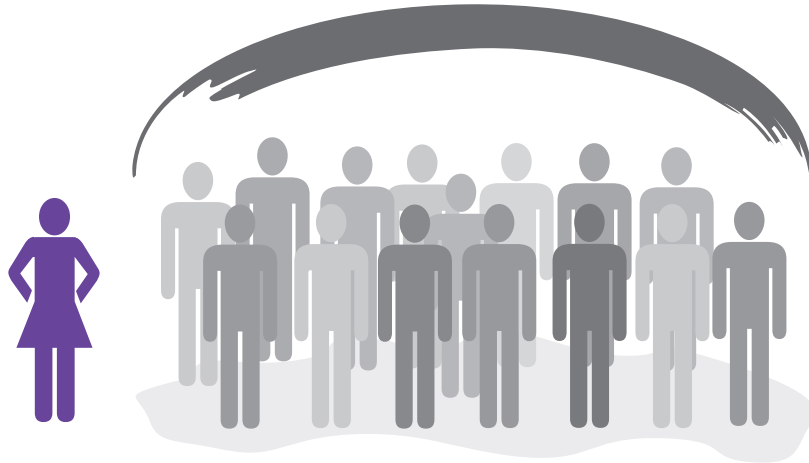




NON-UNIONIZED WOMEN UNIONS WITHOUT WOMEN

A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH REPORT



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NON-UNIONIZED WOMEN / UNIONS WITHOUT WOMEN

A Research On Identifying The Problem Areas In The Relationship Between Women And Unions

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A RESEARCH ON IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM AREAS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN AND UNIONS*

It is impossible to conduct a realistic analysis of the relationship between women and unions without taking into account the differences created by “gender” identities, which are determined by the roles and responsibilities set upon men and women by the society at large. Thus, unsurprisingly, the most important finding within the scope of this study is the fact that both the overarching patriarchal mentality and socio-cultural presuppositions regarding gender roles are decisive factors in the attitude and actions women take towards unions, including union membership itself. We have observed that this difference, based on the aforementioned socio-cultural presuppositions, also provides the fundamental reasoning and basis for the differential positioning of men and women within unions, the gendering of union work in general, and the power relations and hierarchies between men and women in unions. It is clear to us that both the gender-based division of labour – stemming from the widespread understanding that women’s primary role in society lies within the home and the family – and the general ideological approach towards womanhood and motherhood are used in a very effective manner in legitimizing the lack of action and policy-making with regards to certain issues, such as the lowness of the rate of women’s membership in unions, the exclusion of women from positions of power within unions, and problems they face at work due to the prevalence of gender inequality. In contrast with men unionists, women unionists in general have concretized the source of this inequality, acknowledging that the “patriarchy” is responsible for the continuation of this unequal situation. They also see the fact that other women within the union do not stand up against this patriarchal domination as one of the main sources of the problem itself. When it comes to taking place in positions of power within the union, however, it has been observed that they have embraced and internalized values resulting from the gender-based division of labour reproduced daily within and outside the union; and that therefore the choices they make are also in line with these values.

The prevalent discourse and mentality of men unionists, who are in decision-making positions, are both of a nature that recreates and reproduces problem areas in the relationship between women and unions. For one, they obscure the source of the inequality between men and women. And, at best, they are of the opinion that this inequality is caused by certain age-old processes that cannot be resolved within their lifetime. As a result, it becomes impossible to set in motion timely intervention programs in the present, in order to expose and eradicate the sources of this inequality within unions. What women workers need, on the other hand, is an effective discourse on the part of the union, that not only delineates its understanding of the problems women face due to this inequality they are made to live with, but also states who exactly it holds responsible for these problems, and can develop sound solutions. We have observed, however, that the common discourse and mentality adopted by unions does not even come close to satisfying this need. Thus, this discourse and mentality has come to be the most important factor

* This research was matured through political work of *Women Initiative Against Androcentrism//Male Dominance in Unions and Trade Associations* and produced labouring over by research team.

in rendering the collective actions and efforts of women completely futile, as well as in the reproduction of gender-based discrimination within unions. It is also the most serious obstacle preventing women's organizing in unions, as well as their representation.

It is easy to see that what fundamentally nurtures this kind of discourse and mentality is also existing union traditions. In fact, there is no sign of anything in the union charter or administration of the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (TÜRK-İŞ), the largest confederation in the country, with regards to making women's voices heard – except for a completely ineffective women's bureau. With its complete silence when it comes to women's issues, TÜRK-İŞ remains nothing but a mainly **male worker confederation**. In comparison to TÜRK-İŞ, the Confederation of Revolutionary Unions (DİSK) appears to be a confederation where women are more visible in general assembly resolutions, union charters, and the central administration. Although consecutive general assembly resolutions have repeatedly – and almost word for word – stated what the confederation must do with regards to women's organizing and women's rights within the workforce, it is possible to say that there have been no developments whatsoever demonstrating any serious attempt to implement the activities they have been speaking about. The Confederation of Turkish Real Trade Unions (HAK-İŞ) has, on the other hand, continued defining women as mothers and spouses, by way of traditional societal roles. As a result, HAK-İŞ has placed the implementation of regulations and social rights that shall not disturb the familial structure at the very center of its policies regarding women. In short, HAK-İŞ defines women as existing solely within the family, rather than as individuals in their own right; and thus attempts it makes to solve women's social and work-related problems, created as a direct result of the modern conditions we live in, with its deeply conservative world view end up reproducing the very problems being described in the relationship between women and unions. As may be expected, unions develop their policies and strategies with the preconception that obstacles in the way of women's organizing are fixed and unchangeable phenomena. Thus, it is impossible to say that there is an effective policy regarding women, aiming to change the situation, and as one of the essential constituents of the union's agenda and its fundamental activities. We have also observed that women's issues within unions have become popular – especially since the 1990s – as a result of programs and projects implemented by international organizations. It must be mentioned here that there have been certain attempts, and some regulations have been made in a couple of unions that fall outside the scope of dominant union traditions with regards to this issue. The fact that these attempts have taken place in small unions where women's membership shares are high and in large unions where women's membership shares are low is quite interesting indeed.

Upon assessing union strategies, basic activities, and women's activities within unions, it is possible to reach these general points:

- When planning their most fundamental activities such as collective bargaining, education and trainings, and organizing, unions choose not to operate in a gendered manner, but rather to adopt a “gender-blind” approach. What this understanding does is cover up existing societal gender roles. The result is a functioning that is based on the false assumption that men and women have access to the same resources and opportunities.



- There are no procedures in place to demonstrate gender rates in all levels of the union structure, and the necessary data is thus not being produced.
- Traditional union organizing strategies and tactics have been designed in order to organize typical workers within large workplaces where the majority is male. Therefore unions persistently exclude workplaces where what is defined as women's jobs are carried out from the areas within which they organize and gather experience. What this kind of choice and this mentality signifies is the partial preservation of the inequality in income and status between men and women in the labour market by way of union practices as well.
- The target workplace where union organizing shall take place is mostly determined through the demands of workers themselves. This formulation results in the exclusion of women from this kind of organizing from the very first step, since they are not only less informed with regards to unionization, but they also have less of a belief in it, are less inclined towards it, and have fewer opportunities.
- Women workers are not the focus of external union organizing either. The most important indicator of this is the fact that traditional organizing strategies have not evolved in any way in order to include different methods regarding organizing women. Organizing men, who are considered "true workers" is considered the law of the land for unions, while organizing women, who "aren't really workers after all" is seen as an unimportant and secondary issue that can only ever come after the main job (i.e. organizing men).
- Unions have come to know the general principle by which people are able to "organize those who are like themselves" as a direct result of lived experience. The factual circumstances at times result in a de facto relationship between unions and certain active, prominent women – albeit only temporarily. This relationship does not, however, take place as a long-term component of the institutional union strategy, but rather as some kind of momentary assistance these women provide to union organizing. This relationship between the union and the active woman usually ends after the relevant temporary situation is over.
- There have been some experiences of certain value with regards to women's organizing. The overlap of entrenched routines and assumptions within unions, and various structural factors, however, prevents these kinds of important and positive experiences regarding women's organizing from becoming widespread.
- Many women who were interviewed spoke of experiences and observations that show that they are not at all ill-disposed to organizing as long as this takes place around concrete problems, and they are properly persuaded. These experiences and observations are important in terms of overcoming stereotypical judgments that consider union membership a norm for men, and a deviation from the norm for women.

- Organizers who are actors within actual organizing processes are usually male workers and experts, focusing on narrow economic benefits. Employing women organizers or experts is not at all seen as something that is necessary. This, for one, creates problems in establishing the primary contact with women. Another result is that issues within the general framework of the struggle for equality, such as respectability, dignity, child care, harassment, and gender-based discrimination – i.e. issues that can draw the attention of women workers – remain unmentioned in the process of organizing these workers.
- Experiences around the globe demonstrate that the most effective way to ensure the democratic functioning of the union, and to encourage women members to become active is to have real and functioning women's commissions and committees within the union. We see, however, that a large majority of unions, including those who have high women's membership shares, as well as confederations such as TÜRK-İŞ and DİSK, do not even have women's commissions or committees. While certain unions and HAK-İŞ do have women's commissions, these have not been properly institutionalized, and have thus been unable to become permanent components of these unions.
- Women's units within unions are set up either as women's bureaus or women's commissions. These units are not supported in any way by specialized boards, experts or working groups that are capable of organizing and running positive activities. In this sense, existing women's units are quite weak both administratively and technically, within unions.
- It is important that women's commissions have proper charters and that its members are chosen through elections. And yet it has been seen that organizing the women's units through by-laws is far from protecting them from the male union administrators.
- Women's units are centrally organized, their relations with the rank and file is therefore limited. Furthermore, they do not enjoy the possibility of a separate budget, and their activities are focused on specific issues and dates.
- In general, a working system based on voluntarism dominates the trade unions that include the setting up of women's commissions as part of their main regulations. Appointed commission membership becomes a second de facto area of work for women who work in different units of the union.
- Top level administrative positions, especially in unions that have a large number of members, are seen as being specialized vocations that have the advantage of bringing power, income, prestige and political clout with them. This leads to the emergence of a competition with no law or regulation between men of the extant administration and men in the opposition at all levels of the union. The fact that union work is defined as a male specialty and the covert perception that union work is not suitable for women makes it difficult for women to accede to administrative positions. A woman to be in administration needs to convince and seek the approval of not only the men in her family, but also of the patriarchal network established in the workplace and in the union. Otherwise, the woman cannot cope with the competition.



- The points above constitute the reasons for which women who have already been able to overcome the obstacles and have acceded to positions of administration within the union need to create the conditions and apply the necessary pressure for women to expect and to demand the creation of conditions for women accede to even higher positions within the administration.
- The few women active in the union generally work as auxiliary administrators in local branches, as workplace representatives or become delegates and are thus concentrated in low level positions without power or authority and that do not determine and apply union policy.
- None of the unions included in the research have included positive discrimination measures such as a quota system or a form of proportional representation in their by-laws. In cases where a quota does exist, this is limited to delegate elections. Most interviewees, including women, have said that putting a quota system in the by-laws would be unnecessary since it would not change the existing situation.
- Specialized educational programs for women aiming to raise consciousness, develop self-esteem and help them become more active are very limited. Gender courses provided by a few unions are squeezed within the formal union education.
- Unions generally provide information and news about women and special days concerning women's struggle in their bulletins, brochures, web sites and periodicals. Nevertheless, publications that make visible issues regarding women's employment, relations between women and unions, problems faced by women at work, organizations, struggles and experiences of women inside and outside unions are very few and far between.
- Symbols, photographs, and posters used by unions provide important clues about the extent to which women are visible within the union. Photographs whether in union publications or hung on union buildings are rarely shot from angles that show women.
- In patriarchal unions policy is shaped according to men. Therefore measures that aim to reduce gender inequality and women's concrete demands are not included in the general demands put forward by unions. In any case, a system that would identify the concrete problems and demands of women that change according to workplace and location and bring them to the bargaining table does not exist at the workplace not in the local union branches.
- Union administrators presume that the interests of women members are the same as theirs and therefore find it unnecessary to try and determine what the interest of the ordinary union member might be. Therefore for unions, problems of equality remain secondary to "big issues and general" that men deem to be important, such as indemnity payments, job security, contract labour and protection of wage levels. Undoubtedly, this situation gets reflected in dispute issues and collective bargaining decisions.

- Unions expect women at all levels to shoulder the responsibility of caring for others themselves. In rare cases, in collective bargaining arrangements that include child care, the latter is deemed to be the sole responsibility of women rather than of society as a whole. We think that rather than leading to change, this perception means that the position of women within society and within unions continues to exist as is.
- Apart from a few unions, there is no mention of sexual harassment in the workplace in union documents as if such a problem does not exist. Thus, this problem is also made invisible by the unions.
- Our general assessment is that issues faced by women such as lower pay and concentration in unskilled work, the question of care, sexual harassment, roles and responsibilities related to the family and work-related health problems in workplaces where a large number of women are employed are either not addressed in collective bargaining agreements, or are addressed in a very limited fashion. But we also think that it is very important for a few unions such as TGS, Petrol İş and Genel İş to have drawn up in some workplaces collective bargaining agreements in which problems faced by women in the workplace are specifically addressed.

What should be done? This question is answered by women within unions. If the union would instead of listening to men reporting on women's issues, listen to the women instead, the answer to the question would become immediately apparent. Examples of successful women's organizing and the accounts provided by women in unions point to the solutions below:

- Above all, unions need to change their routines and their accumulated knowledge. It is already known that the organizing of women workers depends on the holistic struggle of the working class. And yet it should also be underlined that the specific demands of the women worker's movement, the strategies it delineates and the work it effects in this regard will provide important inputs for the development and strengthening of the worker's movement itself. For this to happen, unions dominated by male workers need to become conscious of the benefits of a gender-equal labour market and organization. This can only come to be with the transformation of traditional union structures and their patriarchal culture. The dynamic for this transformation is provided by the struggle for the visibility of women's issues waged by women's groups within the union movement. It would be unrealistic to expect any transformation of the existing union structure and culture as long as such a demand is not voiced and a struggle to meet this demand is not undertaken.
- A union's women's policy should be determined through principles reached in discussions undertaken by women members and representatives in periodically held congresses and general assemblies.
- Sexist language in union charters should be identified and eliminated.
- Charters and regulations must be revised and re-written according to principles of gender equality and sensitivity to women's problems. Charters should include the establishment of gender-equal democracy among their aims and targets. To realize this, the union should commit itself to gender equality and to undertake all necessary steps for gender equality within the home and in the work space, in workplaces where they are organized, in union administration, internal operation and activities, and in collective bargaining agreements.



- Women's representation should be guaranteed and secured in all unions within a confederation and the unions tied to it, in all organs of the union, in all decision-making mechanisms, and in every meeting, symposium, council, general council, working group and delegate election.
- For this reason, male or female unionists should not consider as secondary and unimportant measures such as a quota system or a form of proportional representation.
- It is important to place a woman representative alongside a man especially in workplaces and in their disciplinary committees which are the places where complaints are heard and resolved.
- An understanding which limits its view of women's issues within the workplace only has to be replaced with one that situates women within the workplace as well as within the home and the neighbourhood, and one which is cognizant of the differences among workplace and type of work. The method, tactics and formulae of organizing has thus got to diversify according to women workers.
- Relations forged with active women during processes of organizing have to be transformed into long-lasting, institutional relations and made part of union strategy.
- Necessary numbers of women organizing experts need to be employed.
- Women's activities have, at all cost, to be structured within the union since these will strengthen both the union and the union movement, and their continuity must be guaranteed and institutionalized by being placed within union charters.
- For women's organizational structures whose work has to be compatible with the union's constitutive aims not to be marginalized, it is essential that they be recognized as one of the fundamental constituents of the regulations and policies of the union.
- Charter regulations regarding women's commissions in unions where they exist, have to be revised and provided with real safeguards against existent administration.
- A rules and regulations set of by-laws have to be drawn up that will delineate in detail who the members of the commission will be, how they will be elected, what principles they will work according to, what decisions they will be able to take, the organizational schema they will have to abide by, the place they will occupy within the organization and their relations with its other units, what they will be responsible for, how they will be supervised and how they will set up their budgets.
- As a woman expert stated, the women's commissions that will be set up need to stop being a central unit administered by experts working for the union. It is for this reason that these new women's units have to be structured as parallel organizations that incorporate all levels of administration ranging from the workplace and the branch to the region and the headquarter. Union headquarters and branches should support these units by:

1. Providing opportunities for these units to assemble,
 2. Encouraging them to hold meetings and demonstrations,
 3. Negotiating with the bosses so that women can be excused from work in order to participate in these activities,
 4. Providing financial support and resources,
 5. Making sure these units are represented at branch administrations,
 6. Enabling these groups to submit regular reports of their meetings and activities,
 7. Encouraging the representation at central level commissions of women workers who have become prominent at the local level,
 8. Setting up women's bureau and departments that would provide technical and administrative support to the woman's commission and executive within the union.
- For women's units to be compatible with the priorities and aims of the union, their work at all levels has to be reported and presented to the union administration for review. A regular flow of information from the center to the branches is an effective method of ensuring the filtering down of the aims and targets of the union. Furthermore, this would also ensure the flow of up to date information from the local level to reach commissions at the center.
 - Women's units can become effective when they are supported by a separate budget under their control that is open to technical, administrative, information, publications education and supervision.
 - Almost all women unionists agreed that an educational program was needed that would increase women worker's self-esteem, that is empowering and less formal.
 - DISK's plan to establish a woman's union school is worthy of attention and needs to be realized.
 - The language, discourse, photographs and symbols used by unions need to be re-evaluated with a view to make women more visible.
 - Women in unions should not wait for men to realize the discrimination and the problems faced by women in workplaces and in unions. This may take a long time. Therefore, it is essential that they not underestimate neither the changes made in union charters and nor the regulations, however limited, introduced in collective bargaining agreements regarding problems specific to women. On the contrary, they should work to make these visible and known widely.
 - Especially in societies such as Turkey where women are made insecure and retreat home, the work carried out by women's organizations inside and outside unions in solidarity with each other has strategic importance from the point of view of the empowerment of women workers.

