on issues of concern to women, and women’s perspectives on all union concerns – perspectives which might be overlooked where women are under-represented.

9.2.3 Women’s activities

Women’s Committees have several roles. As well as their core function of reflecting together and feeding well-considered recommendations for union priorities to the National Executive, many also directly implement gender sensitisation or gender activities. Some examples included women-only forums and workshops for empowerment, confidence and life skills; support to inter-generational mentorship; training spaces on gender for men and women; and educational sessions for men and women on the gender aspects of policies, conventions or Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA).

9.2.4 Women’s movements engaging between unions and into society

In an important dimension, Women’s Committees also contribute to gender education and awareness raising outside of unions in schools, government and communities. While unions are often in competition with each other for membership, and sometimes in conflict where they might have historically splintered – Women’s Committees do not necessarily share these divisions.

Women’s Committees have spearheaded joint campaigns with other unions, other sectors, the media and civil society on gender concerns. One of the most widespread current campaigns calls for national ratification and domestication of ILO Convention 190, confronting GBV in society, and demanding the rights of all women to safety and recourse to justice.

“The Labour Act mentions sexual harassment as an offence, but it doesn’t give further details about what measure to be taken in case of sexual harassment and violence at work. C190 has not yet been ratified by Ghana, although there have been training and campaigns on the need to ratify the convention and get it integrated into national laws.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“We should also have solidarity with other local unions, regional and international trade union confederations and social partners. This will help when there is a crisis because we will have strong supportive partners.” (Focus Group Discussion)

9.3 Do Women’s Committees and affirmative action lead to women’s representation?

9.3.1 The short answer: ‘it depends’

Affirmative positions make a profound difference where the Gender Coordinator position is entrenched in the constitution; where there are formal systems that ensure that women’s views are presented in the national executive; and in a culture where these views are taken seriously. They can enable women to focus on ensuring that their issues are carefully considered and clearly articulated.

If, however, women’s structures and representatives are not formally recognised, or are even perceived as a threat, then representatives might be ignored. Not all unions embrace the idea of

⁴⁶ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

women's affirmative positions, and some grudgingly allow this only because of pressure from EI. We heard of situations in which women-only, or women-focused activities were denied by leadership because male leaders insisted on being present at all functions and participate of all activities. Without political will Women's Representatives can be undermined, excluded and discouraged until the post is essentially inactive⁴⁷. There are risks of these committees being excluding or of their existence marginalising women's concerns⁴⁸.

The Gender Coordinator position is not in the top decision-making group in committees at any level. If the senior team in a committee (e.g. Executive Secretary, Chair, President) does most of the work and makes decisions without the involvement of the Women's Representative, the position is wasted and very disheartening. Similarly, women's structures may be ignored, unfunded and marginalised – and purely used for compliance and appearances. Effective affirmative action needs political will and constitutional support at every level.

9.3.2 Budgets to Women's Committees and activities

Supported and institutionalised structures with a clear mandate would generally also be allocated a share of the overall union budget⁴⁹.

"We have dedicated 1% of our finance to the Gender Coordinator, to organise activities for women, do organising, and find suitable ways for the development of women within the union." (Leader interview)

While many unions do fund women's activities, this is not always the case. Findings of our study, and similar research in Asia-Pacific found that Women's Committees often do not receive a budget, cannot run women's rights campaigns, deliver programmes or provide training or advocacy with women⁵⁰. A lack of budget allocation is often a direct result of the structure not being formalised in the constitution. Although even meetings carry costs, there are Women's Committees that are determined to provide safe space in which women can meet regardless of lack of budget to discuss relevant issues, and encourage each other to actively engage in mainstream union leadership.

"This lack of support to women's activities creates frustration among women, which often leads them to abandon the movement or to remain as a simple activist and let men with 'their thing'." (Focus Group Discussion)

"Women are not given a say in determining expenditure. No money is allocated for activities that can empower women. Financial decisions are made by men." (Focus Group Discussion)

9.3.3 Do affirmative positions and Women's Committees lead to elected positions?

The short answer – Yes, they can and often do, although not necessarily.

Affirmative positions give women the skills and encouragement to campaign, compete and reflect on whether they want to pursue mainstream union leadership. Women's Committees can be a space in

⁴⁷ Ford M and Ward K. 2022. Building the Evidence for Gender Equality in Education Unions: Obstacles and enablers to women's leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region. 4th Education International World Women's Conference. 13 – 16 June 2022.

⁴⁸ Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC.

⁴⁹ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

⁵⁰ Ford M and Ward K. 2022. Building the Evidence for Gender Equality in Education Unions: Obstacles and enablers to women's leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region. 4th Education International World Women's Conference. 13 – 16 June 2022.

which women are encouraged and supported to run for election, while exposing them to the inspiration of those who have progressed in leadership. Women's Committees are a training ground on union processes and structures, and a space in which women who may be accustomed to being silent or submissive can learn to use their voice and gain confidence. These spaces have been an effective training ground and a safe space from which some women have indeed ventured into mainstream union politics.

This depends, as does any attempt at addressing gender imbalance, on whether the mainstream union is sincere in embracing women's participation and confronting sexism, as well as in addressing structural and cultural barriers. In many unions this is not achieved.

"It is very hard for women to be considered for leadership positions away from those positions that are specifically meant for women. There is no attempt to move past the affirmative action. Women are therefore expected to be satisfied with positions provided by affirmative action." (Focus Group Discussion)

9.3.4 Parity and participation in practice

Ideally, unions achieve equal representation by women in all delegations, whether meetings, conferences and missions at national, regional and inter-national levels⁵¹. Several unions in our sample have mechanisms and policies aimed at achieving parity in various structures. However, even where unions report having parity goals and guidelines, they find difficulty in persuading enough women to fill the positions. These are unions which actively encourage women leaders, and are likely to strive for a culture of acceptance and flexibility. Some talked about not finding enough women who are willing to undertake the roles. Others described a lack of confidence and capacity (whether this is the capacity for the additional workloads, or actual skills was unclear). Their experience suggests that there is work to be done in creating conditions in which women are more enthusiastic to join leadership, even in union cultures where gender parity is promoted.

9.4 Gender in policies, CBAs and constitutions

9.4.1 EI policies and practices for encouraging equality

EI has been highly influential in women's structures being adopted into unions. Conditions for GUF membership and support include a system of affirmative positions for Women's Representatives, drafting of a gender policy, and establishment of Women's Committees. While clear conditions for membership of the GUF have been useful in laying foundations for structures which enhance women's representation, there are spaces in which compliance alone leads to inactive, unsupported, ignored and unfunded structures. There are, however, also many Women's Committees which are active, recognised and at least somewhat influential. Virtually all unions in the sample have Women's Representatives, and many have a Women's Committee in some form.

A review of constitutions gives an impression of commitment to gender balance, and how policies have been entrenched in union regulations. Using this as an indicator of sincerity, as outlined below – 12/17 unions shared their constitutions, of which six are gender transformative, although at least

⁵¹ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

another two stated that they are in the process of reviewing their constitutions. Based on this we suggest that almost half of unions are fully committed to gender equity.

9.4.2 Policy review

A total of 23 policies were reviewed from EI and twelve affiliates. Using a gender transformative scale, the policies were reviewed as follows:

Gender blind	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An old Constitution, CBA, strategy, regulations – Do not mention gender
Gender responsive	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two constitutions use 'she' / 'he' to show that both can assume leadership • One constitution acknowledging that women and men can be elected as president, but no measures for balancing access
Gender mainstreaming	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two constitutions acknowledge gender concern, but give no specific actions
Gender transformative	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five Union constitutions and one CBAs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Includes women's structure and female representation in governance – Detail on how the national executive specifically includes women – Policy on parity, e.g. female secretary, male vice etc. – One CBA includes provisions such as child-care and maternity rights in the workplace to protect women rights • Seven gender policies and strategies at national, GUF or union levels <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – EI or union gender policies – National gender policies, although these do not mention trade unions – EI gender strategy

Gender blind	Gender responsive	Gender mainstreaming	Gender transformative
No attempts to address gender inequalities. Likely perpetuates gender inequalities	Acknowledges gender differences but does not address gender inequalities	Includes statements around gender across the program but does not focus on gender norms or harmful practices	Addresses underlying causes of gender-based inequalities and transforms harmful gender norms, roles and relationships

Somewhat more than half of all the policies shared are Gender Transformative – although this includes the specific gender policies of countries, EI and one union.

Out of a total of eleven constitutions shared, five are gender transformative. The strongest policies, CBAs and constitutions gave detailed requirements of how gender balance would be supported. Weaker policies mentioned 'he/she' or gave a vague statement of intent without detailed actions.

9.4.3 National policies and global standards for parity and gender equality

National and federation gender policies and global development goals provide benchmarks for gender equity. An example is the Kenyan national constitution that requires that at least one third of all elective positions are held by women in any relevant social structure. Supportive government and international labour organisations' gender policies and conventions on union policy reform can set valuable precedents. Government policy, in particular, is highly influential. With civil society advocacy, for example, the Nigerian government '*has compelled the union to adopt some gender policies towards mainstreaming women*'⁵².

⁵² Ali MA, Wakili SG and Liberty FS. 2021. Women empowerment in trade union movements: A strategy for national and economic development. Journal of Economic Info. 8(3) Doi: 10.31580/jei.v8i3.2057

Using national and global standards: Standards set by EI and other global labour organisations and national governments give clear goals for unions to pursue, and for gender activists within unions to highlight when demanding reforms.

9.4.4 Constitutions

Constitutional reform does not guarantee gender equity – but it is a critical first step demonstrating political will and organisational attention.

Some examples of helpful constitution clauses from different unions include:

- *“The zonal Secretary position should be occupied by a female who will also be responsible for the Gender Desk. Each Institution shall elect two (2) Officers one of whom shall be the Institutional representative at the Zonal Council and the other, the Assistant institutional representative. One of the two institutional representatives shall be a female. In a situation where there is no female on the staff, the two can be males.”*
- *“The Women Commissioner shall be responsible for organising and coordinating activities aimed at increasing women participation in decision making processes ... formulate and implement affirmative action programs to empower women.”*
- *“The National Committee (NTC) shall consist of ... 10 members elected by the National Congress (of whom not less than 50% must be women). The Secretary for Gender Affairs shall be responsible for: the collection and distribution of information pertaining to gender issues; monitoring sexual harassment and intimidation of women within the Union and in the field of education in general; organising programs and activities aimed at promoting the gender awareness; promoting cooperation and solidarity with other national and international organisations involved in gender issues. He/She will have the power to nominate members of the union to support him/her in his/her activities.”*

Good-practice in designing gender equitable policies: There is opportunity for gender policies to encourage and enable women’s participation; for constitutions to uphold gender balance and redress in systems and regulation; and for CBAs to be clearly relevant to women. Processes of consultation with women members and leaders on how best these policies would support participation, and reflection on how best union policies can address women’s obstacles to participating would help to develop relevant policies which address the real concerns of women in each union.

9.4.5 Workplace representation and protection of teachers’ rights

Most people join a union for workplace protection and representation. Some of the reasons that women shared included (Focus Group Discussions):

- *“To be protected in case of unfair treatment.”*
- *“To have a person or office I can report to in case of a problem with Teachers Service Commission such as unfair transfer or dismissal.”*
- *“For arbitration between union members and management at the workplace.”*
- *“To be represented in case of injustice e.g. biased transfers and promotions.”*
- *“So that it can negotiate for better terms.”*

- *“So that the union can advocate for good working environment.”*
- *“I wanted a better pay and protection from oppression by my employer.”*
- *“To have a stronger voice against violation of rights.”*

In addition to formal CBAs, advocacy with management and employers is part of the ongoing, case-by-case work of unions. Unions are highly valued for intervening and supporting individuals facing difficulties in the workplace – often through an individual union leader taking up a cause and escalating it to national level if necessary.

“A female union member worked in a different town, away from her family, and requested to be transferred. She was not granted this transfer for a few years and this was creating tension in her marriage. She approached the National Executives and they intervened at the national level and she was transferred to join her family. This has served as encouragement to others to be active in the trade union.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“The union works with the state departments responsible for education to address issues that confront their members including female members, such as extra safety and security, or transfers for female teachers posted to remote or unsafe areas. Also, where female teachers are discriminated against, they intervene to help resolve the issues amicably.” (Focus Group Discussion)

The most often mentioned women-specific issues for negotiation included bathroom facilities; maternity leave; creche facilities at schools; the dangers and ‘*indecent accommodation and lack of basic amenities*’ of remote postings; and equality in promotion opportunities.

“If there is no water in the washrooms, it affects women more severely than men. As a student or staff member with a baby, I would have to rush home to breastfeed my child and miss lessons. So how do we get men on board to speak about those issues that affect women?” (Leader interview)

“Our union has been able to negotiate with the employer and request that women teachers get administrative positions for which they are qualified. The results are very encouraging. We now have many women as administrators in both primary and secondary schools, which points to the abilities of women teachers, and encourages our teachers in the classrooms.” (Leader interview)

Unions that can show their relevance in the workplace are more likely to attract members. Women are more likely to join a union that clearly benefits them, engages with their personal and professional concerns, and responds to their specific needs and priorities while confronting discrimination against them.

“My local chairperson is highly respected by her colleagues because she is a trade union executive. She is able to insist on issues of concern to members and influence decision on issues that come up for discussion at our local level.” (Focus Group Discussion)

The converse was also reported – where women’s specific concerns are not being met by unions, their relevance to women was questioned:

“Members are given the option to join or not join a union and some have decided not to be deducted agency fees as they do not see the difference.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Unions no longer exist. Women see unions as weak because they are not represented nor helped by the union in their various challenges.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Other research has also found that globally unions do not consistently give attention to the specific needs of women, placing insufficient emphasis on the issues, concerns, and priorities of women workers⁵³. If representation is misaligned, leaders cannot hope to respond well to members: *“If leaders don’t understand what members are living through, how can they be effective? How can they put forward policies that are going to help the majority of workers?”*⁵⁴

9.4.6 Women’s participation in collective bargaining negotiation

Ensure CBAs are relevant to women members: For women’s representation to result in better working conditions, CBAs need to reflect their specific concerns.

A major indicator for gender-sensitivity is whether demands, campaigns and CBAs reflect the specific issues and needs of women, and whether they have been formulated by women, for women. Workplace demands are greatly enabled by having clear legislation on maternity leave, equal pay scales, employee support facilities, and other basic conditions of employment that affect women. With most teachers employed by government, CBAs can have impact on a single, powerful employer, and can lead to improvements in national legislation for all teachers.

While some CBAs are gender blind, and give no specific reference to women’s specific concerns, some examples of clauses from the Ghana 2020 CBA⁵⁵, include:

- *“Facilities shall be provided for the care of children below school-going age to enable women, who have the traditional care for children, to realise their full potential.*
- *On resumption of duty a nursing mother will be granted two (2) hours off-duty every working day to nurse her child up to a period of twelve (12) weeks.*
- *No female employee shall be dismissed solely on the grounds of pregnancy or on any grounds whatsoever during the period of maternity leave.”*

A focus group in Kenya also shared the importance of the current CBA having extended maternity leave from 90 days to 120 days in the Employment Act.

It is imperative that CBAs include women’s issues, but demands are also needed to address professional discrimination such as equal opportunities for promotion to senior positions for women, and women’s representation in professional bodies and councils. Also, a gender dimension applies to all items of the bargaining agenda. Respondents noted, for example, that although salaries may be equal for men and women in the same positions, salaries and bonuses in secondary education are higher than in primary, where the proportion of women is far higher.

⁵³ Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women’s Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women’s Policy Research, Washington, DC. seven strat full I917

⁵⁴ Kennedy-Macfoy M, Gausi T & King C (2021) When a movement moves within a movement: Black women’s feminist activism within trade unions. *Gender & Development*, 29(2-3):513-528, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1978718

⁵⁵ Collective Agreement for Teaching Staff within the Ghana Education Service (GES) August 2020

The research showed that women are not routinely in CBA negotiation spaces, and certainly not participating equally, something which greatly reduces the effectiveness of unions for female members.

“The absence of female trade union negotiators during negotiations on conditions of service makes it difficult to articulate the specific needs of women.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“As Gender (regional and national) Network Coordinator, when we are going for collective bargaining, I should see if there is women’s representation, because when we are talking about anything the men will not understand what we need.” (Network interview)

Women’s presence and active, substantial involvement in CBA negotiations are critical to articulating and understanding demands that are correct, relevant, sensitive, and promote solutions that are well-designed and beneficial. Women need to be included in the preparation and negotiating committees and teams at all levels, as the most basic level of diversity in representation^{56, 57}.

9.5 Addressing SGBV

SGBV is not a women’s issue. Indeed, it is most often a men’s issue. Nevertheless since it profoundly affects women, Women’s Committees are at the forefront of addressing SGBV and sexual harassment of both staff and students in the education system. EI supports a regional programme to work on this theme, and respondents highlighted the urgency and importance of this drive.

In addition to severe problems with sexual abuse of students, several respondents shared that staff SGBV is highly prevalent in their workplaces and on the increase. There were reports of sex-for-jobs where principals are responsible for hiring and promotion. Women have resigned from their jobs as a result of harassment, without recourse to reporting or responding. In some cases perpetrators are transferred to remote areas where they can act with even greater impunity rather than being confronted and charged.

Most unions seem to have less ability or enthusiasm to confront and respond to SGBV – partly because perpetrators are also union members – are friends with leaders and possibly powerful men in a male-dominated organisation. One union has set a strong example in directly addressing SGBV in the workplace. They demand summary dismissal, remove the perpetrator from union membership and related protection, and then publish the dismissal and the reasons.

“Now our colleagues know, and we have put pressure on our leaders not to support any member as a union. We are not going to support any member who is found culpable. So now teachers know that should you be found wanting, the union will not be with you.” (Leader interview)

Respondents highlighted the urgent need for SGBV and sexual harassment policies in the workplace, that are effective in preventing abuse, and consistently implemented. Ratification of C190 by governments, the development and application of workplace regulations, and processes of reporting that are safe, accessible and effective are needed.

⁵⁶ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

⁵⁷ Ford M and Ward K. 2022. Building the Evidence for Gender Equality in Education Unions: Obstacles and enablers to women’s leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region. 4th Education International World Women’s Conference. 13 – 16 June 2022.

We did not hear accusations of SGBV, sex-for-favours or sexual harassment within union politics. However, the scenario of leadership ‘camps’, alongside the regular sexualisation of women who compete for leadership, would suggest that there is high risk of sexual exploitation in union structures and processes. This risk is highlighted by EI, where “eliminating all forms of sexual harassment and sexual violence in education unions” is a critical concern⁵⁸. EI is fully aware that sexual harassment and sexual violence persist in all types of organisations, including trade unions. Special arrangements were made for reporting SGBV at the EI Congress in 2019 in Bangkok, providing guidance on policies and procedures to protect members from sexual harassment and sexual violence within their organisations, and highlighting the importance of implementing preventative and corrective policies⁵⁹.

Be on high alert for internal SGBV: It is critical to sensitively monitor any abuses of power as women begin to move into leadership in larger numbers.

10 INDIVIDUAL enablers and obstacles

The account above does not paint a picture of accessible or easy journeys for women in union leadership. We have outlined the social and family stigma and resistance that women face, sexism in union culture, and the inconsistency of structures that enable women’s participation. We have also heard how determined and persistent women overcome these difficulties, and that leadership is achievable. As in any situation of the exceptional few overcoming difficult odds, these stories are inspiring, but do not minimise the imbalance in access. These stories illustrate just how exceptional women need to be to participate in a space which is welcoming and achievable for men. The final decision comes down to individual women choosing to embrace the challenge, in all of its inequity, and forge paths which gradually create conditions that are more equal for women in the future.

In many ways women and men share similar ambitions, fears, motivators and inspirations. Many of these observations may apply to men as well as women. While this research focuses on the experiences of women, men too are likely to have fears associated with meeting social expectations in a patriarchy, humiliation against their imagined position and roles in society, and the pressure of masculine ideals. These fears might explain the behaviour of men in sexist and male-dominated settings, and help them to find a way to resolve their insecurities.

10.1 The motivations of union leadership

Despite the difficulties, many women have placed their life’s work and superlative effort into becoming successful, influential and well-respected leaders in union movements.

10.1.1 Unions as networks of support

Women joined unions for various reasons. Among them is the desire for a social professional network of fellow-teachers, who understand their experience as women in the profession, and in society.

“Many women join a union because they are vulnerable and they need to be somewhere where they belong and feel safe.” (Focus Group Discussion)

⁵⁸ www.ei-ie.org/en/item/23034:resolution-on-eliminating-all-forms-of-sexual-harassment-and-sexual-violence-in-education-unions

⁵⁹ 8th Education International (EI) World Congress meeting in Bangkok from 21st to 26th July 2019

A network offers social and emotional support. Needs of professional and personal peer connection are met, problems shared, and solidarity (or at least sympathy) earned. Women's value of connection and relationship can lead to a rewarding union community for them, a sense of collective purpose and meaning, and a feeling of being valued. From this foundation of trust and communication, comes the more direct and tangible advantages of being better able to negotiate in the workplace.

"We discuss our workplace problems together in the staffroom and if we don't find a solution we send our representative to table the matter to a higher office." (Focus Group Discussion)

"We can stand up for each other in case of a problem." (Focus Group Discussion)

"We want moral support and a social network. Considering many women go through harassment at their place of work, I wanted to be somewhere where I am protected." (Focus Group Discussion)

10.1.2 Unionism and furthering the rights of teachers

Women become active in unions, and then in union leadership, because they support the aims of their unions to enhance job security and quality of employment for all teachers. Most women leaders we spoke to started being active in their unions to help members, often women teachers. They are there because they want to be of service and try to improve conditions in their workplaces.

"I joined the union so that I could join the leadership structure at branch level and advocate for the rights of fellow women, whom I felt were not being adequately represented. There was pressure from teachers because they needed someone to represent them." (Focus Group Discussion)

10.1.3 Ambition and personal goals

Respondents mentioned benefits of being union leaders in terms of education, experience and personal development opportunities. In addition, they mentioned the desire and challenge of competing and winning as being motivating. Women are motivated by being recognised for their achievements. Union politics is designed to be both competitive and cooperative. There are women who want to play the game, and are prepared to enter it on men's terms.

10.2 Holding back – women's personal reluctance to enter union leadership

The accounts above share many valid reasons for women to be wary of entering union leadership. The fact that such a small proportion of women are in leadership positions at any level is partly due to obstacles, and partly due to women not choosing to enter into the union setting. Even where parity is part of a union's policy, finding enough women to fill these positions is seldom possible. The individual reasons for women's reluctance, and for not prioritising union involvement and activity, are deeply connected with social expectations and union culture.

These observations highlight the need for women to receive support in overcoming self-limiting beliefs, providing the strategic focus for women's leadership training or experiential learning.

10.2.1 Internalising the patriarchy

Women's personal lack of confidence is taught, and learned from an early age. Their place in society is strongly socialised from childhood, reinforcing the expectations of society for them to be obedient and submissive.

“Socio-cultural stereotypes and psychological preparation from an early age mean that a woman is subjected first to the father, then to the brother and later to the husband and the in-laws, by putting herself at their service.” (Focus Group Discussion)

These acquired prejudices become anchored in the personalities of both men and women, and most women accept their assigned social role. In agreement with our respondents, other research has found that *“unlike male leaders, who generally do not doubt their ‘natural right’ to power, women are often initially ambivalent, questioning whether they have what it takes to lead organisations”*. This self-doubt, questioning and reflection are valuable leadership qualities in themselves⁶⁰.

Overcoming this socialisation in developing their life goals, choices and behaviour takes a great deal of courage.

“Women have low confidence – they see themselves as second class citizens.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Women look down upon themselves. Some women believe men are more intelligent than women.” (Focus Group Discussion)

10.2.2 Fear of humiliation

A respondent shared how the gender work in their union has been taking place, but has *‘never been effective because most of the time women shy away’*. We describe above how women entering union electioneering are subjected to direct sexist and sexualised attacks from competitors, male leaders, and even other women. The stigma can be extended to their children and families, and women face the real possibility of the pain and shame of divorce. Men, on the other hand, are not insulted and humiliated for competing in union politics, and do not risk divorce as a result of their choices.

Women fear this targeting and humiliation. They fear the judgment of others, social and marital consequences, accusation of infidelity, being labelled as militant, unAfrican or aggressive, and of violating the cultural and religious commands they be submissive.

“They will be name-called. All the kind of stories will come up, even the ones that you don't know about yourself. At the end of the day, people say I had better protect my family, protect my face, live at peace.” (Leader interview)

10.2.3 Professional priorities

With the demands of unpaid work on their time, women make careful choices around where to prioritise their energy and time. Prioritising union work over professional work in the time available depends on offsetting the benefits to their career paths against the benefits of unionism. This is especially noticeable among tertiary educators where both women and men consider whether to invest energy in professional progress, research and supervision, professorships or promotion, in a system which offers many career path options – rather than giving their time to union leadership. They might be union members, but may be reluctant leaders when their focus is on academic progress and recognition.

⁶⁰ Kennedy-Macfoy M, Gausi T & King C (2021) When a movement moves within a movement: Black women's feminist activism within trade unions. *Gender & Development*, 29(2-3):513-528, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1978718

10.2.4 Family priorities

While children might be seen as part of a woman's 'burden', there are also many women and families which choose to prioritise women's time to active parenting, believing the benefits to their children to outweigh their other social roles. They are likely to join unions more actively once their children are no longer in need of their time and attention.

"Women make the choice not to participate in unions to be better mothers. Considering most of us are mother and teachers we never want our children to be rogue like some children in school who lack proper parenting. The issue of absentee parenting is of key concern and many women might not want to be absent from their children." (Focus Group Discussion)

10.2.5 Financial priorities

Union election campaigns are extremely expensive. The total cost of travel, accommodation and communication, especially nationally, is well beyond the affordability of many teachers. The financial implications of actively being involved in union politics has also been raised by other research in the region as a major consideration and deterrent for women⁶¹.

Without more detailed research, it is difficult to tell whether male and female unionists have more financial means to invest in leadership campaigns – while promotion favours men, respondents stated that many union leaders are not in more senior positions at work. Despite earning similarly, women teachers seemed to have less disposable income to invest in their campaigns for union leadership. Men seem to be more likely than women to find financial supporters for their campaigns. Men also tend to have more autonomy around financial decisions, while women's salaries may well be allocated to the household budget first. Respondents also stated that despite men being seen by society as the primary bread-winners, working women tend to carry financial responsibility for most of the household expenses – costs which may be relatively invisible to men – such as school fees, clothing, food, health care and utilities.

Women therefore may not prioritise spending on election campaigns in their budgets; may not have the financial autonomy to do so, even if they are earning; and are less likely to have financial backing for prohibitively costly campaigning outside of their local area.

⁶¹ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(7):48-55.

A WOMAN LEADER'S STORY: Passion is the key

As a women in the National Executive Committee, throughout the week I have to be in the capital, to carry out my duties. Maybe over the weekend, if there is time, I travel to my family. That is a big sacrifice. It has not been easy. I was first elected when I was barely 30, and I had young children. Even your in-laws, your family, would find it's not the right thing to do. You are still very young, you need the family, but you have to balance your work, the teaching, the family and the union activities.

But when you do your work well, the members that you serve get confidence in you. And **during those difficult moments, they become support system. They encourage you.** I've always campaigned against men, and I've always won. The members have confidence in me. They believe in my leadership qualities. They believe in the services that are offered them. So **they don't look at me as a woman – now they look at me as that official who has the qualities of the kind of leader they would want.** Although, one time I vied for the seat of the Branch Chair, and there are those who told me, "You're a good Unionist. We like what you do. But at this point in time, we are not ready for a woman Chair." They told me to my face.

It is about the individual mindset. It's not about age. I got into union activities when I was still a very young mother, but the family was not an impediment to the work that I was doing – because **when a person has the passion, that person can overcome these barriers. It is about balancing the responsibilities.**

Most of the ladies that have been elected in the Branches, started the way I did, and have gone up the ladder. Once they are occupying senior positions most could be in their mid 40s, to early 50s, but they did not go in when they were old. They started when they were still very young. A teacher may have left college and be employed by 25. So we have leaders from about 28 cutting across the ages.

Passion is very, very key. You may be old or young, but if you don't have passion for leadership of the Union, then then you can't find yourself there.

10.3 Women's strategies, qualities and skills in leadership journeys

Individual strategies were shared by women leaders on the qualities they cultivated, and their strategies for coping with the many tensions that some of them faced, and barriers they have to overcome.

There were also examples of women leaders who found themselves naturally drawn into leadership; whose journey was not a struggle; and who found the support of family and colleagues from the beginning. Women shared a full range of experiences, some of which were relatively smooth, supported and fortunate. The stories of women who have achieved leadership, some of which are shared in the vignettes above, highlight some of the strategies that female (and male) leaders might find helpful in achieving their union leadership goals.

10.3.1 Leadership qualities

Workers want to be well-represented and supported. They want their rights and needs clearly, honestly and firmly promoted. A person who does this, whether for an individual around a personal matter, or for an entire national sector, is providing what union members want.

"Teachers normally trust someone who was been involved in coming out standing with humanity, speaking boldly, courageously, who is aptly representing them whenever there is a need for them to be represented. Someone who is not covered by employer, or by the government." (Leader interview)

10.3.2 Be thick-skinned

Name-calling, insults and bullying are all tactics in competition. A woman needs to be extremely resilient, since respondents agreed that sexist and sexualised attacks on female contenders are likely. Difficult and hurtful as these are, in order to survive, women have to learn to see them as not personal, and not to take them seriously.

“At school I always shout and call the members for a meeting whenever there is a subject of discussion. They call me ‘an activist’ but I am willing to be called that so that they can get to learn what the union is doing.” (Focus Group Discussion)

10.3.3 Be worthy

While sexist arguments can defeat women, they are also an opportunity to be, and be seen to be, highly competent and to drive changes in the profession and the lives of teachers. Women stated that they are able to compete with those men who rely on insults and rhetoric, by demonstrating their worth – through a record of effective service and of following up on the needs of their members. Women tend to be especially attentive to community, relationships and service. Women leaders earn support and loyalty by demonstrating that they can promote their members’ concerns, that they are highly responsive to the real needs of members, and are approachable and available. A woman who has done what she has promised can win votes – even against a charismatic, forceful or convincing man – by being more diligent, responsive and active in fighting for people's rights.

Although they have to work far harder than men to earn this credibility, their hard work yields results. The trust they gain is sustainable, their relationships and networks of influence are built, and they ultimately benefit from the added effort needed for them to get a foot in the door.

Although stereotypes are treated with caution, the level of unpaid work managed by women has been found to result in a high ability to juggle different tasks, good planning and time management⁶², skills which are key to since successful organising in large and complex organisations.

There is a risk that male leaders and supporters of women in leadership extend this perception to stereotypes that are both demanding of women’s superlative performance, and also probably not always true.

“Once the women have been given positions of responsibility, they assert themselves fully, they are productive – because they took the leap of faith, the step of having confidence in themselves, despite coming up as the underdogs when we go to elections. The challenges that they have, men do not have. Once they are elected, they prove that they are equally good leaders. A woman who has been elected, never lets down her electorates. The good thing about ladies is they know how to multi-task, they can take care of many activities at once, and still all of them can be successful.” (Male Leader interview)

10.3.4 Engagement, commitment, responsiveness and helpfulness

Women leaders shared the importance of being passionately committed to their work. They described being available to give advice at any time, returning phone calls, listening to those in need and responding with advice or practical assistance, or following up where a situation is beyond them and ensuring that it is resolved. They described fulfilling their role as teacher representative at whichever

⁶² Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women’s Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women’s Policy Research, Washington, DC.

level they are assigned with absolute conscientiousness. Perceived as connected and nurturing, this style of activism is both well-accepted for women, as well as being an effective and diligent ethic for any union leader, whether male or female.

"I stepped in to resolve a problem as a local leader, after which almost every one encouraged me to present myself for leadership position – That is how I found myself in leadership now." (Focus Group Discussion)

10.3.5 Be visible – Gather a following

Union campaigning depends on being visible. Women shared how their service and work for members is visible, and that their growing reputation for service greatly helps them in election processes. Many women described being asked and encouraged to enter leadership contests as a result of their reputation for effective service. Many stated that they are already well-known for their work before elections, and that it is their work and visibility that led to their wins.

10.3.6 Balancing the roles – women are managers

Whether fair or not, the reality for women in leadership and professional roles in Africa is that they will be expected to balance multiple roles. This partly involves strategic management of their lives and priorities; alongside pushing back against unreasonable or unnecessary demands in any of their multiple roles, including those placed upon them by unions.

"The committed women can find the right balance in terms of their activities." (Focus Group Discussion)

10.3.7 Bring the family into support

Women are far less likely than men to take life decisions without consulting their family. Respondents advised that women should invest in communication, persuasion and negotiation at home, ideally winning over the trust, support and encouragement of their spouse and family. This is not always possible and both respondents and supporting literature⁶³ highlight the risk and frequency of divorce among both union and political women leaders as a result of their activism.

Nigerian research also found that the positive engagement of a woman's husband, and his cooperation in her leadership and participation, is highly influential in her success⁶⁴.

10.3.8 Promote the rights of all teachers, both male and female

Women in leadership shared the view that their role as leaders is to serve the union as a whole, and not to focus specifically on women or women's issue. While Women's Representatives have the role of focusing on women – those in mainstream, non-affirmative, elected positions work for the wellbeing of all teachers, whether male or female. They ensure that women's specific concerns are included and receive attention, and also that a gender lens is applied to all areas of organising and activism, for better solutions for all. Whether contributing to resolutions, raising concerns in the workplace, helping teachers in need, or leading local to national union structures – women and men serve teachers first, and gender second.

⁶³ Folke O and Rickne J. 2020. "All the Single Ladies: Job Promotions and the Durability of Marriage." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 12 (1): 260-87. DOI: 10.1257/app.20180435

⁶⁴ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(7):48-55.

“As a national leader I didn't discriminate against men or women. I had the support of the men. The people who nominated me were men, and there were more men in the committees than women. When the women were saying, ‘No you cannot do it’, the men were saying ‘You can and we are ready to support you’. If I had depended on being a woman, and thought I was going to leave the men behind and deal with the women, I would have lost it all. I had time to listen to the men too when they had marital issues. There were times I spoke with their wives. When you are a woman, and you open up to the men, they are able to support you – and when you also prove that you are capable of handling all the issues, they will support you and make sure that you succeed.”

A WOMAN LEADER'S STORY: Gathering women

I have never had any difficulties with my trade union activity. I believe that with clear task management, we should have no problem. **If we want women to move forward then it's up to us as women to organise for this.** For me, **managing life as a union leader is a question of planning, being organised and good time management.** I have managed to overcome difficulties, talked with my husband, taught the children to be responsible – although the most difficult aspect has been managing as a parent.

While there is social pressure from some people, I received a lot of commitment from my family – but it is usually the external, profane gaze that poses a problem.

The union has helped me a lot. I have had training on the policies and in leadership, and have benefited a lot.

I stumbled into leadership. It was not something that I had given much thought, especially because unionism is considered to be a preserve of some women, not all women. **If you are seen to be someone who is very vocal, who fights for people's rights, you are always viewed to be a dissident.**

The rules of parity helped me in my ascent, although later I had to compete with men to achieve an elected position. I had been in student leadership during college, and there was no competition from other women at that point. I found myself in a meeting dominated by men, and they said ‘Since you're the only woman here, why don't you put your best foot forward?’ For four years I was the only woman on that Branch Committee. Every time we travelled, I would always travel alone. As a woman who is married, there is no way I would compromise my own social standing.

As I travelled, I would find that other Branches had women and we began talking. So when I came back, **I began sharing my experiences and bringing in women** from my department to increase their awareness about unionism and began a caucus. We began to see more women coming into leadership. I rallied other women to also come and vie for positions. It was a very hot competition. And **what helped us was the fact that we already had a Women's Caucus.** We had the commitment of the women to support us – all the votes of the women were already ours

As women became stronger, the men became antagonistic. We overcame this, and recently what has helped me to follow a leadership journey, was the encouragement of a male friend and colleague. Together we have developed strategies and action plans for the union. As a team, we have enhanced the image of women in our union, and increased their presence, through training and education.

11 Opportunities – What can unions do to grow women in leadership

Unions need to change – both in terms of culture, and in their structures and systems. Change needs to be both top-down and bottom-up⁶⁵. Change is seldom rapid in unions. It involves manoeuvring large and rather cumbersome democratic structures filled with strong personalities and personal interests. Change is, however, inevitable and necessary for unions to be relevant and representative – and steering change in the most helpful direction is the task of influential women and men at all levels from global federations to school branches.

11.1 Structural reform and implementation

Unions that are most committed to achieving equity have strong political will and are open to discussing multiple ways to increase women's participation. Each of the multiple different obstacles from personal to structural has the potential to become an opportunity for large or small shifts.

The following seven strategies are suggested to better enable women's involvement in unions⁶⁶, and are well-aligned with the findings of this study:

- 1 Address women's true priorities
- 2 Create and support formal mentoring programs
- 3 Provide opportunities for women to strategise together
- 4 Put women in leadership
- 5 Highlight the importance of women's contributions
- 6 Provide flexible options for involvement
- 7 Provide training on mobilising women

11.1.1 Begin with the simplest – the practical barriers to participation

Removing the basic structural barriers around logistics and practical arrangements is the most achievable step, although only a few unions in this study were willing to consider adapting to women's requirements. The attitude among most male and female leaders, with a few notable exceptions, is that women could and should prove that they can operate at the level of intensity and single-mindedness that the system demands. A cultural shift is needed that questions this assumption of women fitting into a man's world – rather than systems being adapted to better suit all leaders, whether male or female.

Advice from the Institute for Women's Policy Research states that: *"You have to meet people where they live. You can't expect them to drop their lives and just do what's convenient for the union. The union has to be the one that reaches out to people. Listen to what workers say they need. Create ways to participate at flexible times and places. Welcome children and provide child care. Provide food, especially for mealtime meetings."*⁶⁷.

ITUC also supports the importance of practical support, including childcare or the sharing of family responsibilities, as an important and achievable enabler of women's participation⁶⁸. To achieve this, women need to take the lead on practical arrangements and logistics. Meeting times, places and approaches can be open for consultation. There are unions which do ensure that a space and carer

⁶⁵ Ford M and Ward K. 2022. Building the Evidence for Gender Equality in Education Unions: Obstacles and enablers to women's leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region. 4th Education International World Women's Conference. 13 – 16 June 2022.

⁶⁶ Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC.

⁶⁷ Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC. seven strat full I917

⁶⁸ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

are available for childcare, so that women who might need to bring children to meetings are able to participate. The practice of calling meetings late at night or at short notice can be stopped.

Other researchers have found that trade unions, far from considering women's needs to be a concession, have a vital role and basic responsibility to support women in easing their burdens of care and unpaid work. A respondents in research in the USA ⁶⁹, shared: "My daughter has known nothing but union meetings since she was three months old, and she is 13 now. If I can go to a union meeting and know that she is there with her friends and that they are being looked after in a space that has been created for them, this makes my work easier. But there has to be that recognition that women need to be able to concentrate." This experience provides a valuable image of how a thriving African teaching union space might function.

A willingness to change traditional, trivial union habits to enable women's participation not only enables their involvement, but also sends a clear message – that the union is committed to their participation, and considers their involvement to be necessary and important. Unions which reflect women's values, as well as their concerns, and are considerate of their needs, are more attractive to women.

11.1.2 Integrate reform into structures, affirmative action and constitutional regulations

Structural barriers and enablers are the cornerstone to gender reform. The discussion above offers respondents' insights on how best policy and structures could be more enabling for women, and is not repeated here. Political will behind reforms, and women's participation in formulating new systems, are essential for policies to be more than vague intents or passive compliance with EI requirements.

'Structural re-arrangement' has also been promoted in union research in the region to address the gender imbalance in union leadership ⁷⁰, in order to be more responsive to their members' gendered needs, including statutory status of women's structures ⁷¹, and administrative policy supporting gender sensitivity has potential to be one component of a gender-responsive strategy ⁷². Research in Nigeria concurs that viable internal strategies to support women's progress in trade union movements include: women's commissions, gender policies and affirmative action ⁷³. Affirmative action, or quotas, is also seen as a key strategy ⁷⁴. While policies are necessary, they are not necessarily implemented ⁷⁵, ⁷⁶.

⁶⁹ Kennedy-Macfoy M, Gausi T & King C (2021) When a movement moves within a movement: Black women's feminist activism within trade unions. *Gender & Development*, 29(2-3):513-528, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1978718

⁷⁰ Ahule BG. 2013. Gender and Development: Mainstreaming the Female Gender in Trade Union Leadership Structure in Nigeria. *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*. 12(4):35-40.

⁷¹ Kästel H, Sennemark E, and Kampe K. 2018. External Evaluation of the EI African Women in Education Network (AWEN): Final Report

⁷² Akinsanya AO, Ajede SA & Oludeyi OS. 2014. Gender in Workers' Participation and Trade Union Leadership in South Western Nigeria. *JOLAE: Journal of Arts and Education*. 7:312-321.

⁷³ Ali MA, Wakili SG and Liberty FS. 2021. Women empowerment in trade union movements: A strategy for national and economic development. *Journal of Economic Info*. 8(3) Doi: 10.31580/jei.v8i3.2057

⁷⁴ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

⁷⁵ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(7):48-55.

⁷⁶ Ford M and Ward K. 2022. Building the Evidence for Gender Equality in Education Unions: Obstacles and enablers to women's leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region. 4th Education International World Women's Conference. 13 – 16 June 2022.

11.2 Shifting union culture

Culture is not static, and men and women who might have been steeped in the patriarchy are able to reconstruct themselves and their societies with time, personal growth and positive inputs. The quote below offers insights into the hidden competitiveness and sense of power among even men who are in support of gender equality, along with awareness and willingness to grow.

“In African culture we feel like women should be lower than men in terms of taking responsibility, and that men are the heads of the families and women should be in the second position. So definitely, when a woman rises up to take their positions of leadership, we men have not been very comfortable. And that is why we would want to say that they should remain where they are. But as time goes by, you realise we share the same profession, we earn the same salary, we get the same challenges – what brings us together is much more than what would push us apart. So we just appreciate and say, if you cannot beat them, let them join you.” (Male leader interview)

Interventions, whether training or organisational development, need to engage at multiple levels to shift the system as a whole, and are strategic opportunities to confront both the structural obstacles and to reform the internal culture ⁷⁷.

11.2.1 Union education

Union movements in general benefit from organising which helps members to grasp the importance of union membership and activism, and to understand union systems and structures. Newly elected male and female leaders benefit from a clear understanding of roles, and leadership skills and styles. Women may be under-represented in the routine practices of union education and programmes. General training, union participation, negotiation spaces or advancement opportunities should all actively pursue parity, and ultimately proportionality.

“We had a special orientation for female leaders about four years ago and it was very useful. We should have it again to sharpen the skills of women leaders.” (Focus Group Discussion)

11.2.2 Gender awareness education

Research in the region concurs with our findings that, in addition to a focus on enhancing women’s access and participation, trade unions have a responsibility to educate men ^{78,79}. Measures that target women are necessary and important in redressing existing discrimination, but they need to complement changed attitudes and culture in the union’s mainstream.

“Equality between men and women is not a ‘woman’s concern’ – but is fundamental to the aims of all trade unionists.” ⁸⁰

EI and the regional women’s networks have provided training on gender both for women-only groups, and gender sensitisation for both men and women. The 2018 findings indicate that AWEN has affected the unions positively, contributing to enhanced political will among leaders in all unions, especially at

⁷⁷ Ford M and Ward K. 2022. Building the Evidence for Gender Equality in Education Unions: Obstacles and enablers to women’s leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region. 4th Education International World Women’s Conference. 13 – 16 June 2022.

⁷⁸ Ali MA, Zakuan UAA and Ahmad MZ. 2018. The Push and Pull Factors of Women Participation in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(7):48-55.

⁷⁹ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

⁸⁰ Ahule BG. 2013. Gender and Development: Mainstreaming the Female Gender in Trade Union Leadership Structure in Nigeria. *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*. 12(4):35-40.

the national level, as well as shifts in the attitudes and perceptions of male union members about women's leadership abilities⁸¹.

Respondents to this study also reported positive results from men and women learning about gender together; confronting social stereotypes and negative cultural practices; and sharing their perspectives and experiences in patriarchal societies and male-dominated unions. They shared how unions are more concerned and aware of gender equality after these experiences, and that training should extend beyond individuals to include the governance structures.

“Union leaders have been trained to ensure that they understand the need for gender balance. A lot of strategies have been put up, so now we can talk about women in trade unionism. Although they are not yet at their peak, I believe that they are coming in. In conferences and meetings, union leaders can learn from their colleagues that are doing the right thing.” (Network interview)

Union culture would need to shift in the minds and hearts of men and women. Changes would be needed in habitual, often sub-conscious behaviours in which both men and women participate. Sexist attacks in elections would become unacceptable if male influencers and leaders confronted them. These changes are profound, and depend on new social narratives and shifts in personal beliefs and deep assumptions.

Safe spaces for reflection, paradigm shifts, and a growing understanding of women's and men's experiences are a valuable starting point.

11.3 Facilitating self-realisation for women – addressing disadvantage

The term ‘capacity’ carries complex connotations. Sometimes it simply refers to the technical skills and union knowledge that both men and women need to be effective leaders. Sometimes it implies that a person, group or organisation is intrinsically inadequate to a task and needs to be ‘improved’. There has been a theme, mainly among ‘northern’ respondents, that claims that women are already powerful and capable, and that if men and unions change, women will be enabled. There is suggestion that investing in women's knowledge, beliefs and confidence implies that they are lesser.

While changes to unions and men's attitudes would undoubtedly enable women far greater access, women in this study also stated clearly that socialisation, expectations and the excessive demands of their unpaid work do indeed impact on their confidence. They reflect on how their immersion in a patriarchal culture has not only had external impact, but also affects their beliefs about themselves, men, women, and society.

11.3.1 Building confidence

It takes a great deal of confidence to lead, and especially in a male-dominated space, where the qualities needed to lead are actively socially discouraged. Women need opportunities to confront their own socialisation as lesser or submissive, to gain belief in their own abilities, and clarity on what they want from their life and work for themselves and their professional communities, beyond their families and roles as wives and mothers.

⁸¹ Kästel H, Sennemark E, and Kampe K. 2018. External Evaluation of the EI African Women in Education Network (AWEN): Final Report

“Women’s lack of confidence makes it difficult for them to make interventions in public.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Confidence and clarity are needed for a woman to explain her goals, negotiate well with her family, and gain the support of those around her.

“There is a slight improvement in culture, but women should become more sure of themselves in order to have a critical mass of women who are able to promote themselves, fighting hard to win certain positions.” (Leader interview)

Confidence, alongside the technical skills of public speaking, leadership, listening and workplace negotiation, can be grown in well-designed workshops and leadership journeys, thought-provoking conversations, under the tutoring of a strong female mentor, and/or in the relatively safe space of a Women’s Wing.

11.3.2 Inspiring women

As our stories series highlights, there are powerful women leaders at the forefront of unions. Given the difficult conditions for most – it might be assumed that if 6% of leaders are women, they are made up of these exceptional and superlative characters. As the women’s movement in union leadership gathers momentum, each inspiring women leader helps to encourage women to join and be active in unions, and to aspire to leadership.

The more women show each other that their leadership has relevance, influence and power – the more likely it is that others take up the challenge. Women are increasingly being seen in leadership, and for many it was a mentor or an example that inspired them to become active and committed union members.

Mentors – often in the form of a leader with a younger woman assistant – are able to show upcoming women the practical operations of union leadership and politics, giving them an example of confidence and influence, while demonstrating service to the rights of their fellow teachers. Other research concurs that formal and intentional mentoring programmes for women’s participation help to foster skills and provide experience for leadership⁸².

Naturally evolving mentorship relationships are one of the key factors encouraging women in leadership, and many of the successful women leaders today value the gift of mentorship they have received in their lives.

“I think women should volunteer to take up responsibilities that can groom them into future trade union leadership.” (Focus Group Discussion)

“Mentorship programmes are needed, to identify and build young and potential female leaders, and train new female leaders to be assertive, giving them lobbying and public speaking skills, and making them more visible.” (Focus Group Discussion)

⁸² Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women’s Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women’s Policy Research, Washington, DC. seven strat full I917

A WOMAN LEADER'S STORY: The power of the mentor

Soon after I left university the Regional Gender Coordinator came to my school and introduced herself and talked about the union, and what they do for teachers. So I filled in the form and became a member.

After about a year, she told me, *"You are very active. I want to groom you. Will you have time for it?"*

I said *"Why not? I'm fresh from school, very young, I don't have enough responsibility. So whatever role you assigned to me, I am ready to support you?"*

It wasn't formalised. She made me her secretary. During the holidays she could call me to come, saying *"We are going for a programme"* – this was when the union wanted to join EI – they wanted vibrant ladies who would bring ideas.

Next, she said she was going to contest an election. I was able to lobby some ladies to rally their support behind her and she was elected to a National Women's position – and I took over her position as the Regional Gender Coordinator.

We were doing the work – but it wasn't formalised in our constitution. I would just try to assist members. We were not recognised. There was no specific rule for the Gender Coordinator position in the constitution. So they would call you to a meeting as and when your services were needed – but then, some of them would say, *"She's not part of us, she's not an officer. Why is she around now?"* Well to that I would say *"I'm your sister, let me sit outside, if you need something you can call me, I'll come in and support you."* Whatever they do, it will not put me off.

Then we had constitutional review, and it was amended. They made Regional Gender Coordinator a permanent position, which I contested for in elections. I won because I was going to the office regularly, so a lot of people got to know me, and they realised I was hard working.

At the next election I was looking at the men I was working with, and it seemed to me that they were not prepared to listen to other officials, so that we work as a team. One person cannot run the whole region. You have to open up for others to support you so that you can achieve your aims and move ahead. So I decided to change my position, and contest against them. **Even if I didn't win, I will have made a mark. It will encourage and motivate other ladies to also try** and pick up such a position in the future. People thought I was joking, but I was very serious. **You have to lobby. I sold my ideas, my intentions, what I have done, and what I wanted to do for the region.**

It wasn't easy – the intimidation. They were telling all sorts of lies, and I did not comment. On the election day my opponent said, *"How can we allow a woman to rule? How can we do this?"* But because I was going to the office, and **if somebody came with his or her problem, I would take their number, call the National Office, and find out what we could do. I would look into it and attend to the person.** So most people were happy with what I was doing. They told me, *"The good work that you are doing and the way you are serving our members, we put our support behind you"*. So at the end of the day I won by many votes.

Most of us are married women with families – so if you want a lady to come for a meeting, you shouldn't schedule the meeting after two o'clock, where the lady might be preparing to go home, and maybe take care of the kids, bringing them from school, cooking. It's not everybody who can leave her family to attend union a meeting. They won't come. So we are trying to educate our Zonal Chairman, to **look at the timing of the meetings.**

Also, some men think when you involve yourself in unionism, you will be cheating on your man – so they don't feel comfortable when women are travelling. You have to travel for workshops for several days. You will be sleeping in hotels with your colleagues. You need a husband who understands you, and knows what you are doing, and will give you the support. I don't have challenges with my family.

Women feel intimidated by the men. Women might think, what if I go and I lose – **if you lose what's wrong with that? You have opened a door for another lady to know that she can also go and try.** Some think a woman should not lead them. But I think **if a woman says she will do something, she will do it, and do it better. She will do it to perfection.**

11.3.3 Women's networks and women-only spaces

Used well, women's spaces provide a context where women can safely explore and grow their own sense of power. Several women leaders described networks and women's spaces as having material value to unions, unless they are ghettoised or ignored – but also having direct and immediate value to the women participating in them. Some of these women might remain in women's spaces, benefitting through greater self-worth and a sense of community enhancing the way they engage in their daily lives and relationships. Others might forge out to become union leaders in the mainstream, and return to inspire other women by their example. In either case, this space is valuable to women, the union, and broader society.

11.3.4 Training: Strategic, high quality, facilitated processes

The importance of *'intensive training programmes'* is endorsed by ITUC, as a means to prepare women for leadership positions⁸³. Training has been found to help women to build skills and confidence⁸⁴. While women clearly have capacity, their motivation and personal abilities to tackle the many different obstacles they face can benefit from well-designed facilitated leadership learning journeys. Nevertheless, we hesitate to call the subtle processes of self-realisation 'training' – a word that implies transferring information from an 'expert' trainer. This traditional training style would probably miss the point of guided self-realisation.

"There should be more workshops. Strength was born in a workshop for me. We should workshop these women so that they get to know that they are not lesser human beings, and then hold their hands as they walked the journey." (Leader interview)

Some unions, all women's networks and EI have offered multiple workshops for women. Women appreciated the psychological work around building self-esteem and questioning sexist assumptions and the patriarchy; as well as very practical reflection on how to balance their triple burden. Safe spaces can enable women to formulate their own life goals, strategies and priorities; practice their confidence, articulateness and ability to formulate ideas; or share insights on how to handle delicate family negotiations. In some unions women have opted for training and workshops to focus on issues such as alternative supplementary income, health education, or matters that are empowering, but tangential to union leadership and participation.

Leadership and personal growth processes require a particular facilitation style and skills. Processes are very different from the boardroom, information-based, knowledge-transfer approaches of conventional training. Training and women's empowerment may receive the insights of women across the world, but profound processes of reflection and self-analysis must be designed and led by powerful African women.

EI processes are facilitated by such women, although further reflection and evaluation would help to consider whether or not the style, design and content are also best suited to the context. This was beyond the scope of this study. While there is consensus among union respondents that training has been valuable, **further exploration and assessment of the current leadership training approach would help to identify whether the design, style and content of these processes is ideally suited to**

⁸³ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

⁸⁴ Caiazza, A. 2007. I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies That Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions. Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC. seven strat full I917

the context. There is potential to draw on skills outside of conventional training, such as gender and leadership programmes that might offer personal growth processes in a leadership development journey.

12 Conclusions

12.1 African Feminism

The word 'feminism' can be interpreted in many different ways, and a literature review on African feminism would be fascinating. Although women's experiences globally might be similar, feminist responses may differ. Versions of feminism that emerge from within societies are likely to be more legitimate and more effective in enabling self-realisation.

While this is beyond the scope of this study, it was interesting to observe that research respondents do not enter into union politics to confront the patriarchy, campaign primarily for women's rights, or educate society on the equality of men and women. They are first and foremost unionists. They seek equal voice with men, mainly to further the rights and needs of their fellow teachers – both male and female. They believe that their leadership is worthy, that women are under-represented in the main body of the union, and that they have a role to play and service to offer. They accept the idea that they are also fully responsible for child-raising and household management, and do not feel that their husband should substantially share that role.

African feminism, developing in women's conversations among African unionists, has guided the evolving ideals and approaches of women in the continent – without over-reliance on Western ideas around emancipation, subjugation or patriarchy.

12.2 Women's leadership in African education unions

Over the last decades, women in Africa have grown to hold greater influence, self-determination and authority than ever before. This has infiltrated union processes and culture, enhanced by EI's support. There are more unions conscientiously applying affirmative action in different ways. Gradually more women are entering into the openly contested space of mainstream union leadership.

While progress is reassuring – the point has not been reached where enough women are in enough positions of influence to both normalise their presence, and for them to consistently influence union operations. This research has shared many valid social reasons for this, while resisting deflecting attention from the important goal of identifying and adopting ways of ensuring women's participation. Society provides the backdrop for unions to work on their own internal cultural norms and gender responsiveness, and on structures which attempt to level the playing field so that women are motivated and leadership is accessible.

12.3 Summary of opportunities

This research has highlighted opportunities to improve accessibility for women in union leadership:

- Women's structures should be funded, enabled and encouraged to deliver programmes that address gender bias, both within the union, as well as in society at large.
- Policy, constitutional reforms and strategy are needed as a foundation. Policies and structural reforms should be strongly influenced and guided by women – with the full endorsement and active leadership and support of all leaders, both male and female.
- Reform should accompany processes of gender awareness-raising and reflection with governance structures.
- Women-only programmes can be highly beneficial, offering space for reflection, education, confidence building, personal growth and goal-setting. They are also a space where mentor-mentee relationships can be formed, and where powerful and inspiring women can share their journeys.
- Gender programmes for men and women are critical, offering calm and safe space for gaining very personal insights and awareness on gender, and on the impacts of people's socialisation on their beliefs and assumptions.
- All training or capacity building should be strategic, and should be evaluated for process and outcomes. A study of training approaches and their benefits, against global examples of gender and leadership capacity strengthening may help to ensure that facilitation and design draw on good practice.
- Invest sufficiently, with political support from the highest levels, to ensure that campaigns against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and for workplace rights that affect women, are well-understood and well-supported by both men and women. Thoroughly research and develop or domesticate policies and safe reporting processes for sexual harassment and SGBV within unions.
- Monitoring – Unions have minimal objective or easily accessed data. Demographic data against a small, achievable set of variables should be collected on different levels from membership to top leadership; of the effectiveness and integration of women structures; and of the outcomes of gender equity interventions. While data are useful, the numbers alone do not necessarily reflect the situation. Monitoring also includes the qualitative feedback on gender goals, policies and measures. Both numbers and the quality of gender balance should be shared with Congress, holding structures at different levels to account for policy implementation⁸⁵.

⁸⁵ ITUC. 2008. Achieving gender equality: A trade union manual. https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/manuel_ENGOK.pdf.

Annex 1: Questions from the Terms of Reference

The TOR outlines the following range of questions, focused on the barriers of women to leadership position and influence, to be researched in five countries, from all four sub-regions.

- I. How do the unions seek to represent the interests of women members and include women in decision-making?
- II. What are the main barriers to women's participation and leadership in the selected unions? What has the union done to overcome these barriers?
- III. Are there different barriers pertaining to women's participation vs. women's leadership in the unions?
- IV. Are there different barriers (within and outside the unions) linked to age, geography, socio-economic status, culture, family status etc. among female members? What has the union done to overcome these barriers?
- V. Are there different barriers to be found at different levels of the unions (local, regional, and national)? How might these be overcome?
- VI. Do the unions have policies and/or have taken action to reduce gender imbalances in participation in union activities and decision-making? How have they been effective?
- VII. Have the unions taken into account the 'triple burden' (professional work, unpaid family/domestic responsibilities, union participation) on women? If so, how? If not, why not? How might they do so in future?
- VIII. To what extent have measures aimed at increasing women's representation and involvement in the unions been effective?

These questions offer focused questions on some of the ideas around likely obstacles to women's participation and leadership, including intersectionality between different types of discrimination.

Annex 2. Interview / Focus group instrument

Introduction (Use your own words. Do not read like a script)

Hello, my name is _____. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this FGD.

Purpose

This focus group is part of a research project for EIRAF and AWEN.

We would like to learn about the experience of women in your union – especially women in leadership – the challenges and opportunities that women find if they wish to work as leaders in the union; how women feel about being leaders; and the ways in which unions can become more equal for men and women.

Please note – that this is not a normal union meeting about women’s conditions in the workplace. We appreciate your work for rights in the sector – this session is about how women experience union membership and leadership.

Ethics

This research is **independent** – nothing you say will affect your standing in the union or with EIRAF. Please feel free to speak openly. Also there is no direct benefit to you – you are helping us to learn about how best to support women in unions.

This meeting is **confidential**. Clearly as a group you hear each other, but you will not be quoted by name, your name will not be recorded in the reports, and what you say will not be associated with you.

This focus group is **voluntary**. We appreciate you coming, but you do not have to feel any obligation to answer any question if you feel uncomfortable, although we hope that you will participate fully.

Please remember that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. We are interested in your experiences and beliefs. I hope you will be comfortable speaking honestly and sharing your ideas with us, including both your personal challenges, as well as achievements.

Some of your experiences or feelings might be difficult. You might have faced challenges. Let us agree that this is a safe space to tell your stories. You might not be the only person facing difficulties, and we can all learn from each other. Please can we agree to be open to each other, and not to judge each other in this meeting.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Informed consent: Do we have your consent to participate?

FGD / interview process – semi-structured

Let’s do a quick round of introductions. Can each of you tell the group your name, and where you work, any leadership you occupy, what training have you received from AWEN / EIRAF / regional women’s network on gender.

Questions

- 1) **How well do you think your union works for women?** (If data are provided – from your data we hear that about **x% of union members are women**)
 - a. In what ways is your union supportive of women and their needs and interests in the workplace – please give examples (eg equal pay for women, family allowances ...)
 - b. In what ways is your union not supportive of women and their needs and interests in the workplace – please give examples (e.g. do they get involved in sexual harassment, sex for jobs, abuse situations – C190)
- 2) Women as **union members**
 - a. Are all of the women in your workplace members of the union? Why might a women join or not join the union? (prompts against the gender transformatory framework)
 - b. Are members active in their unions – why or why not?
- 3) Women in **union leadership**
 - a. Please also tell us about whether women members can influence union decisions equally with men.
 - b. **How easy is it for women to become union representative for a school or district?** What are the things that make it easy or difficult for women? (From your data we hear that about **x% of school representatives are women.**)
 - c. **How easy is it for women to become senior or president?** What are the things that make it easy or difficult for women? (From your data we hear that about **x% of senior leaders are women.**)
- 4) Do all women have equal access in unions as members? And as leaders? What about young women or women with disabilities, poorer women, women with less formal education, different religions. etc?
- 5) TO SUMMARISE – What are the reasons for people’s activity in the union? (Summarise what people have said – and probe for more)
 - a. **Structural in the union** = Policies, systems, internal rules, practical support to membership, time and expectations. (is the correct, anything else)
 - Two ideas about how this can be improved by the union
 - b. **Social / relationship in the union** = Acceptance of women as leaders, women’s voice and influence, competition.
 - Two ideas about how this can be improved by the union
 - c. **Social reasons in society** = Family, culture, society norms – do they encourage / discourage?
 - Two ideas about how women can be supported by the union
 - d. **Individual reasons** = Women do / don’t want to be in and/or lead in unions? What are the benefits for them? And what are the costs or sacrifices they make?
 - Two ideas about how women can be encouraged to participate
 - **Materials – do you think this is better on flipcharts (how?) ... or verbally only?**

Annex 3: Demographic Data form

Dear EIRAF Affiliate

We would like to request information, if you have it available, on the numbers of women and men in elected leadership in your union. This is part of a research project for EIRAF and AWEN on gender representation in all of our unions and women in leadership positions. With data, it will be possible to monitor the trends over time for the numbers of women in major structures in the unions.

We are aware that you have multiple sub-committees, ad hoc committees and levels of management and elected structures. Please try to select the top 3 structures for national governance, national management, and at district/branch or the next level down.

Please remember that this is not a judgement, it is simply information for gender monitoring. If you do not have data on gender, then this is also understood, and is also useful to know.

Name of union							
Name/s of person/people entering information							
Date/s completed							
1	Number of people in your governance structure / board – What is it called:						
	Male		Female		Top position M/F		No. Female affirmative
2	Number of people in your national executive committee / management structure – What is it called:						
	Male		Female		Top position M/F		No. Female affirmative
3	What is the name of your sub-national level – e.g. regions/counties/districts:						
4	How many regions/counties/districts are there? (1 level below national)						
5	Please give the numbers of males and females for each region if possible, and whether the top position (e.g. executive secretary) is M/F, and how many women are in affirmative posts. (If you have more than 10 regions, then a note or email summary would be great. Thank you						
	Name of 'branch'	No. Male	No Female	Top position M/F	No. Female affirmative		
5.1							
5.2							
5.3							
5.4							
5.5							
5.6							
5.7							
5.8							
5.9							
5.10							

Annex 4. Policies reviewed

Country	Organisation / Policy holder	Constitutions / Statuts	Other policy documents	CBA / letter of demand	Related national policy	Total union documents
Cameroon	National SYNTESPRIC	1	0	0	1	1
	National			1	1	
Ghana	GNAT	1				4
	NAGRAT	1				
	TEWU	1				
	CCT	1				
	UTAG	0				
Kenya	National			1	1	5
	KNUT	1	1			
	KUPPET (2010 and 2017 constitutions)	1				
	UASU	1				
Namibia	National			0	1	2
	NANTU - constitution and gender policy	1	1			
Senegal	National				0	3
	SYPROS	1				
	SELS	2				
Regional	EIRAF 2017 updated policy declaration on women in education and Teachers Organizations		1			
	EIRAF Strategic Operational Plan 2022		1			
	TOTAL = 22	12	4	2	4	