

# Voicing the Voiceless: Experiences of Indian Women Trade Union Leaders

**Rashmi Maini & Mahima Thakur**

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*This study unravels the lived experiences of Indian women trade union leaders who gave voice to uncountable voiceless women and fought for their rights. The attempt has been to uncover the reasons for joining trade unions and actions taken by them to achieve leadership positions. The study involves a qualitative survey of 41 women union leaders in the Delhi NCR region. Snowball sampling was used to select the respondents to carry out semi-structured interviews and the qualitative data was content analyzed. The findings of the study indicated that self-efficacy, political efficacy, support from family, ERD (Egoistic Relative Deprivation) and CRD (Collective Relative Deprivation) majorly influenced the journey of women trade leaders.*

**Rashmi Maini** is Assistant Professor, Jaipuria Institute of Management, Ghaziabad E-mail: rashmimaini@gmail.com. **Mahima Thakur** is Associate Professor, Faculty of Management Studies, University of Delhi. E-mail: mahimathakur@fms.edu

## Theoretical Underpinnings

Though women's labor force participation is increasing day by day however, their participation in unions is not increasing in the same proportion in the central as well as the state level unions (Dean, 2006). Colgan and Ledwith (2002) also pointed out that the scenario in the unions across the developing and developed world is one of women's under-participation relative to their share in workforce membership and needs to be improved. The overall participation of women in Indian trade unions is a miniscule and very few women occupied leadership positions in trade unions in both central and state trade unions (Ratnam, 1995). This research tapped the experiences of those courageous women who took bold steps to come forward and joined unions as leaders to give voice to the voiceless women. According to Cohen (1994) and

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Dean (2006), there are various benefits of participating in trade unions. Issues such as maternity benefits, equal wages, sexual harassment etc. are given importance in organizations where women are involved in unions (Anderson, 1979; Thakur et al; 2018).

The analysis of women's experiences at leadership positions in trade unions in India is anchored in a variety of theoretical foundations. Though a plethora of theories can be associated with the broader idea of women's presence or under-representation in trade unions, however, for the present study, leadership theories are selected to throw light on the phenomena of lived experience of Indian women trade union leaders. According to Northhouse (2013), number of theories has sought to encapsulate the essence of the embodiment of leadership by leaders. Leadership theories help to understand the choices, decisions and strategies employed by leaders and also the ideologies that guide the mindset or impacts of the leader. The impact of leadership theory is also considered important in the context of diversity as a necessity for strategic growth, as the information technology age emerges, global cultural awareness and diversity as cornerstones of future growth become evidently pronounced (Geothals, 2011). In the year 2012, a survey of more than 300 senior executives of companies that held revenues ranging from \$500 million to over \$ 20 billion and beyond indicated that diversity and inclusion in the workforce was a necessary strategic element in empowering the innovation strategy. If the strategy of 'diversity and in-

clusion' is used in an organization, it acts as a catalyst for the growth of the organization and eventually impacts positively on the revenue of organizations. From such a perspective, a large part of the possible ethnic or gender diversity is missed when the power and inclusion of women in the workforce in general and at the leadership positions in particular have been suboptimal and cannot be considered as an adequately exhausted resource for future (Heeter, 2012).

Herrera et al (2013) mentioned that there is a need for organizations to adapt to the changing culture or fluctuating organizational cultures in order to take maximum advantage of diversity practices to influence leadership effectiveness (Healy & Kirton, 2002; Tannenbaum, 1965). According to Tapia (2009), there are five major megatrends which influence the corporate environment and these are diverse workforce, multilayered responsibilities, autonomy, empowerment and global scenario. Tapia (2009) stated that United States is focusing on not just diverse workforce, however they have diverse stakeholders. If such work is performed as an institutionalized effort, mobility and representation of all voiceless/ underrepresented groups hold positions of leadership (Cook & Glass, 2014). As per Manson (2012), issues such as morals, ethics and values have to be explored in detail as these are the pedigree of this era. Socio-cultural perspective becomes relevant in getting moral and ethical perspectives together. People like Jim Collins, Winston Churchill and Peter Drucker emphasized that today's era is the 'age of social transformation' where

social order is shifting the human condition and experience (Turner, 2008; Moua, 2010).

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Application of leadership theory constructs to women, and particularly those women who present nuances limit its direct translation to their experience (Chin et al, 2013; Chin et al, 2007). However, the overarching concepts of motivation, vision development and empowering others to a larger cause provide insight to the experience of a unique population of leaders. Cook and Glass (2014) emphasized that transformational leadership approach suggests that a leader effectively raises the moral, ethical and emotional connection of followers to a larger cause, empowering conscious action towards a common vision. The history of leadership study is deeply enriched and essential in understanding how women and particularly women of different background impact a leadership journey (Fosh, 1993; Cunnison & Stageman, 1995).

### **Research Method**

Qualitative research design was used to explore the union leadership journey of women who raised their voice not only for their cause and concerns but who helped countless women for several is-

sues. On the basis of existing theoretical framework and review of literature, 14 women unionists were interviewed in depth as a part pilot study. Pilot study helped in framing the questions for final qualitative in-depth interviews. This study involves a qualitative survey of 41 women unionists who hold a leadership position in trade unions in the Delhi NCR region. Snowball sampling was used to select the respondents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to fetch the detailed information with regard to their journey to the leadership position in Indian trade unions. The questions asked from union leaders were related to the following areas: which essentially are the reasons for joining and participating in trade unions, holding leadership positions, inhibitors and facilitators for union participation and leadership positions and last but not the least how did they support other women after becoming trade union leaders. Rigorous probing was done to get concrete information and exit questions were also asked in the end.

The data was analyzed using thematic content analysis. Qualitative data has its own pros and cons. Many a times its objectivity is questioned though it is a profound source of information and support the survey data. Henwood and Nicholson (1995) opined that though the procedural selection of psychology has normally included qualitative methods, these are observed as appropriate for the initial phase of a project or as an aid to other research designs (Thakur et al, 2018). "The qualitative approaches with their emphasis on exploring the research participant's own situated experiences

offset the critiques of much psychological research that the richness and significance of individual experience is neglected in favor of overarching reductionist explanations” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994).

**Results also unveiled that women trade union leaders unraveled that women support other women in voicing their concerns and issues.**

Results revealed that there are many factors which influence the participation of women in trade unions, however self-efficacy is one of the most important factors followed by political efficacy, ERD (Egoistic Relative Deprivation), CRD (Collective Relative Deprivation) and family support. Results also unveiled that women trade union leaders unraveled that women support other women in voicing their concerns and issues. Women look up to other women for help and support

### **Findings & Discussion**

The themes that emerged from the in-depth study were self-efficacy, political efficacy, support from family, ERD (Egoistic Relative Deprivation) and CRD (Collective Relative Deprivation), which majorly influenced the journey of women trade union leaders. Interviewees were specifically selected to generate a diverse and information-rich sample. All the participants met the delimited criteria for this study by being Indian women trade union leaders from Delhi NCR. The participants represented three different types

of trade unions; women who belong to central trade unions like AITUC, INTUC, HMS, CITU, women who belong to trade unions of private sector organizations and women who belong to trade unions of Public sector organizations. The leadership roles represented the Indian woman trade union leader in the given organization, as accessible to the researchers. The titles of the selected Indian women trade union leaders included convener of women’s committee, general secretaries, president and office bearers of Indian trade unions. All are residing in India and working as a trade union leader either in private, public or central trade union organizations.

The lived experiences of women trade union leaders about their journey to leadership positions in Indian trade unions are summarized in five major themes which are self-efficacy, political efficacy, support from family, ERD (Egoistic relative deprivation) and CRD (Collective relative deprivation).

### **Self-Efficacy**

Almost all the participants talked about their increased confidence level as they moved towards their journey to leadership positions in trade unions. They exhibited the determination and self-confidence in achieving their goals in spite of many obstacles. It was found out from the in-depth interviews that initially some women unionists were not interested in participating in trade unions actively. However, after spending a few years in unions, they gained confidence in self to participate actively in unions.

Some members were self-motivated and very confident of their chosen field.

One of the women trade union leaders mentioned: "I was influenced by some senior leaders in the organization. It's not about you have to join union for your own rights but union is about unity. I believe that together we can face challenges in a better way. If you are united you can fight with the world strongly and even if things don't get solved their intensity may lower down. Unions do provide opportunity to go outside India as well to present our own views in conferences. It actually increased my self-confidence". Another respondent mentioned: "I felt strongly that by working with unions continuously, it raised the level of self confidence in me and I feel psychologically empowered not in the working organization only however at home also. I also believe that it increased my level of knowledge working capacity. I feel different altogether if I compare myself with my prior life. I feel that more and more women should come and participate in unions, women are born managers so obviously."

### **Political Efficacy**

Political efficacy was also found to be an important factor in influencing their decision to become union leader. Many leaders mentioned that political efficacy really helped them in getting the work done by the people and mobilizing the mass and mob in an effective manner. One of the leaders mentioned that she has tasted the impact of activism at a very early age and throughout the journey ef-

fectively exhibited the importance of political efficacy in reaching to the level of leadership. One of the respondents mentioned at the interview: "I started working directly with women organizations and trade unions, even though my work with trade unions began at university days. Then I became active with AITUC state body. I view trade unions as an acid test for democracy of any society. If there is no freedom of making a union that means there is no democracy".

### **Family Struggle**

Most of the union leaders mentioned that family support is really important to pursue career in trade unions. In the beginning of their association with union, families were reluctant towards their participation in trade union activities. One of the union leaders mentioned that her father was very supportive. However, after marriage, her in laws were not in favor of her participating actively in unions. Her husband opposed initially though he was associated with the trade unions but he denied his wife to work with unions because of deep rooted stereotyping. Respondent no. 3 and respondent no. 4 did not face family struggle much however they had to sacrifice a lot in order to pursue a full time trade unionist position. The tests of early life journey, in essence, showcased the journey of ascent to leadership roles. It was

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prevalent with struggles, choices, challenges, and finally, a decision to overcome the hurdles. "I was fortunate enough that I got the support of my family. In Kerala, the society is much open; not that the barriers are less. I think that trade unions are necessary for the upliftment of the not only the workers but the whole society because the decisions taken by the govt. are against the common man wish, then who will stop them or oppose them. Trade unions are there because of their fighting capacity, they will be able to mobilize people also, demands of the society".

### **Egoistic Relative Deprivation & Collective Relative Deprivation**

Almost all the leaders experience egoistic relative deprivation and shared their experience that individually they faced inequality in organization and that was the important reason for them to be associated with the unions. They felt that they were deprived of many things which were basic and bare necessities. They also mentioned, though deep-rooted patriarchy is difficult to smash however taking an initiative to join as unionists and further as trade union leaders may be a positive step towards equality.

Most of the union leaders uttered at the interviews that only a woman can understand the real need and importance of other women's issues and concerns and they should strive to achieve leadership position to help others (Davis, 2008; Cook & Glass, 2014). Facilities like 'child care' and 'transportation' can only be seen as important issues by a woman

but not in general. The issue of 'separate toilet facility' was neglected by male members however it is one of the crucial issues in front of women. Almost all the leaders mentioned one or two critical incidences that showed collective deprivation being the main reason for coming into the unions and helping other women.

One of the respondents mentioned: "I joined railways in 1985 as a junior clerk and slowly and gradually with all patience and perseverance, I cleared the exams and reached the position of a senior section officer. Since 1985, I have been associated with union, however, I was not actively involved till 1990. I took almost five years to understand union functions and its structure, since 1991 I have been actively associated with the union. It was not an easy task for me. I had to listen from many sources to quit my active participation from unions. I have gone through a lot of struggles. Just like other women I also used to think that union is a male world, Over a period of time I realized that women must participate actively in union in order to fight for their rights. I realized that many women raised their issues and asked male members to put forward to the bargaining table, but they did not bother about women's issues. This actually raised the need for women to participate more in union so that they can help other women. I have seen many ups and downs throughout the journey"

### **Conclusion & Implications**

All the participants were significantly impacted by self-efficacy, relative deprivation and family support. Self-efficacy

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is the most important trait of an individual and always strengthens the determination to pursue any task (Bandura, 1992). It was a strong motivator for each participant in this study. As a part of the journey to reach the top positions in unions, each participant felt a deep sense of confidence and this notion of personal efficacy can be linked to motivational theory of believing in the 'competencies' and 'capabilities' of oneself (Maini, 2018; Maini, 2019). Each participant has gone through many challenges in her journey to achieve top positions in the trade unions. Some of the participants faced problems in organizational settings whereas some faced cultural barriers like stereotyping. Role models or the people who were sources of inspiration were discussed in detail by each participant. The other important catalyst for each participant's journey to leadership in trade unions was the feeling of empowerment and self-confidence (Sandberg, 2013). Participation in union also leads to economic empowerment and influence the decision-making ability of women and it overcomes the exploitation of women (Thakur et al, 2018). Patriarchy is deeply rooted in Indian society and trade unions are no exception to this. It is a very difficult task to encourage women to join trade unions and develop them as potential leaders. Various central trade unions namely AITUC, CITU, Indian Railways,

unions in banking sectors are taking initiatives to educate women and stimulating them to join as union leaders. Women leaders must take part actively in union related activities such as collective bargaining, settlement with management/employers. Women must be given opportunities to learn and get trained at the top notch labor institutes and must learn to negotiate well. Proper training and involvement will help develop women successors in trade unions. Women union leaders should be given proper access to various benefits and cordial environment so that they do not just help other women in realizing their potential and try not just becoming the voice of countless voiceless women but make them vocal at front.

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