

CULTURAL FACTORS IN THE UNION ACTIVITY  
OF WOMEN IN HAWAII\*

Marian H. Roffman

Hawaii, the ultimate vacation site, belies its image of tropical indolence for the people who must make their living here. The typical family in Hawaii has two breadwinners. It has always been so, but in the last thirty years this trend has accelerated. No other state has such a high proportion of women workers. In 1975, 51.5 percent of Hawaii women sixteen years or older were working or seeking work. The national rate was 45.9 percent (Kautz, 1976:i).\*\*

Why do so many women work in Hawaii? The answer is simple: they have to. Even before inflation escalated prices, the cost of living was much higher than on the mainland, because so many essential things must be imported. The development of the sugar and pineapple plantations was at the cost of a diversified agriculture that might have made the islands more nearly self-sustaining. Housing and real estate are prohibitively expensive because of the limited amount of acreage, the need to import building materials, the antiquated leasehold system whereby huge estates retain perpetual control of the best land, and, to compound the problem, an ever-expanding population. All things put together, there is no way most families can make it if the wife doesn't work.

The catch is that even when she does work, the family still has a hard time, because the other side

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\*\*According to the librarian at the State Department of Labor Research Section, no analysis of the work force has been made since the report here cited. In 1975. The next report, utilizing figures from the 1980 census, will not be published until 1982.



of the high cost of living in Hawaii is the low average of wages. This, too, is a long-standing part of the Hawaii scene. The Islands' economy was built on immigrant contract labor which in some ways resembled the system of slavery. As late as 1939 a male sugar mill worker received only 28-1/2 cents an hour, or \$2.12 a day (Murin, 1950:5). Female workers have always been paid less than men, and this inequity continues despite unionization, legal mandates, and affirmative action programs. The 1970 census indicated that on the Island of Oahu, which has the largest concentration of population, 65 percent of the women employed work as sales or office clerks or in service jobs (such as waitresses, seamstresses, or house and office cleaners) and that they earn from 32.3 to 47.6 percent less than men doing the same type of work (Honolulu Office of Human Resources, 1973).

So Hawaii women work, in large numbers; they are underpaid, concentrated in low-level jobs, and discriminated against on the basis of sex. Plainly, they need some form of organization to advance their interests. It is nearly forty years since unions became a force in the Islands. How have the unions served women?

#### Women in Unions

One would think that when a labor organization comes into a workplace where many women work, gender differences would be blotted out by the larger similarity in the bonding among a group of workers allied in common interest against their employer. If union organization were a totally new concept just taking place today, we would expect, would we not, to see working women involved in active organizing, speaking at meetings, taking leadership, serving on committees, being elected to office? Why did it not happen that way? I do not mean to imply that unionization in Hawaii was an all-male show. There were and there are today many union women who were strong leaders. But the fact is that, with the exception of a few organizations, women are not represented at leadership levels in their unions to any significant degree.

Among those unions which have a mixed membership, only two, the Postal Employees Union and the Hawaii State Teachers Association, have women presidents. The I.L.W.U., one of the first of the unions to organize women—and an organization which prides itself in being in the forefront of social progress—hires women organizers only on a short-term basis during organizing drives. All of the business agents and international



representatives of that union are male, although recently women have been hired temporarily to replace regular business agents who are on leave. They have one woman on the local executive board and one woman on the Board of Trustees. In addition, they send one woman observer to the International Executive Board meetings. The United Public Workers (UPW), which is perhaps the best of the mixed unions, has six full-time paid staff members (business agents) who are women. For more than twenty years now the UPW has had women on their State Executive Board, women unit chairpersons, and division officers. Nevertheless, even in this union, the top officers—division chairmen—tend to be men, and men outnumber women on the Executive Board. In the other unions, there is an occasional woman business agent to service units with mostly female workers. But except in the all-female fields such as nursing, the unions are securely in the leadership of men.

It would be useful to know why this is so. The situation is not much different from that on the mainland, where women union members may be active on unit and local levels but are rarely seen beyond that. Many of the explanations that are put forward to account for women's low level of union activity in mainland unions would be applicable to Hawaii also. But the very different historical background and ethnic population of the islands suggest strongly that other factors might be at work here.

The lines of inquiry in my research on the problem can be summarized by four basic questions:

1. Are certain ethnic groups likely to be more interested in unions than others?
2. Do the women who emerge as union leaders tend to come from one or two particular ethnic groups?
3. Could there be cultural determinants at work which affect the level of interest which a particular woman may have in union activity? and finally,
4. Do the personal backgrounds of the local women who have become strong union leaders provide any clue to such motivation?

In the fall of 1977 I began to elicit information, through personal interviews, letters, and questionnaires, about women's participation in unions. Some of the women I talked with have been my personal friends for as long as twenty-five years. This paper



represents a preliminary report on research that is still going on. It is based on the responses of the first group of fifty women, all of the UPW (United Public Workers) or the ILWU (International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union). I was particularly interested in determining whether certain ethnic groups might be more likely to be interested in unions than others, and whether the women union leaders tend to come from one or two particular ethnic groups.

### Effect of Ethnicity on Union Participation

The idea of tracing everyday practical decisions and activity to racial or ethnic behavior patterns may seem farfetched, particularly to those who live in homogeneous communities. It is true that under the leveling effect of American culture, national characteristics tend to become less and less distinguishable. As early as 1912, observers noted a marked difference between the first-generation immigrants and their children who had been born in Hawaii and gone to American schools (Blascoer, 1912:3). Nevertheless, each ethnic group in the population has been identified by certain character traits, real or imaginary. Such stereotyping of immigrants was common on the mainland, too, but the tensions among groups were sharper here because of the manner in which Hawaii was populated. The Caucasians who began to come to the Islands early in the nineteenth century took over moral leadership by converting the native Hawaiians to Christianity and soon gained possession of the bulk of the land. The sugar plantations which they developed required thousands of workers. As the Hawaiians did not take to this work, foreign laborers were brought in—at first, Chinese men, then, between 1878 and 1900, Portuguese. These were followed by Japanese and Korean contract laborers. Whereas the Chinese came without wives, and often returned to China, the Portuguese and the Japanese came with their wives or sent for them later. Some Oriental women came alone, preferring field work in Hawaii to the despair of being a concubine in a land where women were considered worthless. Many Japanese and Korean laborers sent home for "picture brides" to share their lives and raise families. Due to this, and to the steady arrival of more male laborers, the Japanese soon became a major element in the population. The last great incoming group was the Filipinos. Like the Chinese in the early period, most of these were single men or married men who had left their wives and children in the Philippines, intending to return some day. However, a considerable number of Filipino women have come to the Islands.



Each of these groups lived in separate communities—there was on each plantation a Japanese camp, a Portuguese camp, a Filipino camp, and so on. They could not speak each others' language, and so the Island pidgin was developed. Naturally, there was distrust, and certain races looked down on others. The first strikes and attempts at unionization were organized on racial lines. The planters continued to use one group against another. For example, in 1902, a U.S. Labor Commissioner said, "During the year ending June 30, 1901, the regular arrival of monthly expeditions of Puerto Rican laboring people throughout an entire year largely disabused [the Japanese] and made them much more reasonable in their relations with their employers." It was only natural that the strike-breaking of those who were newly imported did not endear them to the other laborers who were trying to improve their conditions. In every one of these struggles, the workers lost and had to go back to work on the employers' terms. But the lessons taught by racial disharmony had been learned. When the big wave of labor organization swept the Islands between 1943 and 1945, it was on the principle of one union for all races. All ethnic groups worked together. The ILWU started with the longshoremen, and took in the sugar and pineapple workers in 1945. Unionism, which had been considered "a violent breach of local mores" (Aller, 1958:221) in the twenties and thirties, was now a solid reality in Hawaii.

On the plantations, some women worked in the fields, although only during certain seasons. They were always a small number, about 6.1 percent of the total number of employees in 1939 (Shoemaker, 1940:56). They did planting, and some of the lighter work in cultivating, fertilizing, or gleaning the fields at harvest time. These were called the "hoe hana women," which means "women who work with the hoe." There were a handful of these women still working in 1960, when a group of them was interviewed and photographed for a newspaper feature. In the early days, they wore kimonos, with wooden *gettas* or clogs on their feet, straw hats on their heads, heavy scarves wrapped around their necks and heads to keep out the sun and insects. The women who were hired to work felt themselves privileged, even though it meant getting up before dawn, working very hard all day, and then in the late afternoon going back home to cook, wash, scrub, iron, sew, and take care of the children. Pregnant women worked until just before the baby was due, and some babies were born in the field. The mother usually had to go back to work in a day or two after the birth. Many mothers worked



with their babies strapped to their backs. One of the demands in the great sugar strike of 1919 was for paid maternity leave of two weeks before and six weeks after birth. (That was one of the strikes that was broken because the union at that time was a racial one.) The Japanese and Korean women worked only if they had male family members also working on the plantation. In the early days there used to be some work gangs that were 100 percent female, but over the years the plantations phased women out of this work.

One of these women had her picture in a labor newspaper with a short story about her, in 1953. She was the champion cane cutter on one of the largest sugar plantations; she produced more than men on piece-work, said the article. She was also

a militant union member who has time and time again been elected steward of her field gang. She is outspoken and fights for workers' rights. She attends union meetings and occasionally she takes the floor. She speaks better in Japanese. She is an older second-generation who bridges the years between contract laborer and today's unionists. She and her son are both active in their Olaa ILWU unit. (*Honolulu Record*, August 6, 1953, p. 34)

For all their hard work, women were paid a good deal less than men. In 1939, by law women were supposed to receive a minimum average wage of not less than 75 percent of that paid to men. That would be, at that time, \$1.05 a day (Shoemaker, 1940:56). This same situation prevailed in the pineapple industry. Philip Brooks, who sat on the management's side in the union negotiations in 1946, compared different job rates as follows:

Hourly rates for the male jobs on plantations were uniformly 15 cents lower than the corresponding rate in the canneries. Rates for female jobs were assigned only to the first seven labor grades and were uniformly 10 cents lower than the rate for male jobs in the same labor grade in the canneries; on the plantations, rates for female jobs were 5 cents below those for male jobs in the same labor grade. (1952:125)

The surprising thing is that these wage differentials between men and women continued for a long time. In the 1946 pineapple contract that came as a result of the union negotiations, there were nine agreements, none of which mentioned or affected the differential between male and female wages (Brooks, 1952:8, 127). There seems to have been no demand for equalization. In every wage struggle, the demand was for an



increase in the hourly rate, leaving the relative differences intact. When questioned about this, women unionists today admit that it did not occur to them, even in the forties and fifties, to ask for equal pay for equal work, although now there is general agreement on this subject. There was a strong cultural bias against such a development, a feeling that a woman shouldn't earn as much as a man. This derived from the concept that men are primary breadwinners and have the support of a family as their responsibility, whereas women are secondary wage earners "helping out" or working for "pin money."

This attitude was most prevalent among the Japanese women, but it was evident in women of other ethnic backgrounds as well. It is still heard today from women who give it as an excuse why they do not need a union in their place of work. It is, of course, more emotional than logical, because some men do not have families to support, and some women do. Despite the rhetoric, employees' wages are determined not by their needs, but by the rates set for a particular job.

On the plantations, the great majority of the laborers' wives, the ones who were not themselves working, joined the ILWU Women's Auxiliary. The story of those auxiliaries is extremely interesting, but too long to relate in detail here. The women organized themselves, recruited their neighbors, and supplied the staying power for the many months that their men were on strike. They ran soup kitchens, in some cases feeding as many as 3,000 persons a day. They marched on picket lines with the men and sometimes formed their own picket lines. The ILWU men I have talked with are quite frank about the crucial role the auxiliaries played in the development of their union. Feminists today are likely to belittle the unions' "ladies' auxiliaries" on the grounds that their organizations were purely supportive of men's interests, and that women would have done better to push their own interests. But this is to overlook the tremendous change that activity in the auxiliary brought to those women. I think it would be safe to say that very few of those women were ever the same again. The experience of participating in a strike, volunteering and carrying out jobs, talking to other people and working with others, and most of all, going to meetings and speaking, all this caused them to grow, to develop, to become aware of their own relation to the larger world. They were in effect emancipated from the small, confining circles of their domestic life.



One of the factors at work in the plantation situation was the Oriental feeling that wives should behave in accordance with their husbands' interests. In this case, the husbands were union activists, and they were very anxious that their wives be friendly to the union. In the early 1950s, when the UPW was organizing hospitals and government workers, it quite often happened that a husband and wife might be working at the same place, or that the husband might be a government worker in one place and his wife a hospital worker somewhere else. A survey I made showed that when the husband was a union member—either ILWU or UPW—the wife was very likely to also join the union in her shop. This is in fact one of the reasons for the vitality of the UPW, and for the high level of female active participation in that union. When the husband is a union member, he will not object to, and he will probably encourage, his wife's joining a union, too.

But sometimes there is a conflict. If the wife works in a place that is being unionized, and if her husband is antagonistic to unions, or even indifferent to her joining, she is less likely to become a member. And if she does join, seeing the obvious benefits, she may simply pay her dues, but never attend meetings or take responsibilities in the organization. This influence seems to be stronger in the affirmative case—when the husband is a believer in unionism. This factor seems to be the same along all the ethnic groups.

Typing whole nationalities or races on the basis of personal experience or hearsay was common in the early part of this century. Contrary to the widely-held notion that Hawaiians are lazy and indolent, Blascoer found in 1912 that managers of canneries and laundries had no difficulty in securing Hawaiian "girls"; their advertisements for help always brought in more applicants than there were jobs. The Hawaiians had a pride, a strong sense of their personal dignity, that the employer had to reckon with. An observer who interviewed many employers in 1912 reported that "Hawaiian girls and women would just quit and change jobs because pay envelopes had been short several hours time, in spite of the fact that in every case the mistake had been corrected when called to the foreman's attention." And again, speaking of Hawaiian teen-age females she observed—"Although limping painfully after a week of standing from seven in the morning until seven or eight at night—often their first experience with any sort of occupation—they stoutly maintained that they were not tired."



Japanese women, who still wore kimonos at this time, worked without complaint and strove to please their employers. For a long time (and to this day) they were considered the best women for household employment because they were "quiet, scrupulously neat and clean in appearance," and seemed to enjoy, or at least not to mind, housecleaning and kitchen work (Dranga, 1936:12). They worked also in garment shops, mostly in the heavier tailoring work such as sailors' uniforms and work suits, shirts, and plantation work outfits.

There is another aspect of Japanese culture that had a bearing on the employer-employee relationship—the custom of deference toward someone who is in a position of authority, who is older, wealthier, more powerful, and male. It also implies loyalty toward one's employer, clan, or other organization. This pattern of behavior is highly valued by the Japanese, and although Americanization has modified it to some extent, it still distinguishes the Japanese. Dr. Abe Arkoff conducted a survey of this phenomenon among University of Hawaii students in 1964, comparing Japanese, American, and Japanese-American women, and found that on the behavior rating scale he had constructed, Japanese-American women in Hawaii are high in deference (Arkoff, 1964). This quality of deference is of course much appreciated by the employer.

The Chinese women, who in 1912 still wore blue cotton pants and smocks, their black hair swinging in a long pigtail, were considered highly desirable employees, quick, intelligent, and hard-working. They were also ambitious and as quickly as they could, they moved up into clerical and technical jobs.

Portuguese women appear to have been of two contrasting types. Those who came from Portugal often worked in dressmaking shops, where they were in demand because of the fine needlework they had learned in the Old Country. Perhaps because they were homesick, they were described as "reserved and melancholy" (Blascoer, 1912:48). The other type, which came to predominate as the Portuguese became settled in Hawaii, was characterized by volubility, curiosity about other people and a love of gossip, liveliness, and a quick temper. They were noisier, less restrained, and more openly emotional than the Orientals. Because they were gregarious and friendly, they were considered best when they met the public in jobs such as sales clerking.

The personal values of the women in various ethnic groups affected their attitudes to their jobs. The Japanese were likely to have long-range goals, almost



invariably connected with saving up for the purchase of a house, and the college education of their sons. A typical Japanese woman would view her job as a necessary part of the family's striving for this goal. She would be philosophical about the job's disagreeable aspects and would not be likely to do anything that might jeopardize it. Hawaiian, Portuguese, and Chinese women, on the other hand, would be working for current needs, without long-range goals, and to them the conditions of the job where they spent their days would be much more important.

When I asked union leaders (men and women) whether these cultural traits had any effect upon organizing drives in the formative stage of a union, most of them said ethnicity was a factor, but not the decisive one. One UPW official said that some of the resistance to the UPW among the school cafeteria workers stemmed from their loyalty to the labor organization which they then had. Although this organization, which did not even call itself a union, included supervisors and managers and did very little for the workers, these women, most of them Japanese, thought that they "ought to" remain in it, even while they privately criticized it. They eventually transferred this loyalty to the UPW.

The same question must, of course, be asked concerning male workers: were any ethnic groups easier, or harder, to organize than others? As far as the limited data from union records can tell us, this was not a factor at all in recruiting men. The considerations there were quite different. Men were interested in knowing what the union could do for them, and what the risks were. That there could not have been anything in any of the ethnic cultures that would be antithetical to unionism is proven by the early labor organizations which were purely ethnic in character.

I asked then what were the reasons most commonly given by women to explain why they did not want to join a union. The answers I received are imprecise, because they relate to things that had happened between twenty and forty years ago, and no written records or notes had been made. Still, many organizers seemed to remember quite well, perhaps because this activity of building a union and approaching fellow workers to ask them to join was such an entirely new thing in their lives that it made a deep impression.

Some women workers were, simply, afraid of the boss. They needed the job and couldn't risk being



fired. (In the early days, the unions couldn't guarantee that this would not happen.) Some were afraid because they had read in the newspapers that the unions were communistic. One woman, who later became one of the strongest UPW members, confessed that she held out for several weeks before joining, because she was certain that a group of her very dear friends, who had joined, were going to be arrested and sent to jail for being UPW members. This was in the McCarthy period. Almost all of those who gave this reason, however, changed their minds when they saw that no one was going to jail for union activity, and when they began to see the benefits of union membership. Some women said they couldn't afford the dues. This was one of the easiest arguments to refute, according to the organizers. Some women said they wouldn't join because their husbands told them not to. The organizers often heard women say, "I wouldn't feel comfortable in a meeting with all those men." One common excuse was, "Oh, I'm just working for pin money, so I don't need a union." This was likely to be a face-saving device by which the woman pretended that being underpaid wasn't important to her because her husband was making more.

On reflection, it will be seen that most of these statements are culturally rooted. Tom Yagi, the Maui Division Director of the ILWU, discussing this at a seminar on the status of women which was conducted by the union in 1972, made no bones about it. He said: "When you try to organize women and they tell us these things, then you begin to realize how much harm is done to us by cultural habits which make women feel inferior or subservient" (Yagi, 1972). Many years before, Theresa Wolfson had said much the same thing:

The linking of the woman to her home has undoubtedly assured the perpetuation of the family, but it has at the same time created a state of introversion, an interest in her immediate surroundings and herself, which forms a real obstacle to any attempts at trade union organization when the woman enters the industrial field. (Wolfson, 1926:20)

Females were trained from little girlhood to "think small," to keep the domestic circle as the center of their lives and interests, to leave weighty subjects like politics and economics to the menfolks. When they went out to work, it was supposed to be only for a few years, until they married and started having babies. The fact that so many of them kept returning to the work force, in between babies and after, escaped notice. The myth of wives working for pin money has been long a-dying. It forms such an excellent



rationale for the wage differential between men and women, which in Hawaii, according to the 1970 census, resulted in women being paid from 32 to 47 percent less than men doing the same type of work (Honolulu Office of Human Resources, 1973).

### Characteristics of Union Leaders

Once a union was organized in a plant or establishment, how did the women respond to it? Who were the leaders? I asked these questions in an effort to learn whether certain ethnic groups were more likely than others to produce leaders. Much more research needs to be done before anything like definitive answers can be given, but I shall summarize the trends that emerge from my interviews.

There was no ethnic group that did not produce some strong union women leaders. In each place, the quality of the union activists was related to the individuals in the work unit. It seems to be very much a matter of personality. The shop steward is likely to be a woman who is competent in her work, who is liked and respected by the other workers.

What caused a woman to accept the responsibility of a union position or assignment? The answers to this must be considered along with the reasons given for women *not* being active, because they form the other side of the picture. One feature that almost all of the leaders share, and most of all, those who hold higher office than shop steward or unit leader, is the ability to speak up at a meeting. Here, ethnic background has something to do with the matter. Portuguese women and part-Hawaiian women tend to be very effective speakers; they are self-confident and forceful. Japanese women are more likely to hold back, to say little at meetings. The first-generation workers also had a problem with the English language.

The shyness of women who did not speak was accentuated by the presence of the male union members at the meetings. This had, and continues to have, an inhibiting effect upon the women members. At the many union meetings I attended, it was always the men who dominated the discussion. This, again, is a trait that cuts across all ethnic lines.

The women who accepted leadership were those with abundant energy. They certainly needed it, because most of the jobs that women did were extremely tiring, many requiring them to be on their feet all day, and



the hours were long. Being an officer meant making trips to the union hall and spending several hours at meetings, or working on union projects. Conversely, the reason women most often gave (and still do) for not being active was lack of free time. One hospital worker who had been an officer, explained why she no longer was:

I haven't been because I have been having my children with me. They take up my time so I felt I shouldn't. There are too many meetings you have to make.

This woman was still helping whenever the union called for volunteers, as for getting out mailings.

This is a problem that is similar for every organization. It is the problem of the double burden of the woman worker who is also a wife and a mother. Even when the children are old enough to take care of themselves, even when there are only the husband and wife at home, it is still a great burden to keep the household running, to shop and get meals and all the hundred and one things that have to be done. Husbands may help, but the responsibility for the house is tacitly regarded as being the wife's. It is small wonder that she is just too tired to go out again in the evening to a union meeting.

Some women say that their husbands don't want them to run for union office—they don't want their wives going out to meetings at night, or they think it will take too much of the wife's time.

We keep coming back to *men*. Do they really want women to be active in the unions? They would be hard pressed to prove it. Why are there so few women business agents, presidents, directors, union newspaper editors, contract negotiators? Why are there so few of them on local executive boards, and fewer still at the upper levels of the international executive boards and top leadership? Union men, when questioned, will tell you that women do not run for these elections; the implication is that they could be elected if they did—that the women do not want the responsibilities of those jobs. Well, perhaps. But some aggressive encouragement of potential women leaders on the part of the men unionists might bring about a surprising change. If women were sure that they were wanted and needed by the organization, as leaders and paid staff people, as well as dues-paying rank and file members, many more would be willing to run for office and apply for union positions.



The labor movement will have to face up to this problem of recruiting women for leadership in the very near future. Union membership is declining, and employers are spending enormous sums to forestall organization of their employees. Unionism has not done a good enough job for women. Yet organization is the key to higher wages, a fair promotions policy, and job security. If women workers, in their new sensitivity to male put-downs, turn away from unionism, it will be unfortunate for them and also for the unions on which they turn their backs.

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