


Chapter 48


Gender and Trade Unionism Advancing Female Participation and Representation in the Nigerian Context

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ABSTRACT

Trade unionism is a major part of modern workplaces. It forms the basis for peaceful relations and consensus building to attain mutual goals. At the heart of trade unionism is social justice and equality, which affirms the rights of all employees regardless of gender to enjoy freedom of association and accessibility, etc. Socio-cultural exigencies have made women to face tough challenges and discriminatory treatment at work, resulting in fewer rights and liberties and leading to economic and psychological stress. The World Bank noted that the starting point is the recognition that women are disadvantaged in most indicators at work—earnings, quality of employment, participation. Trade unions are central to protecting the interests of workers, and building strong unions can foster the elimination of discrimination at work. This chapter shall proffer actionable strategies and issue-based outlines that would advance the cause of gender equality, address the lopsided power configuration between the genders at work, and engender women's participation.

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INTRODUCTION

According to ILO (1948), a trade union is an “independent association of workers, constituted for the purposes of furthering and defending the workers’ interests”. Basically, trade unions are institutions formed to advance the collective interests of workers. The power inherent in trade unions have successfully fought for better life for workers and their families and has enabled the voice of workers to be a great force to be reckoned with both in the workplace and in the society. Trade unions according to Waronwant (2018) are organizations that provide workers with a powerful, collective voice, negotiate better terms and conditions and fight for equal opportunities in the workplace by standing for equal pay and treatment and against discrimination. Trade unions provide platforms for men and women to work without gender or sex prejudices and canvass for equal rights, treatment and opportunities and fight for all workers whose rights are being trampled upon at work through their words, policies and actions. Ethical Training Initiative (2010) pointed out that trade union help employers to: build trust among the workforce, ensure that workplaces are safe, make better business decisions and promote equality. Indubitably, unions have multidimensional utility value to workers, employers, government and even the general society. Unions contribute to organizational growth by cooperating with employers to plan, seek solutions to issues, fashion resolution to conflicts and manage change. Invariably, there are immense benefits accruing to unions and business owners through partnership on workplace issues. A point emphasized by Thijssen (2004) that workers’ and employers’ representatives are at their most effective when they combine their first-hand knowledge of the economy and the labor market. The usefulness of trade unions was illuminated by the joint statement issued on December 5, 2005 by a group of eleven Nobel Peace Laureates in conjunction with the American Federation of Labour –Congress of Industrial Organizations calling on all nations to “truly protect and defend workers’ rights, including the right to form unions and bargain collectively,” and that “protecting the right to form unions is vital to promoting broadly shared prosperity, social justice and strong democracies.”

But it seems trade unions that should be at the forefront of addressing the situation of women at work are not immune from catching the discrimination virus. In Nigeria, women workers are often out of the loop in the union scheme of things in terms of participation and representation at the top echelon despite their increasing participation in paid employment. Even in professions that women are known to constitute the majorities, there are few of them in the decision making bodies of the affiliate unions. The inequalities between both genders are so glaring despite the prominence attached to gender equality and the opening up of more legislative, senior and other management positions and erstwhile male dominated endeavours to women. Regardless of the accessibility of women to more decent employment opportunities and the promulgation of several policy instruments, legislations, conventions etc, the rule of the thumb is still prevalent in the sense that the higher up one goes in both union and work hierarchy the fewer the women you meet. Britwum & Ledwith (2014) dwelt on the social processes of intra union gender which has systematically excluded and marginalized women from unions’ leaderships, despite extensive union policies of gender equality. They also threw light on the serious knock-on effects of these realities in muting women’s voices in strategy and policy work, and at the negotiating table, leading to too few of their demands for gender parity and rights getting into the union mainstream and bargaining agendas. Paradoxically how do we explain why a male minority representation ends up dominating the decision making processes in a female dominated institution like a trade union organization?

Trade unions as the bedrock of social justice and democracy for all must embed women in their decision making processes. In order to thoroughly address women disenfranchisement at work and

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