

# Women Trade Union Participation in India- A Qualitative Inquiry

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*With growth in women trade union membership in India, it is crucial to understand who carries the trade union responsibilities because past research has discovered gap between women membership and participation. This article explores the trade union participation of women in a mixed gender union set up located in the Eastern India. In the case of women trade union members “full participation remains a myth” is a key finding of the study. Masculine structure of entire industry, lower social acceptance of women’s union activity and existing family responsibilities have made it difficult for women to reach full participation.*

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## Introduction

Inclusion and integration of women in trade unions could draw upon bargaining power in favor of women issues and could generate equal power distribution among all its members, (Greene & Kirton, 2002; Parker, 2002) and develop a sense of democracy (Blaschke, 2015). Though India has a 100 years history of trade unionism, beginning its first movement in 1918 (Elembilassery, 2018), however only a few unions like Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) have worked for women’s trade unionism (Menon, 2013). Women in SEWA are successful in their efforts, still being a women only union, might have a different scenario from a mixed gender union, as women behave differently in the presence of male members (Kirton & Healy, 2004). Forrest (1993) made a point that influx of women into labor force would limit the trade union activities, caused by the pseudo representation of women. Pseudo representation has been referred to as union membership without active work. Women lacking time for attendance of committee meetings, not able to invest time for growth of trade unions, would be a burden on other (male) union mem-

bers. Women trade union membership in India has grown over time from 1351000 in 1996 to 2512096 in 2014 (Trade Unions in India, 2014), which grows the curiosity to verify the argument of Forrest (1993) and explore the level of union participation.

Studies on women union participation have gained prominence in the last four decades (Anderson, 1978; Blaschke, 2015; Greene & Kirton, 2002; Parker, 2002; Ratnam & Jain, 2002) and discovered comparatively lower participation of women as trade union members. The reasons of non-participation and low involvement broadly pulled together in factors like attitudinal, ideological (Lawrence, 1994) and social gender stereotypes, union norms, opportunity to participate (Ratnam & Jain, 2002) and the absence of female leadership in unions (Marathe & Balasubramanian, 2013). Some scholars defined the factors of low participation as structural determinants and individual's belief in unionism, along with attitude and perception towards the same (Lawrence, 1994). Ratnam and Jain (2002), have mentioned lower participation of women in trade unions in India, however they mostly focused at the union membership, not the active participation. They looked at macro level and have taken data from the major unions of India.

Debate on union participation, mostly researched in developed countries (Anderson, 1978; Blaschke, 2015), might vary on the parameters in developing countries. Rarely any study has explored the level of actual participation of women

union members, office bearers or committee members at the micro level, in the Indian context. In order to contribute to this global agenda of women participation in union activities, this study had tried to find out the level of participation in India. It also tried to trace the enabling and inhibiting factors behind the same. From the existing literature on trade union participation, relevant dimensions have been selected for the study and data taken from one mixed gender trade union set up in the Eastern India.

### **Theoretical Background**

Union participation could be segregated into two parts; first formal activities like attending union meetings and present in the election; second informal activities like helping at workplace and speaking for unions. Klandermans (1986) pointed out that seeking information about union activities, showing interest for agreements, exercising union voting rights and emotional involvement would also contribute to union participation. Discussing about union activities with others also indicated union participation. McShane (1986) also argued that merely having union membership may not display the complete participation, rather participation is multidimensional and suggested nine dimensions for trade unions participation. The dimensions are: delegate at national union convention, member of union branch committee, elected official in union branch, voted in latest contract ratification, candidate in union branch election, being held any other appointed position, voted in latest strike vote, voted in latest union election, num-

ber of union meetings attended. Kelloway and Barling (1993) have given seven union participation dimensions such as: hold union office, serve on committees, attend union meetings, talk to union leaders, vote in elections, vote in other votes, reading union literature.

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Studies have explored the union participation from several dimensions such as psychology, attitudinal and demographics. Among all demographic variables, “gender” has been identified as a major one. Literature is ambiguous about women’s inclination towards trade unions. As per Ratnam and Jain, (2002), and Clegg (1976), women workers show lower inclination towards unions and mostly try to stay away from it. However, according to Sinclair (1995) women carry strong confidence in the principles of unionism like men. They want to carry out union work along with men and carry tremendous potential to contribute towards it (Parker, 2002). As per a study on BPO employees in India, women have displayed favorable attitude towards union in India (Sarkar, 2009); however, their actual participation had not been revealed.

Trade unions as democratic bodies are expected to give equal opportunities to all their members, so as women represent issues and participate in its decision making process (Blaschke, 2015). Non-participation will deprive women

members from extending their view points and will fail to put forward issues related to women, result in non-fulfilment of union democracy objective. Participation could bring in more number of women members and can project better identity of one union. Women unionists can work towards formation of women friendly unions which could be a pre-condition for transforming traditional masculine view of trade unions.

More bargaining power in the hands of women leaders can highlight more women related issues otherwise these issues will be sidelined from the mainstream (Greene & Kirton, 2002; Kirton & Healy, 1999). Women bring sense of diversity to the set up and, given proper opportunity to exercise their beneficial rights, can generate faster and fruitful result (Parker, 2002). According to Reddy (1981), entry of women into trade unions might contribute to lower number of strikes in India. Women members with their nurturing characters could avoid number of strikes and incidence of violence by initiating discussion. For many scholars (e.g. Forrest, 1993), increased influx of women into labor market is a limiting factor for future growth of the trade union movement. In a mixed gender union set up, women members mostly show concern for gender specific issues in meetings in comparison to men who hardly show any concern for male issues (Pocock, 1997).

As per the studies done on women only groups or separate unions, women feel more confident for taking decisions in non-male atmosphere and feel the

opposite in their presence. Even with all ability for unionism, women showed higher inhibition, lower confidence for participation in union activities in the presence of male and mostly give up leadership roles to men (Kirton & Healy, 2004). Presence of women in decision making positions motivates women members in participation (Blaschke, 2015) by witnessing one role model in the proximity (Greene & Kirton, 2002). Number of women council members/office bearers remaining low for many reasons discussed above (Parker, 2000), has impacted women union participation negatively.

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Availability of proper working framework and opportunity to contribute towards decision making encourages female members for participation, however traditional union frameworks are mostly male centric (Forrest, 2001), and could pose problem for inclusion of women. Historically industrial relations and trade union activities remained dominated by male issues and union atmosphere mostly lacked friendliness for women members (Greene & Kirton, 2002; Kirton, & Healy, 1999). Trade union activities mostly influenced by majority view in the group (Parker, 2002) and the majority membership is male. Women issues found to be vague by male members, absence of role models, dismissing women issues, not let-

ting women to get into dialogues and existing social structure have made women feel inferior to men, develop lower confidence in their presence. Exclusion of women members from holding important positions in union could be due to stronger existence “masculinity” in it and the way discussions and meetings were conducted, fail to accommodate women’s needs, indicate women’s non-belongingness and discourage women to be part of it (Cooper, 2012; Forrest, 2001).

In contrast, Anderson (1978) argued that personal factors play a more dominant role than union structural issues in influencing an individual’s decision for participation. The perceived pay off from unions and the ability of the unions to achieve the objective of the members it will lead to increased involvement. Lawrence (1994) stated that women members’ lower union involvement is largely affected by attitudinal (like or dislike for unionism), ideological barriers (different viewpoints) and loosely defined work culture in unions.

Women workers in newly industrialized countries in South Asia, among which India is a prominent one, are mostly identified with lower wage aspirations and are ready to work for longer hours without decent workplace, because of their desperate need for earning (Standing, 1989). Women in this category are normally low paid as compared to male employees, mostly determined by the social constraints that bar women from working and earning at par with men. Female working poor, mostly seen in the unorganized labor force, find them-

selves under several layers of hierarchy starting from class, gender, caste and ethnicity (Sen, 2013). In addition to this, issues like sexual harassment at workplace and reduced job security have made it even worse. These workers generally do not react to the conditions as they have a desperate need to earn for the family and alternatives are very less, hence the role of trade unions turn more important.

### **Methodology**

Data has been collected through in-depth face to face interviews from committee members of one Contract Workers' Union, located in one industrial town in the Eastern India. This is a new union formed in 2012, affiliated to Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). The members in this union have worked in contract positions as Patient Support Workers (PSW) in one prominent multispecialty hospital, under an external vendor. As per the last data point, total number of the union members were little above 650. Male and female ratio is almost 3:2. The age of the participants ranged from 25 years to 40 years. Only two persons studied till 10<sup>th</sup> standard in this sample, rest did not complete schooling. Prior verbal consent for participation in research work has been taken through general secretary of this particular union. The discussion has been kept open-ended and participants have discussed their organizational and personal issues. It has taken multiple rounds of visits to the hospital to generate trust and familiarity.

The reasons behind selecting this union are: first, a significant number is women union members, second, it has 4 female members in a committee of 11. Data was collected in two phases: first in September 2015 and second in September 2018. During phase I the union did not have any election as such, only volunteers were leading the union. Therefore, in the second phase follow up interviews were conducted. The second phase was conducted when there already was an election in March 2018 and all the elected members were heading the union. Except one, all the committee members were those holding the position since the last 6 years.

During first phase, total number of participants were 11. In the first phase, 9 female members were interviewed out of whom 4 were committee members (Yoshada, Rupa, Shabina, Mamta), and the rest were union members (Ahalya, Shikha, Sandhya, Pratima, Renu). Pseudo names have been used for confidentiality. In the second phase, only 5 members of the first could be traced. The general secretary Ashok, the treasurer Ghanshyam and three female committee members (Yoshada, Rupa and Mamta). Only Ashok gave his extensive interview on their union activities in the last 3 years. All the interviews were noted on paper and later analyzed.

### **Findings**

From the analysis, three themes evolved: i) Full participation is a myth for women, ii) Continuation of masculine leadership, iii) Concentrated participation.

*Full participation is a myth:* From the in-depth discussions with union members, it became clear as per the dimensions provided by scholars in the literature, women have not achieved full participation in the union in this study. The dimensions considered here are: (1) seeking information about union activities, (2) showing interest for agreements, (3) delegate at national union convention, (4) member of union branch committee, (5) elected official in union branch (holding office bearing position), (6) voted in the latest contract ratification, (7) candidate in union branch election, (8) voted in the latest union election, (9) number of union meetings attended and (10) talked to union leaders. These dimensions are taken from the list as per the need of the study. All the 10 points were valid for this union. Dimensions like being a delegate at national union convention and elected official was fully absent in relation to women in this study. This union has representation at national level union meetings, but it is always the general secretary or other male members have attended. Even though they have 4 committee members in the union office none of them occupied any office bearers' position. The number of female members subscribed to the union have grown in between phase 1 and phase 2 data collection, however, the level of women participation remained unchanged.

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Yashoda found to be one and only active female participant in this study. Rupa, Shabina and Mamta have expressed their personal reasons for not contributing to the union activities. In the first phase interview Shabina told that she was not interested in the role and in the second phase she was not part of the committee. Rupa and Mamta found that the union can function even without their participation. The number of meetings they have attended was very low in the case of all the three members, but Rupa and Mamta got re-elected for their roles. Yashoda has her husband's support in attending all the evening meetings and she is also a person behind the formation of this union.

One participant's (Shikha) husband is not in favor of her union activities, so she has never gone beyond paying the monthly subscription fees. Pratima is a single bread earner of her family and has her sick husband at home to care for. She was too tired to attend the meetings in the evenings. Sandhya's daughters are in marriageable age, so she wants to spend some time with them before they marry. Ahalya is a widow, mother of two teenage sons, stays with her maternal family. The household chores have been managed by her extended family and she could manage her union activities. Ahalya is not a committee member. Union members expect the jobs to be made permanent and paid all the perks and salaries at par with permanent employees. As per one participant (Renu), most of the time they do not know why specific topics have not been discussed, why not wage increment issues? They have also

pointed out absence of women specific issues, rather always general matters have filled the committee agenda.

*Continuation of masculinity:* Even though there are 4 female committee members in the union committee of 11, none of the women occupied any office bearers' positions. One woman, Yashodha who was the brain child behind formation of this union, having elected as committee member, still did not opt for any office bearing position. Her husband advised her to form a union if they want to get rid of their exploitations, so she had all the support from her husband to move ahead with it. She has all her children grown up, so not really burdened by household responsibilities. But her own belief that men should do all that work pulls her back from holding any position. Women never go for representing the union at the district level, state level or national level trade unions meets. It's always the general secretary Ashok who went for all those activities. Yashodha did face management fury for trying to form the union, still never wanted to occupy any office bearer's role.

Another important aspect that came out in all such places during the interviews is the whole structure of union functioning. The management being male dominated, if these women want to discuss something with them, the gender dynamics comes into the picture. Second, in all such meetings as at state level or district level union conventions, the majority are male, mostly organized in the night which necessitates travelling and hence females normally do not find it ap-

pealing to attend. Finally, in the case of meeting labor commissioner or any lawyer etc. also the same gender dynamics gets surfaced. Thus, the male members take the responsibility of attending local INTUC meetings, national level meetings, visiting labor commissioner's office etc. Male members have their own vehicles to rush wherever they want. Thus, the overall structure has created inhibition in women.

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They have one "best employee of the month award", for which one person would be selected who received INR 500. But the people who are active members of the union have never been selected for the award. These kind of incidents have created job insecurity among workers, so as the participation. The basic motivation behind keeping women in the union committee has been that it helped them organizing peaceful meetings because management could not speak slangs in-front of women and showed best of its behavior. The basic feature in woman union leader is composure and calm. One participant, Ahalya, accepted that even though she was very much inclined for the union, she has not opted for any committee member's role. The reason lies in her short-tempered personality trait, thus unfit for the union needs. The same thing has been verified through the general secretary. As per the General Secretary, when the bargaining power is so low, they cannot discuss with anger. Yashodha, has also mentioned the

same. Everyone believed women should not fight in the union meetings.

The treasurer who was the eldest participant in this study, had witnessed much worse conditions in the workplace in the past, when there was no union. Whenever they tried to seek help from political leaders or unions outside, the result was always very bad. As per Ghanshyam, “they will .... break all the glasses, make all noise...but this is a hospital, we don’t want such things here.... It took many years to form this union...Management never wanted us to unionize.....this is a hospital ...peace is most important”.

*Concentrated participation:* Only a set people had worked hard for the formation this union, they are holding key positions. There was hardly any change in the committee members and officials, in the last election. Only one committee member Shabina, who opted out in the

election, had made her point for not being interested in the union. In her first interview she told, she was part of another union before this focal union was formed. As she had prior experience, her name has been recommended for the committee, but she had never attended any of the meetings. When the actual election happened she did not nominate herself for the position. Again, among those involved, male members have handled a major part of the union responsibilities. President of the union is an outsider, with very low involvement. Female members discuss the issues on the hospital wards during working hours, if they get free time. The discussion was also confined to a few women in the union. As observed during the interviews, these women also need to keep the topics confidential, as they felt management never wanted them to be united. Female committee members donot want any change in the leadership, as things are done well by Ashok and others.

**Table 1 Enabling &Inhibiting Factors for Union Participation**

Enabling Factors	Inhibiting Factors
Opportunity to join and contribute, spousal/ family support for union activity, ideological match, availability of time to contribute, bonding with other members,match in perceived pay off, orientation to bring change.	Lower confidence, stereotypes about female, expectation mismatch, meeting timings, family responsibilities, inability to bond with other members, absence of scope for contribution, female issues not covered, dominated by male, only few work actively, free riding attitude.

**Discussion & Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to find the level of trade union participation of women and the reasons behind it. With 4 females in a committee of 11 and 40% of the union members as females, this un-

doubtedly displayed a case of higher representation. However, about women participation, the findings were dicey. Two major findings were: first, they are yet to reach the full participation in trade union activities, as none of the committee members had taken up any office bearer’s

position, all the positions have been held by male members which indicates the continuation of lower confidence level in a mixed gender union set up, where female give up leadership roles to males (Kirton & Healy, 2004).

**Family members' acceptance of union activities came out as a factor behind women's union participation.**

Second, remaining absent in meetings is not lower inclination towards union activities, rather it was related to the time factors. Women have their own family responsibilities and hence could not devote extra time for union activities on a regular basis. Family members' acceptance of union activities came out as a factor behind women's union participation. This is a case of a trade union where the female members are not very low in number. As per the General Secretary, the actual participation of women and many other union members very low. When the idea of formation of the union came up, women workers came forward to join union but only few showed active interest for its functioning. "Some people even do not know how life changed by union effort, they feel management turning better automatically" said Ashok, General Secretary. This is indicative of a lower level of awareness about union functioning among all its members and they need knowledge about union activities to come forward to participate. This also is a classic case of free riding very well prevalent in union activities (Booth, 1985), which indicates enjoying fruits of

group bargaining, without incurring any cost for it.

Though as per statistics women union membership has grown over time (Trade Unions in India, 2014), women's representation is not sufficient to ensure that their issues receive attention. Some findings match with those from previous studies done in India viz. union activities, by nature, are time consuming, meetings carried out in the evenings, male oriented structure, low number of women in office or committee, family responsibility resulting in less time or energy to devote towards any other unpaid work (Blaschke, 2015; Ratnam & Jain, 2002). Forrest's (1993) finding that influx of women would put burden on trade union is also found to be true in this case. However, male members in this study, have not complained against it, rather they have taken this non-participation for granted, may be the power is concentrated in a few hands.

**Traditional theories and models on trade unions found to be mostly suitable for men and failed to accommodate women in it**

Though, as Pocock (1997) said, women would always highlight women specific issues in a mixed gender union setup, but here they have discussed more general issues that might be a factor behind low participation. Traditional theories and models on trade unions found to be mostly suitable for men and failed to accommodate women in it (Forrest, 1993). Women union activities studied in

isolation without social factors integrated in to it, might fail to project the full scenario.

**In a highly traditional society like India where males have always been given an upper status, women giving up their leadership roles to the males seems obvious.**

Even though all the studies in relation to women union participation have been done in western context like in Australia, Germany, Britain, Canada etc. with different social values, but the findings are not very different in the Indian context. Women still continue as tokens and are kept to maintain peace in the union meetings, lacking time or energy for extra unpaid work and feeling less confident in the presence of men. Surprisingly, two committee members who have not contributed to the union activities in the past still continue as committee members since years. In a highly traditional society like India where males have always been given an upper status, women giving up their leadership roles to the males seems obvious. The perceived power distance also played its role, in feeling less confident in presence of male.

### **Implications**

After opening up of economy, the number of contract workers have grown significantly in India, in almost all kinds of jobs (Saini, 2010), so as the chances of labor exploitations. In contrast, union activities have been reduced in India over

a period of time in order to establish industrial peace and to attract foreign investors. Women being a major part of this exploited contract laborforce, also as a gender more susceptible to discriminations, are in double difficulty, so need to represent their viewpoints through unions. Because, if labor issues are not seen through union lenses, some issues might remain unidentified. However, in absence of active participation in union activities, women fail to raise or resolve their issues and these unresolved issues further discourage women from expecting any gain from union activities. Like a downward spiral, low participation leading to even lower participation.

Trade union education could be an empowering mechanism for union participation (Greene & Kirton, 2002), could convert representation into participation. Contract workers have been protected through Contract Labor Abolition and Regulation Act, 1970 and many more. The knowledge of legal system, labor rights, modifications in the laws etc. could also be easily transferred to workers through trade unions, which might increase interest and participation in trade union activities. A nation filled with poverty, economic inequity and higher unemployment rate makes the role of trade unions even more crucial but difficult in absence of active participation of all its members.

### **Limitations & Future Research**

This study has some limitations. With a small sample size, it cannot ascertain the statistical significance. Done

on a contract workers union, it cannot be generalized for larger populations or in different union setups. Overall participation could be captured by a quantitative survey method on a bigger sample. Participants had been met at their workplace, which might have constrained in-depth discussion on certain personal issues. Future research can consider these matters.

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