

The Challenging Role of Female Decision Makers in Maltese Trade Unionism

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Female Decision-Makers

Trade Unionism

Organisational Culture

Societal Perceptions

Introduction

Trade Unions are considered as important key-players within the social dialogue framework.

Over the years, it has become more evident that within this important element of the industrial relations scenario, women have often been left in the shadows and were rarely, if ever, present in the high echelons of the union or organisation.

On an international level, Trade Unions have since their inception been a hive of masculinity, and are most regarded and looked upon as male-domain organisations with an embedded litigious nature (Amini et al, 2018; Kirton et al, 1999) On the local front, various literature and research studies bring to the fore that the top seats of the decision-making positions within these organisations are filled by men, even though female membership at the bottom level shows a high presence of female active members. (Debono, 2018; Department of Industrial and Employment Relations (DIER), 2019).



It is a common perception, both in society and literature, that “*women are women and consequently live women’s lives*” (Forrest, 1993). This reasoning was more evident in earlier days, when women tended to leave the workforce to take up their ‘duties’ as family-carers. Although women have been on the increase in the labour workforce, unfortunately they still lag behind when it comes to top-management positions or occupation of high-level roles, including within the structures of trade unions. (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).

Government policies and a paradigm shift in the working conditions to address work-life balance realities, acted as catalysts to witness a steady increase in career progressions, and a more active participation of women within decision-making fora and on negotiating tables within the industrial relations scenarios. One needs to ask whether this was a smooth transition, or whether women are still struggling to climb up the hierarchical ladder within this ‘gentleman’s world’ of trade unions.

Studies demonstrate that women dominate within the five Cs of the formal labour market – Caring, Cashiering, Catering, Clerical and Cleaning (Ledwith, 2012). Increase in trade union female membership has, over the decades, been the direct effect of labour trends and of the economic sectors that were mostly identified as female-oriented. This was also evident over the years within the Annual Registrar of Trade



Short Research Reports by Public Service Officers

Union reports, identifying the sectors where a high female presence is registered, clearly pertaining to the teaching, family care, psychology, counselling, and tourism fields – a clear and direct link with the 5C professions in the labour market that are female-dominated (DIER, 2019).

Data gathered from the Registrar of Trade Unions report reflect the sectors representing the 5Cs of the labour market mentioned earlier, wherein females scored an 85% trade union membership share in sectors representing family, health, and well-being, with another high member representation share of 79% in Trade Unions representing the teaching sector.

However, various literature highlights that, although the rise at the lower tiers of the union organisation are female-dominated, top level leadership roles are most often occupied by male unionists. This phenomenon results in “issues most salient to female workers ... not becoming a priority during the collective bargaining process” (Amini et al., 2018).

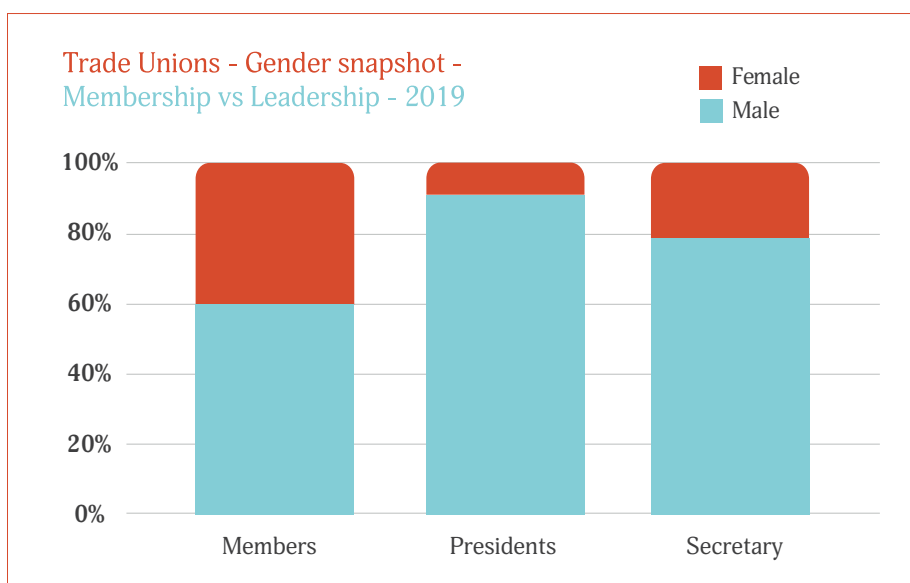
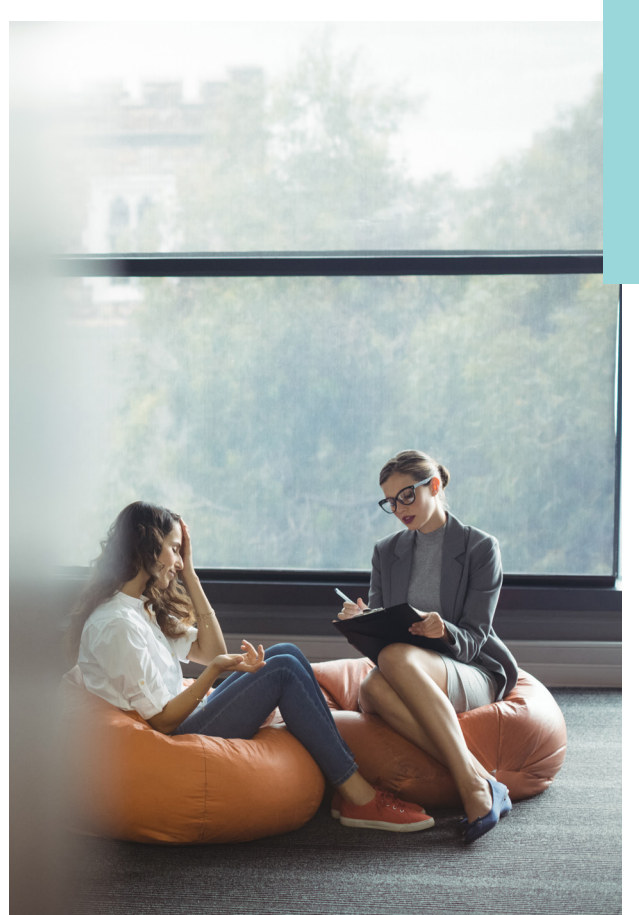


Figure 1: Female vs Male membership / Leadership in Trade Unions. Data source: DIER, 2019

Figure 1 above shows that from a total of 33 registered unions as at November 2019, only 10% of these unions are being led, or have, females occupying the top-tier seats (DIER, 2019). This demonstrates a clear picture of the inverse proportionality between female membership within trade unions vis-à-vis the female leadership presence within those same unions.

Scope and objectives

The research study highlights the challenges encountered by women who occupy, or have occupied, top-level seats within trade unions and the societal perceptions that these organisations embody. The following questions represented the main elements of the study:

- What are the factors that are keeping females from occupying top-management positions in trade unions?
- How are females perceived in this male-dominion?
- What are the hurdles encountered in order to occupy a seat at the top echelons of union structures?

Method

These objectives were tackled through two main research tools – Seven semi-structured interviews with active and former trade unionists, of both genders, to ensure a more holistic and wide spectrum of experiences from a male and female perspective - and also an open-ended online questionnaire disseminated randomly to 300 participants aged 18 years and over, to members of the public, to capture the perception that trade unions hold within society.

This tool generated 196 responses (65.3% response rate) that included 150 females and 46 males. The software used (Survey Monkey[®]) allowed replies to be stratified by gender and guaranteed anonymity of respondents. Interview participants were not identified due to sensitivity of subject matter and were referred to as Interviewee A, B and so on throughout the study. Findings from both tools were analysed thematically.

Findings

Perception of Trade Unions as male-dominated organisations embedded in masculine roots.

The perception that Trade Unions are regarded as male-dominated organisations was commonly reverberated throughout the study, with an interviewee going even further as stating, “This is more than a perception...this is a reality...I experienced it”.

This reality was further rooted in the fact that the first trade unions were mainly representing the manufacturing and shipyard sectors. These sectors were pre-dominantly male, leading to the bulk of its members being male and thus rooted in masculine practices, norms, and organisational frameworks. To a certain extent this trend is still the norm since, as stated by former trade unionist, “Societal culture is still not prepared or aware that women too can embark on a career within a Trade Union”, especially because of the militant and litigious nature attributed to Trade Unions.

Experiences shared by female interview participants shed a light on this perception:

The way they [male colleagues] interacted with me could easily have been interpreted as harassment or bullying. Their habitual language and way of interaction amongst each other at first made me feel uneasy... their response was that for them it comes natural since it is not customary that they have females as their peers at the office.





Media portrayal of Trade Unions further corroborated this ‘bad imagery’ that could have also been a deterrent for females embarking on trade union involvement or considering pursuing such careers. Henceforth, stereotyping was a common determining factor that further strengthened such perception towards Trade Unions. The various quotes which are produced in this paper from the fieldwork carried out support this stance.

Determinants that influence the extent of female presence in Trade Unions

As mentioned earlier on, stereotyping, in the form of societal norms, was a pre-dominant deterrent that

shackled females from committing - or even joining - trade unions. Interviewed trade unionists stressed that, even though trends have shifted more towards gender-neutral role sharing, there were still some instances where society is “male-driven and household and children responsibilities, especially if still young, still fall on the woman’s lap”. They echoed that cultural stereotyping can only be broken if society and such organisations nurture and mould females from a young age, instilling within educational institutions the maxim that roles and jobs are, and can be, carried out by any gender.

Most of the female trade unionists interviewed commented that holding a role within the higher hierarchies of the union, requires a great commitment, and thus it would be crucial that “you have a back-up plan in place since this job is 24/7...especially if the sector you are responsible for represents shift workers”.

Extent of influence of sector represented by Trade Union

In this regard, female-heavy sectors such as teaching, nursing, or public sector administrative fields, still struggled to attract and retain female 'leaders', even though at membership levels, these unions registered high female presence. This consideration was experienced by a male interviewee during his stint of leading the textile section within the organisation. At the time, the section was 90% female. He recounts, "I was flabbergasted when the time came for the members to nominate a shop-steward and they presented a male name."

In this regard, female interviewees corroborated that:

One of the biggest hurdles was not actually the sector itself but rather the transition between having a male shop steward representing the sector to having a female shop-steward... the moment you gain the trust of the members and prove that you mean business and have the skills to put forward their issues, the sectorial barrier drops.

However, a difference in attitude and approach from male peers, especially when the seat under contest was a full-time role and higher in hierarchy, was still strongly present. One female respondent stressed that their "antagonistic attitude towards me was saying that they felt I would be a threat to their success of regaining their top-seat positions".

Echoed by a male trade unionist, this participant highlighted that sectors with a large female catchment had greater perception of issues that affected mainly female needs, such as child-care or flexitime, among others. He observed that "it would be beneficial for male-heavy sectors to emulate these sectors and come up with more lucrative packages and conditions to attract more female members within the field". However, this way forward depended heavily upon the innate behaviour and pre-disposition of women themselves to be present within the corridors of trade unions and make their presence felt and be recognised on the top seats of these organisations.

Feminine behaviours and mentoring

The majority of female interview participants explicitly and commonly remarked that "no-one will change things for you", and thus one needs to adapt and push through. Past experiences and exposure to representing bodies further nurtures the disposition of embarking on trade union careers. Such involvement helps nurture those necessary skills in order to progress, and eventually reach, high seats within the trade union representing various sectors. Women themselves need to recognise their abilities and valid inner qualities, that could prove to be an added value to the trade union. Their professionalism and participation, starting from the lower ranks, could be their trump ticket to prove to their leaders that they have 'what it takes' to occupy such seats. Most of the interviewees agreed that, once top management recognised such skills and commitment from these female officials, they supported them to take on higher roles.



This inner strength was challenged especially in male-heavy sectors where, more often than not, these were headed by a male secretary of sector. Female trade union officials were often reprimanded and continuously reminded to “speak up only if I say so...it was common practice that he insisted that only he speaks and the other officers are left in the shadows without intervening”. This was, to say the least, unnerving and it was only with their innate determination to speak up did they hope to demonstrate that they, too, had valid contributions that could be beneficial for the organisation, and ultimately for the workers. This strong stand was the winning ticket to prove to the top-management that females too had the qualities to eventually make it to the top hierarchy of the organisation.

This observation was also emphasised by a former male trade union leader where he stressed the fact that, sometimes, the sentiment of ‘women being their own worst enemies’, was hindering them from progressing in such organisations. Concurrence from all interviews stressed that, women need to voice their suggestions and contributions, to ensure that this gender barrier is broken.



**impeding
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Having role models is one such way to ensure this shift in decision-making roles occupancy. Role models and mentoring are key ingredients that can guarantee “a breath of fresh air” needed in such organisations. Trade Union organisations were embarking on continuous training to aspiring trade union officials. Such training is provided across the board, irrelevant from gender. These mentoring sessions are usually given during working hours, to ensure that family-care responsibilities are not disrupted. Sadly, it was observed that, most of the women undertaking such training, subsequently do not pursue this line of work and therefore are impeding “themselves away from such positions”.

The importance of having female role models and mentors that help, was repeatedly stressed by female participants, since such colleagues “cultivate in you those skills and leadership traits that will help you perform brilliantly within your sector, especially around the negotiation table. If you want to be respected as a female leader, you have to work for it and not expect it simply because you are a female.”

Public perception of Trade Unions

The attributed role of family-care to females was clearly highlighted, with 79.8% female survey participants indicating that they are the prime-carers of the family. Furthermore, 42% of all respondents had never been part of a trade union organisation, with only 10.2% declaring that they are active paid members. Further insight shows that female respondents are more absent in trade union scenarios when compared to their male counterparts.



When asked whether Trade Union organisations are regarded as male-oriented organisations, 74% of all respondents concurred. This further corroborates the notion of ‘male-heavy’ imagery portrayal and perception which may act as a deterrent to shy off females from joining trade unions or eventually pursue a career within the same organisation.

A varied list of determinants presented in the questionnaire, and

illustrated in Chart 1 below, gives an overview of the factors that are considered as stumbling blocks for women to feature in trade unions or pursue and progress in a trade union career.

Further participant comments included lack of interest and awareness of unions, social constructs that encourage mostly males to participate more in all walks of life, and also the fact that females usually engage

themselves more in religious groups or other NGOs, with a male participant saying that “trade union representatives were for a long time male, so it would be difficult to remove this stigma [sic] and it would take a great effort to overcome it... house unions especially, often work on voluntary basis outside working hours, which in itself is an obstacle”.

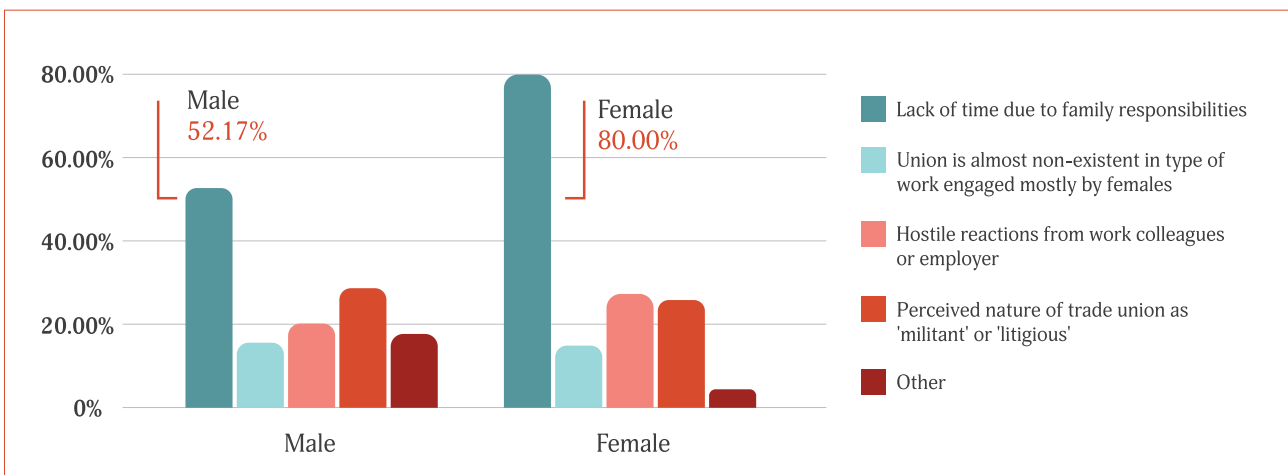


Figure 2: The main factors that prevent women from joining a trade union



Another insight identified the factors that limit women trade unionists from advancing in such a career. Chart 2 below gives a visual overview of the replies given; once again demonstrating the ascribed role of family care to females garnering the highest choice, and the innate ‘soft’ disposition of females also featuring high as a main stumbling block for female progression in Trade Unions.

A significant comment by a female respondent that reverberated the sentiment witnessed across this study, also echoed the societal barrier that inhibits women from featuring prominently in such headship roles since she stated that as yet “society is not fully geared towards equality.”



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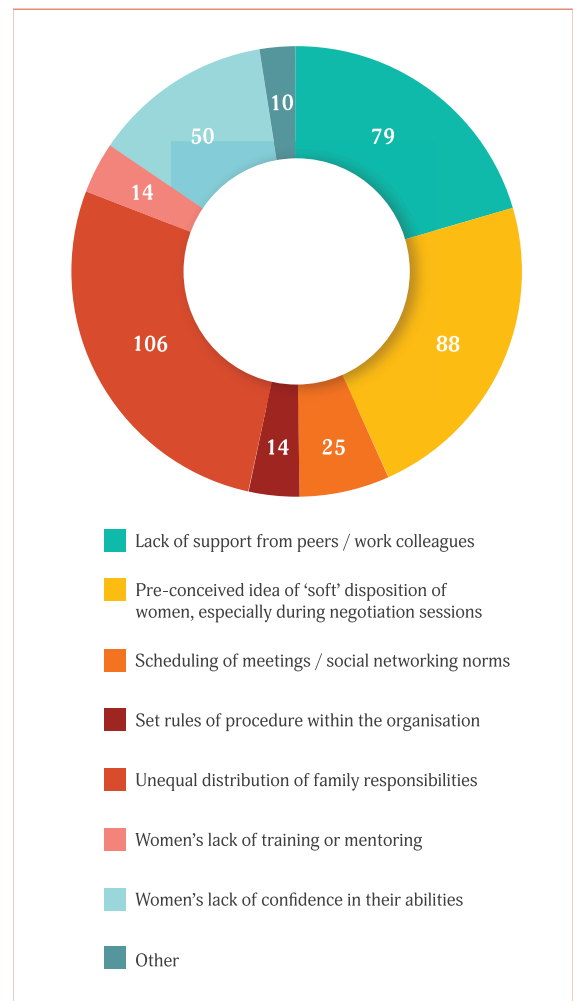


Figure 3: Factors that limit women from advancing in trade union career (by number of respondents)



Conclusion

This study brought to light a number of common determinants that hinder and challenge the presence of females within organisations that are structured on male-oriented norms and practices.

Trade Unions, since their inception, have been such examples and to a certain extent, still harbour elements that prove to be arduous challenges for women to pursue high-level careers within said Trade Unions.

The arguments captured in the in-depth interviews and also in the results gathered in the survey further corroborate these arguments, namely:



- a) **The divide between men and women in high organizational power positions**, leading to the evidence of inverse proportionality between male and female trade union membership vis-à-vis leadership role occupancy;
- b) **The construction of media imagery and portrayal of trade union organisations as a male hegemony**, and thus corroborating the perception that such organisations are more befitting to a male rather than female presence;
- c) **The interactions/relationships between male and female peers in trade unions**, with the common observation that male trade union activists most often regard female peers as unsuitable to fill in and commit to fully to decision making roles, due to the ascribed role of females to family care;
- d) **The individual identity and inherent behaviours and attitudes of the female activists within these trade unions** who are most often perceived of possessing a ‘soft’ disposition and lack that ingrained militant approach. This perception limits female activists from making their presence felt around the negotiation table or not being able to achieve better working conditions for the trade union members. On the contrary,

as highlighted by the interview participants, it is this same ‘caring’ and ‘sensitive’ attitude that makes female trade unionists more perceptive to holistic, gender-neutral issues and therefore prove to be an invaluable contribution to policies and amelioration of working conditions in different sectors of the labour workforce.

Based on these findings, the research study recommends that Trade Unions should become role model employers:

- i. in adopting work-life balance policies in their organisations;
- ii. Mentoring upcoming female activists;
- iii. Provide training programs to attract young females.

The investment needed to recruit and retain female trade union officials, while at the same time removing the glass-ceiling for them, would definitely ensure a positive rate of return to Trade Union movement.

The feminine acumen will embellish the structure of such organisations and ensure an added value with a win-win result, not only for the organisation itself, but for society at large.



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