Gender and Trade Union Development in the Anglophone Caribbean

LAUREN MARSH, MARVA A. PHILLIPS, AND JUDITH WEDDERBURN

Introduction

FOR THE LAST THIRTY-FIVE YEARS, the Caribbean region has recognised gender equality as a necessary component to national development and economic and social progress. Almost all CARICOM countries have implemented procedures to facilitate greater parity for both genders in the public and private spheres. With respect to labour, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and its social partners have worked extensively within the Caribbean to engender national policy by promoting international labour standards and the Decent Work Agenda which advocates, among other things, gender equity within the workplace.

Early attempts to incorporate gender in the development paradigm began with human rights methodologies such as the Women in Development approach which gained prominence throughout the 1970s; this was subsequently modified to the Women and Development approach which moved beyond the reproductive concerns of women to highlight their contribution within the domestic and professional spheres. In the 1990s, it was recognised that gender equality was achievable only through the establishment of initiatives and policies concerned with the specific needs of both genders. The Gender and Development approach was therefore established to include men's agendas while concentrating on women's development.

Despite such efforts, many organisations throughout the Caribbean still maintain a patriarchal structure, rarely allowing women to occupy supervisory

and middle management positions.² Trade unions are no exception, as women are continuously excluded from the leadership of unions regardless of their invaluable contribution to trade union development in the Caribbean. This is in contrast to Western Europe and North America where female membership has increased, and where female union members, especially in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Canada and the United States, have reformed the status quo in their organisations by successfully competing for leadership positions traditionally reserved for men.

The study reported on in this article is a follow-up to a previous study undertaken in 2009 by the Hugh Lawson Shearer Trade Union Education Institute on the gender composition of trade unions in Jamaica. Based on the findings of that study, it was proposed that an exploratory investigation be undertaken to assess the gender structure of trade unions throughout the Caribbean. The study analyses the structure of seventy-three unions across ten CARICOM states.³ Utilising data from various trade union congresses, confederations and centres to strengthen the analysis, we seek, firstly, to provide a brief historical overview of women's early involvement in trade unions in Britain, the United States and the Caribbean; secondly, to explore factors that may impede gender equality within Caribbean trade unions; and thirdly, to illustrate the gender composition of Caribbean trade unions, particularly the participation rate of men and women within the executive of trade union leadership. Overall, we seek to expand on existing literature positioning women as active players in the development of the Caribbean labour movement.⁴

Women and trade union development: A historical overview

The overall tone of existing literature has rendered women invisible in the history of trade union development. Women, however, have worked assiduously with their counterparts since the Industrial Revolution, when innovative production methods provided new employment opportunities. Throughout Europe, female membership grew in the labour movement during this period.

Britain's first trade union for women, the Women's Protective and Provident League established in 1875 by Emma Patterson,⁵ represented dressmakers, upholsterers, bookbinders, shop assistants and typists. In 1903 the union was renamed the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). Its primary mandate then was to achieve universal suffrage for women and improve conditions for women in labour-intensive industries. WTUL proponents such as Mary Macarthur, Margaret Bondfield, Dorothy Jewson and Susan Lawrence worked collaboratively to improve wages and working conditions for women. Together, these women were able to secure minimum wages for women in sweated industries and successfully lobby for the extension of voting privileges to women.

The Knights of Labor was arguably one of the largest and most important labour organisations during the 1800s. In 1881, women were formally admitted to the organisation. One outstanding Knights of Labor member was Leonora Barry who organised and agitated for the establishment of women's organisations throughout the USA.6 Such women influenced the development of gender-sensitive labour policies by establishing investigatory committees that protested gender discrimination, child labour and unequal pay for equal work.7 The committees also focused on issues pertaining to occupational safety and health in the workplace. The intention at the time was to improve working standards for both men and women by organising and educating workers to procure for themselves improved labour standards.

In the Caribbean, much of the literature on trade union history has provided a narrow account of women's contribution to the establishment of early trade unions. However, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that women played a fundamental role in trade union development regardless of the discrimination they experienced while serving in various capacities. Marva Phillips has noted that "women performed varying roles in the formation of Caribbean trade unions. Some went along with the traditional role expected of women, while others operated outside of the designated roles and founded trade unions, sometimes joining with male colleagues to establish them."8 The work of early stalwarts such as Anne Liburd, Elma Francois and Mildred Bailey contributed significantly to the progression of the Caribbean labour movement, and contradicted longstanding notions pertaining to women's competency and status in union organisations. Their achievements also revolutionised the labour movement by firstly introducing a women's agenda to the collective bargaining table and secondly proving that women possess leadership qualities that are on par with those of their male counterparts.

Despite the accomplishments of these early women, the general attitude

towards women within union organisations was, and still is, one of resentment.9 An attempt to remedy the situation resulted in two three-year regional education and training programmes funded by the Inter-American Foundation for delivery by the Trade Union Education Institute in the 1980s. The objective of the first programme was to prepare women for leadership by improving their management, organising and planning skills, and the second to integrate women and men in order to sensitise men to issues concerning women and the need for cooperation between women and men toward the strengthening of the workers' movement. The second programme emphasised the concept of gender equity to promote consciousness and camaraderie among union men and women.

While these programmes and others have proven to be effective in mobilising advocacy by encouraging gender equality within the labour movement, there have not been any significant changes among membership in their attitude towards women in leadership. As in most organisations, women vying for leadership positions within union organisations are heavily scrutinised even by other women. This underestimation of women's competencies and leadership ability has contributed to the sluggish narrowing of the divide between women and men at the helm of unions.

Union women in the Caribbean: Challenges to visibility

The marginalisation of women within trade union leadership is associated with interlocking factors that now define women's participation in the organisation. A European Trade Union Confederation study partly attributes the underrepresentation of women in unions' decision-making bodies to the following causes:

- the existence of prejudice, conveyed by hostile reactions, attempts at dissuasion against taking on trade union responsibilities;
- 2. the rigidity of some rules of procedure;
- 3. women's lack of confidence in their own abilities; and
- 4. the male-dominated nature of the trade union culture. 10

Throughout the Caribbean, it is believed that "women are unequal to men and that men have a 'right' to exercise power and privilege over women in the home as in the society". It Leadership within the private and public domains is culturally considered a process requiring attributes that are primarily associated with masculinity. This perception also permeates union philosophy, whereby women are thought to be unsuited for leadership because of a combination of biological and social stereotypical factors such as being naturally passive, indecisive and emotional.

The historical development of the union movement is responsible for the scarcity of women at its helm. Early Caribbean trade union activity was concentrated in agriculture, manufacturing and mining, all areas that traditionally provided mass employment for men. Evidence of union activity dates back to the 1800s when the Artisans Union, Patriots Club and Mechanics Union were established.¹² At that time, women were absent or marginal within specific spheres of work, and their absence has continued to be reflected in the general structure of contemporary unionism, with certain categories defined as 'men's' work.

Women's absence in trade union leadership is also attributed to the fact that they constitute a large faction of the informal sector and non-unionised occupations related to market sales and domestic work. ILO Director General Juan Somavia has noted that "too many women are still stuck in the lowest paying jobs, often in the informal economy with insufficient legal protection, and a high degree of insecurity".¹³ The concentration of women in such areas limits the ability to acquire union representation and advocate policies responsive to their concerns.

Most countries within the Caribbean have ratified conventions to promote and protect women's rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its covenants – the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Many CARICOM member states are also signatories to both the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, known as the Convention of Belém do Pará, both of which seek to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace. However, the absence of women at the helm of union leadership has resulted in the subsequent neglect of enforcement of these rights generally. Regionally, women are working longer hours for less money and are victims of various kinds of discrimination due to the reluctance of trade unions to steadfastly

assert women's agendas. To address the importance of gender equality to economic development and human progress, governments and human rights advocates have established women's committees and women's agencies. While trade unions throughout the region generally support these organisations and programmes, there is little initiative to independently spearhead activities and form committees that research and advocate women-specific issues.

Nonetheless, a few women have managed to break through the glass ceiling, but their contributions to the movement remain subverted under a masculine architecture that depicts unilateral notions of leadership. To overcome the barriers to visibility, these Caribbean union women over the decades have advanced themselves by means of educational attainment, and through dedication to the labour movement at the expense of personal relationships and despite their domestic responsibilities. Our research indicates that the majority of these women have contributed at least forty years of their lives to the labour movement.

Despite the fact that these women have gained some respect based on their laudable performance in various positions within the labour movement, the status quo across the Caribbean still allocates power along strict gender lines. Barbara Bailey states:

Education has not proven to be the vehicle for Caribbean women's economic, political or personal empowerment. In spite of their overall high levels of participation and performance at the secondary and tertiary levels of the Caribbean education systems, the majority of women in the region continue to be positioned in the lowest sectors of the capital market, earn lower wages than men, suffer high rates of unemployment, experience greater levels of poverty, are under-represented in decision making positions at the meso and macro levels of social and political institutions and lack real autonomy.¹⁴

The ILO affirms this assertion by explaining that women throughout the Caribbean are prone to experience high levels of discrimination in the work-place and wider society. 15 Union women today, like their predecessors, are confronted by entrenchment and perpetuation of male hegemony. The persistence of discrimination against union women demonstrates that Caribbean trade unions have not sufficiently evolved despite their formal acknowledgment of laws and international labour standards addressing gender discrimination. The next section provides a comparative analysis on the gender structure of

seventy-three trade unions within the Caribbean region to examine the women's participation in leadership.

Gender in trade unions: A Caribbean analysis

Leadership within the Caribbean has always been considered an activity that requires a strong masculine persona. The absence of women in leadership is not only synonymous with entrenched cultural standards, but more so, a trend that moves concomitantly with globalisation. The ILO's publication *Breaking through the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management* focuses on the progress of women in professional and managerial jobs. Data for the publication was collected from various governmental and non-governmental organisations across the world. It states:

Men are in the majority among managers, top executives, and higher levels of professional workers whilst women are still concentrated in the lower categories of managerial positions. Both visible and invisible rules have been constructed around the "male" norm, which women sometimes find difficult to accommodate: male and female colleagues and customers do not automatically see women as equal with men, women tend to have to work much harder than men to prove themselves, and sometimes they have to adapt to "male" working styles and attitudes more than necessary. Furthermore, women tend to be excluded from the informal networks dominated by men at the workplace, which are vital for career development. ¹⁶

Attempts to change the above situation encouraged the publication of the *CARICOM Post-Beijing Regional Plan of Action* in 1997 which sought to promote gender equity in leadership and governance. The document placed special emphasis on the absence of women in political leadership at the community level as well as in national and regional spheres. The plan of action proposes adoption of a tripartite approach to ensure consensus on initiatives geared towards encouraging greater gender parity in leadership around the Caribbean. Regarding trade union leadership, little has been done to assess the performance and capabilities of union women. Consequently, our study conducted an examination of union structures throughout the Caribbean in an attempt to clarify speculations and myths pertaining to trade union leadership within the Caribbean region.

Sample and methods

Qualitative methods were used for the data collection and analysis. The sample for the study consisted of seventy-three trade unions within ten CARICOM countries. Participants were identified from the ILO's List of Workers' Unions in the Caribbean. Participants represented trade union confederations either nationally or regionally, academia, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that fund trade union programmes in the Caribbean. A two-stage sampling technique was used to select trade unions and participants for the study. First, simple random sampling was used by researchers to acquire unions for research. Second, purposive sampling was used to identify prominent individuals from trade union confederations, academia and NGOs throughout the Caribbean. A survey instrument was designed to meet the objectives of the study. Interviews were conducted via telephone and face to face; telephone interviews were conducted in most instances because of budgetary and personnel constraints. The sample population for interviewing was twenty women who had contributed significantly to the movement in their country or the Caribbean. Participants who volunteered for the study had between fifteen and forty years' involvement in the labour movement. Consent forms

Table 1: Sample distribution by country

Country	Number of participating unions		
Antigua and Barbuda	6		
Barbados	7		
Bahamas	5		
Belize	8		
Dominica	4		
Grenada	5		
Jamaica	14		
St Lucia	7		
St Vincent and the Grenadines	4		
Trinidad and Tobago	13		
Total	73		

were attached to each questionnaire along with guidelines outlining the research intent and objectives.

The organisations participating in the study are among the most prominent in each country. They represent workers mainly employed in the agriculture, manufacturing and service sectors. Some are blanket unions that represent a wide cross-section of workers in various occupations. A large percentage of these organisations are affiliated to the Caribbean Congress of Labour.

Findings: Gender structure of trade unions

An examination of the presidency for all unions involved in the study reveals that women occupied only 26 percent of all posts. Men dominated the presidency for all countries examined in the study except for Antigua and Barbuda and Dominica where the gender balance appeared equitable. Male dominance at the presidential level was most pronounced in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago where females occupied not more than 15 percent of all presidential positions in trade unions examined for the study. Male representation at the presidential level was more than double the female representation for most unions in the sample population.

Table 2: Gender profile of presidents 2011

Presidents	No. of males	No. of females
6		or remares
	3	3
7	5	2
5	4	I
8	6	2
4	2	
5		2
	3	2
	I 2	2
7	5	2
4	3	I
13	II	
73	5.4	19
	6 7 5 8 4 5 14 7 4	6 3 7 5 5 4 8 6 4 2 5 3 14 12 7 5 4 3 13 11

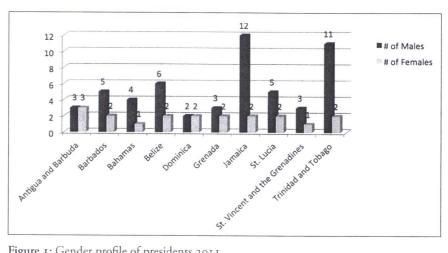


Figure 1: Gender profile of presidents 2011

Table 3: Gender profile of general secretaries 2011

Country	General secretary	No. of males	No. of females
Antigua and Barbuda	6	4	2
Barbados	7	6	I
Bahamas	5	4	I
Belize	8	4	4
Dominica	4	3	I
Grenada	5	3	2
Jamaica	I 3	8	5
St Lucia	6	4	2
St Vincent and the Grenadin	es 4	3	I
Trinidad and Tobago	I 3	9	4
Total	71	48	23

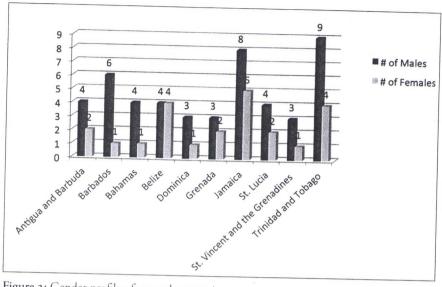


Figure 2: Gender profile of general secretaries 2011

The results in Table 3 illustrate the gender distribution of men and women at the level of general secretary. It should be noted that the Union of Public Officers and Public Employees in Jamaica and the St Lucia Seamen Waterfront and General Workers Trade Union participated in the study but did not have a general secretary during the time of data collection. Based on the examination, women occupied 33 percent of all general secretary positions. While the gender distribution was commendable for most unions in the study, there were noticeable disparities for Bahamas, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago. The unions examined in these three countries displayed a stronger patriarchal influence at this position. Overall, men dominated the position of general secretary for all unions in the study except for Belize.

In respect of the post of vice president, women occupied 25 percent of all positions for unions participating in the study. Data collection for this category was particularly challenging since some unions were unwilling to disclose this information. It should be noted that no data was retrieved for the Christian Workers' Union and Belize Workers Union, the Grenada Technical and Allied Workers' Union, the Trade Union Congress of Jamaica and the All Trinidad General Workers' Trade Union. The examination reveals that men dominated the position for all unions in the study. The findings illustrated a high

Table 4: Gender profile of vice presidents 2011

Country	Vice presidents	No. of males	No. of females
Antigua and Barbuda	12	10	2
Barbados	13	7	6
Bahamas	8	6	2
Belize	8	5	
Dominica	7	6	3
Grenada	10	10	I
Jamaica	30		0
St Lucia	12	23	7
St Vincent and the Grenadines		9	3
Trinidad and Tobago		4	2
	24	18	6
Total `	130	98	32

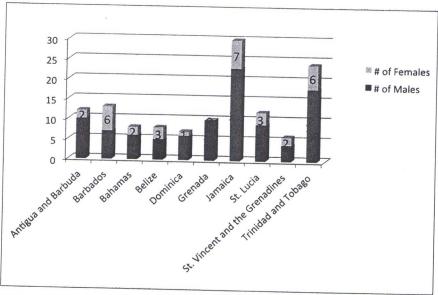


Figure 3: Gender profile of vice presidents 2011

Table 5: Executive membership 2011

Country	Executive members	No. of males	No. of females
A 1.D. 11.	0.0		22
Antigua and Barbuda	89	57	32
Barbados	80	53	27
Bahamas	59	47	12
Belize	40	24	16
Dominica	43	23	20
Grenada	72	50	22
Jamaica	141	86	55*
St Lucia	58	40	18
St Vincent and the Grenae	dines 25	17	8
Trinidad and Tobago	131	90	41
Total	738	487	251

^{*}The Nurses' Association of Jamaica has 25 females, no males

concentration of men in the post for unions in Grenada, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. Male representation for the post of vice president for unions in these countries was three times that of their female counterparts.

Of the seventy-three unions in the study, all but one were able to provide figures pertaining to the gender composition of their executive. Examination of the data reveals that women constituted 34 percent of the total number of executive members for unions participating in the study. Men dominated the executive core for most unions from the participating countries except where the traditional female professions of nursing and teaching are represented. Female membership within the executive appeared to be most marginal in unions from Bahamas and Jamaica (for Jamaica, the Nurses' Association of Jamaica accounted for nearly 50 percent of female membership aggregated).

Interview findings

To corroborate the data retrieved from the various trade unions in the different territories, interviews were conducted to examine the gender dynamics of trade union culture within the Caribbean region. Most participants (fifteen out of twenty – 75 percent) believed that women are marginalised at the helm of the trade union movement in their country because of cultural norms and entrenched male hegemony, as explained by a respondent:

Culturally, women are perceived to be homemakers with the paramount responsibility for family life. Though women have acquired the necessary leadership skills, it is an uphill task for them to attain top leadership positions because of the mindset that they can only "support a leader" but not be a leader. Sometimes, the closest women can get to leadership in a union is to have a relationship with the leader. This loses them respect and worsens their chances for leadership.

The participant continued:

Traditionally, in the Caribbean, the CEO of a union is the general secretary who is a full-time officer and almost always is male. Though women have been presidents of some unions for the past two decades, their role is titular; the ego of the Caribbean man does not allow him to appear to be an underling.

While this statement may be reflective of the sentiments held by women in most territories, a respondent from Dominica believed that women had made significant strides in the labour movement within that country and have a "voice" within the executive, and believed that the inclusiveness of women in trade union leadership in Dominica is fostered largely by ongoing mentorship programmes that emphasise the need for gender equity at home and work. However, all but one participant believed that leadership within the labour movement is predominantly male-dominated.

Interestingly, 60 percent of participants in the study believed that male hegemony within the trade union movement is not only preserved by men but also perpetuated by women who ascribe leadership to men, thus maintaining the sexual division of labour, as noted by Phillips.¹⁷ Respondents believed that male executive members will generally support women vying for leadership if they do not consider the position threatening to their own position. However, most participants (70 percent) commented that union women

are not usually supportive of each other. Some reasons highlighted for this by participants were: lack of respect, envy, a lack of confidence in female leadership, and the entrenched belief that men should lead in both public and private spheres.

The general consensus among participants was that improving the upward mobility of women in Caribbean unions requires specific training in gender equity for both males and females. A participant suggested that in the past millions of dollars were wasted because leadership training programmes were only developed for women without acknowledging that men are the power-brokers within the labour movement. Most respondents (80 percent) believed that women vying for leadership in the trade union movement will not earn the "respect" of men if a concerted effort is not made to develop and change this approach. It was recommended by half the respondents that programmes should be designed specifically to sensitise men about the importance of having women at the helm of the trade union movement. A respondent stated that increased membership of women in the trade union executive would not only benefit the organisation but the entire country. Using Jamaica as an example, the respondent continued:

More trained and capable women will bring more expertise and experiences of women themselves – which is definitely a 'value-added' for the wider society . . . A gender equity approach to trade union leadership would change the situation now, where trade unions are not benefiting from the additional skills, experiences and expertise which Jamaican women can bring to decisions made at the highest level. The trade unions will benefit from women's own understanding of the diverse challenges which women and men face differently because of the gender roles and responsibilities in society.

The shortage of women within the trade union leadership in some countries is reflected at the bargaining table, as issues pertaining to equal remuneration and sexual harassment are absent or marginally discussed because women do not play a central role in the collective bargaining process. A participant explained:

Most times, these issues affecting female workers are not adequately addressed at the bargaining table by trade unions because the main negotiators are men. It is assumed that women cannot represent themselves and their issues adequately, and that men need to speak on their behalf. This also undermines and denies the woman the right

to "voice", and to self-expression and representation . . . Gender barriers need to be removed to provide women in trade unions with the same training and educational opportunities to become first-class negotiators who will represent not only themselves, but male workers effectively.

Apparently, issues addressed at the bargaining table are what a respondent described as "macro-focused" and not women-specific in many cases. The issues deliberated at the bargaining table mainly affect both genders and are typically those related to wages and conditions of employment. Most respondents (80 percent) believed that issues pertaining to sexual harassment, equal pay and gender equity in the workplace rarely appear on the bargaining agenda.

Discussion

The study confirms that male dominance of trade union leadership continues to be a common feature of Caribbean trade unions. Respondents identified as the main reason, cultural notions and the patriarchal structure of Caribbean society. Overall, men dominated most executive positions for the unions participating in the study. Females tended to be more dominant in union organisations that provide representation for workers in professions related to nursing, teaching and service work.

Nonetheless, a few women have broken the glass ceiling by occupying the positions of president or general secretary in trade unions that represent workers in traditionally male-dominated professions. Some of these unions are the Barbados Workers Union, the Jamaica Association of Local Government Officers, the Jamaica Workers' Union, and, in Trinidad and Tobago, the Contract and General Workers Union and the Transport and Industrial Workers' Union. In Dominica, the pro-woman shift in union culture stimulated a greater appreciation for gender equity, facilitated by ongoing mentorship programmes and resulting in women occupying high-ranking positions within these unions.

Of significance is the fact that women constituted 30 percent of all executive positions examined in over 50 percent of the trade unions in the study. There were also a few instances where women outnumbered men within the executive of some trade unions: examples are the Grenada Public Workers' Union, the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Workers' Union, and the Medical

Professional Association of Trinidad and Tobago. Conversely, there were many cases where male membership was twice that of women.

Conclusion

The examination of trade union structures within the CARICOM community provides us with meaningful insights concerning the progression of women within the Caribbean labour movement. The results of the study indicate that women's membership within the executive of trade unions has increased. However, this does not mean that there is a general increase in the overall membership of women within these organisations. Data in the literature reflecting an increase in female membership pertains only to unions in Western European countries. There is no such data available for the Caribbean region or more specifically CARICOM member states.

Nevertheless, the fact that female membership has increased within the executive membership of trade unions is an indication that unions have become more accommodating to women with leadership capacities. Evidently, women constitute 30 percent or more of the executive membership of trade unions in the study. Ironically, the research reveals that women's participation within leadership is marginal in some countries that have ratified most of the ILO conventions seeking to eradicate gender discrimination within the economic and social spheres. Examples are Bahamas and Jamaica. It should also be noted that most participants believe that camaraderie is weak among women in the movement because of entrenched beliefs denouncing women as competent leaders.

Overall, the study reveals that trade union leadership across the region still remains predominately male-dominated, indicating that there is a need for more programmes or initiatives geared towards increasing the participation of women in trade unions as both members and leaders. The ILO and other international social partners have launched several initiatives to remedy the situation over the last thirty-five years; however, the extent to which these programmes are supported by Caribbean governments and trade unions varies depending on their economic and political agendas. For some, gender equality is not considered to be a priority or an essential component for economic and social development at the national and regional levels.

NOTES

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