

WORK AND FAMILY: STILL THE MOST DIFFICULT REVOLUTION? - A REVIEW OF THE WOMEN AND UNIONS CONFERENCE, 2003

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In *The Most Difficult Revolution: Women and Trade Unions* (1992), Alice Cook claims that the relationship between women and unions is the most difficult revolution facing women. The Cornell conference in November 2003 was dedicated to investigating the ways in which Cook's claim is still relevant. Scholars and activists who participated in the conference identified contemporary problems facing women in their workplaces and in their unions. Women's under-representation in union leadership, lack of union representation, discrimination at the workplace and marginalization of women's issues within unions were cited as problems faced by women workers across the globe. Underlying each of these problems is the relationship between work and family. As Arlene Kaplan Daniels noted in her opening speech, when discussing women workers and unions, a key issue is *always* the relationship between work and family. She pointed out that the ethos of the domestic code whereby women are relegated to the home and are made responsible for the family is alive and well, and must be challenged. Barriers to women's participation in union activity, to adequate numerical representations of women in leadership positions, to including women's issues in bargaining agendas, and to providing safe workplaces for women, are all fundamentally related to women's domestic responsibilities.

Presentations identified the ways in which women's domestic responsibilities affect their potential for union activism. Internationally, women remain responsible for the family despite their participation in the paid labour force. These responsibilities are cited as the key reason women do not participate in union activity. Simpson and Kaminski, for example, argued there is a direct connection between women in union leadership positions and family responsibilities. They reported that female representation in union leadership remains "woefully inadequate" despite some improvements. So few women are found in top leadership of American unions because women are limited by family responsibilities. Indeed, scholars rank the dichotomy between work and family as "the most important factor standing in the way of female involvement in union activities and leadership" (Gray 1993). Family responsibilities conflict with union responsibilities because the expected devotion to union activity is

high - an expectation that stands opposed to the dedication required in carework.

Despite ongoing criticism regarding the structural and ideological barriers to women's participation in union activity, presentations revealed that unions are not doing much to challenge the gendered division of labour found in both the private and public spheres. At best, unions are attempting to make themselves more "family-friendly" by providing child care at union meetings and conventions. These policies are the exception, however, and may only be found among unions in which women have reached what is considered a "critical mass" of women in leadership positions (Gray 1993) - a proportion of women in decision-making roles that is generally known to affect change for women. The United Nations identifies this critical mass as 30% (CAW Conference 2003).

Policies attempting to make unions more "family friendly" do little to challenge the structure upon which the gendered division of labour rests. Consequently, many issues facing women in their unions remain marginalized. As Jincock Lee pointed out in her discussion of women's trade unions in South Korea, trade unionism is limited in its ability to represent women's issues because gender is missing in unions' policies and practices. That is, trade unionism does not consider the unique experiences of women workers. This lack of gender analysis is due in part, to the divide between work and home. Operating according to the dichotomy between work and home, she argued, has caused industrial relations to lose sight of the connection between family, community, and wider society. What is needed, according to Lee, is a consciousness of life beyond the workplace, one that challenges structures such as the gendered division of labour. The MAKALAYA project in the Philippines, as Mylene Hega noted, is one organization that operates with such a consciousness. She discussed how this organization operates according to the connections between the personal and the political, through coalitions with other community services in order to better represent working women's struggles.

Attempts to make women's issues integral to union affairs has proven to be incredibly challenging. In her keynote speech, Jennifer Curtain referred to the history of unions' treatment of women as an "almost unforgivable" history of discrimination. Traditionally, unions relied on stereotypes to justify the exclusion of women from leadership positions, and to marginalize women's issues in bargaining. Historically, unions have held discriminatory assumptions about women's relationship to the workplace and to the family. Women's absence from union activity was assumed to reflect a lack of interest and dedication to union affairs. These notions of commitment are related to perceptions of women's domestic priorities, and specifically, the idea that women's interests and priorities lie primarily with their family and home life rather than their workplaces (Duffy and Pupo 1992). Conference participants challenged these

assumptions, and discussed barriers to women's participation and representation in leadership. Discussions revealed that women's exclusion from union activity reflects a structural and ideological problem. Barriers are structural in that women remain responsible for their families, and ideological in that the dominant view suggests this is women's proper place. These barriers are preventing women from obtaining leadership positions within unions. Consequently, implementing gender issues within unions is an ongoing struggle for women.

Presentations were not centred on challenging the dichotomy between work and family, revealing that this issue remains incredibly difficult to challenge. Rather, the focus was on how unions can better represent women's issues as well as how unions can organize women workers. Participants did, however, reveal some optimism for the future of women's relationship to unions. It is clear unions are beginning to take up women's issues at the bargaining table (Simpson and Kaminski 2003; Kumar 1993). Unfortunately, it is evident that unions still do not have the gendered division of labour at the forefront of their agendas. This may reflect the need for a coalition with other social movements that consider a broad scope of social issues. In this respect social unionism and social movement unionism have much to offer unions in their attempts to change the relationship between work and family. Regardless of *how* the issue of women and unions is considered, the relationship between women and paid work must be confronted. Indeed, this conference revealed that challenging the dichotomy between work and family is perhaps the most difficult revolution facing women, one that must be addressed in order for the relationship between women and unions to improve.

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