

A SUMMARY OF

"THE BARRIERS AND BENEFITS OF UNION ACTIVISM FOR WOMEN"

A study by Betty McGregor

FOR

THE O.W.W. EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

OF THE OTTAWA CHAPTER

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The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was sent to various unions and the response rate varied dramatically by union local: OPSEU returned 21 completed questionnaires; ONA returned 18; CORE returned 17; the two PSAC locals 10; and RWDSU only returned 2. RWDSU was contacted on a number of occasions in an attempt to raise the response rate. 8 questionnaires were distributed as a second attempt, none were returned. A total of 68 questionnaires were returned.

The Interview

Nine follow-up interviews took place: 5 with union activists and 4 with non-activists. The interviews were of approximately one hour in length, covered four major areas: 1) a discussion of the woman's job and her experiences working at it, including co-workers and job environment and her concerns about these; 2) the woman's family responsibilities and their impact upon her work experience and union involvement and any other interests and activities she was involved in; 3) the woman's union activism, or lack of, and her reasons for being involved or not, her experiences as a union representative, and barriers to her activism; and 4) her awareness of OWW and how she became involved or not in the organization and what she felt an organization like OWW could do to help her in her union.

The weakness of this design is that the selection of the sample

unions and the way in which the women chosen to complete the questionnaires was obviously subject to the judgement of the OWW. The design is also flawed in that the needs of the union women should have been investigated before attempting to elicit the responses to OWW and its activities. After finding out more about these union women's needs, an organizational review could have investigated whether union women felt OWW's activities responded to their concerns.

The findings

The women in our sample on average were better educated and better paid than the average Canadian woman; most worked full-time and were not shift workers. The majority were aged 30-49 and had family responsibilities. One fifth of them were single parents.

Nearly 40% of the women surveyed were active in their unions (36.7%, n=25) and 28% of the inactive women were interested in becoming more active in their unions.

Other studies have found that active union women tend to be better paid, have a higher level of education, to be younger and to have fewer family responsibilities than their inactive counterparts. }

The higher the income level, the more likely these women are to be active in their unions. While only 4% of the active union women earned under \$25,000 a year, fully 40% of the inactive union women earned under this amount. 32% of active union women

earned more than \$35,000 a year, while only 14% of inactive women earned this much. Being active in the union can be an expensive undertaking--babysitting costs, attendance at meetings which are often held over dinner at restaurants or in bars, travel for conferences, etc. can all be added expenses which are difficult to absorb for low-income women.

The following tables will show the Women Awareness of OWW and

Table VIII

Why Union Women Didn't Attend O.W.W. Events*

You didn't know about them	75.0% (n=51)
You couldn't arrange child care	0
It was held at an inconvenient time	4.4% (n=3)
Other responsibilities prevented you from going	11.8% (n=8)
You didn't know anyone else who was going	2.9% (n=2)
You are not an O.W.W. member	10.3% (n=7)
Not offered in the language of your choice	0
Other: not interested-2	8.8% (n=6)
travelling distance probably-1	
unsure of wanting to become involved-1	
can only manage work and home-1	
no time-1	

*multiple choices possible. percentages don't add to 100

Table IX(a)
O.W.W. Events of Help to Union Women

Public Speaking Skills Building Workshop	63% (n=43)
Impact of Technological Change for Women's Work	54% (n=37)
Writing Workshop for Women	53% (n=36)
Taking Control-Developing Union Skills for Women	43% (n=29)
Social Events	29% (n=20)
Strike Support Activities	25% (n=17)
N/R	2% (n=1)

Public speaking was obviously the most popular workshop, with the writing workshop and the impact of technological change also highly popular.

Table IX(b)
O.W.W. Events of Help to Women by Union Local


	O.P.S.E.U.	P.S.A.C.	C.U.P.E.	O.N.A.
Public Speaking	90% (19)	50%(5)	47%(8)	55%(10)
Technological Change	43% (9)	30%(3)	56%(12)	67%(12)
Writing Workshop	48% (10)	80%(8)	47%(8)	55%(10)
Developing Union Skills	38% (8)	40%(4)	28%(6)	55%(10)
Social Events	43% (9)	40%(4)	29%(5)	11%(2)
Strike Support	24% (5)	30%(3)	24%(4)	22%(4)
N/R				6%(1)

Suggestions for OWW activities

- counselling, drop-in centre
- self promotion (i.e. OWW)
- all the things mentioned in Table IX
- 1)" Breaking the Paranoia" offer a workshop focussing on emphasizing the many advantages associated with union affiliation as opposed to the constantly expressed disadvantages. Focus on teaching women that, in today's workplace, relying on the "good faith" of management no longer suffices. 2) Offer a workshop to Active Union Women who often inevitably abandon unionism due to disillusionment and fatigue. A support network is well-needed."
- training in working in a unionized setting ?
- "Taking Control-Developing Union Skills for Women" should be available to every new permanent women employee. This questionnaire should help. There is a lack of a mechanism for anyone to state their concerns to be addressed by the Union.
- assertiveness training
- pick a key issue to work on to get unions and employers going
- getting women involved in locals committee or executive
- financial planning, money management
- educational support and recognition for educational advancement.

How can OWW help You in Your Unions

- If they might make special presentations at our educationals, around specific women's issues.



- OWW can offer guidance in time management. (often union women are faced with having to juggle union activity and work activity). They could also provide positive reinforcement/support to union women.

- By trying to assist us get other union members interested and motivated.

- Share experiences

- Share experiences with other locals with a wish to increasing involvement in the labour movement and fighting apathy.

- Trying to interest women, especially in clerical roles, in taking union activities seriously.

- Information sharing and strategies to get women involved in union.

- Encourage participation from women in union activities by encouraging more women to be more active in the union which is totally male-dominated.

- Encourage the union to quit trying for percent increases and go for a lump sum across the board. Women are mostly in lower categories and 4 or 5% on their salaries is far less of an increase than men at higher levels.

- If it had been available when I had trouble with my union, I might not have had to leave or I might have had help to get a disability pension.

- A supportive role, monitor work situation, esp. complaints.

- Increased profile.

- Give my union a larger voice

- Help to have less hours of work, work one shift of choice.

For the interest in finding out more about OWW, fully 69% (47) women wanted to know more. There were requests for publications or newsletters. No differences were apparent between active and inactive women in their desire to know more about OWW (68% vs. 67.4% respectively).

The following tables display the responses of all women and the concerns they felt were not being adequately addressed by their unions.

Table X(a)

**Issues Women Feel Are Not Being Adequately Addressed
by Their Unions***

Opportunities to change your field.of occupation	35% (n=24)
Career advancement	27% (n=18)
Job sharing	27% (n=18)
Impact of free trade on women	27% (n=18)
Assertiveness training	27% (n=18)
Reduced working hours	25% (n=17)
Impact of privatization on women	22% (n=15)
Retirement planning	21% (n=14)
Child care	19% (n=13)
Affirmative action	18% (n=12)
Health and safety	16% (n=11)
Pay equity	15% (n=10)
Sexual harassment	13% (n=9)
Political lobbying	13% (n=9)
Impact of technology on work	13% (n=9)
Abortion choice	10% (n=7)
Other: fitness at work - 1 not knowledgeable about what union does - 2	4% (n=3)

*multiple choices given, % don't add up to 100

As we can see from Table IX(a), the most mentioned category

Table X(b)

**Issues Women Feel Are Not Being Adequately Addressed
by Their Unions According to Union Local**

	O.P.S.E.U.	P.S.A.C.	C.U.P.E.	O.N.A.
Opportunities to change your field of occupation	24%(5)	70%(7)	24%(4)	39%(7)
Job sharing	33%(7)	40%(4)	12%(2)	22%(4)
Career advancement	24%(5)	40%(4)	24%(4)	16%(3)
Impact of free trade on women	19%(4)	30%(3)	24%(4)	28%(5)
Assertiveness training	14%(3)	30%(3)	41%(7)	22%(4)
Reduced working hours	24%(5)	10%(1)	36%(6)	22%(4)
Impact of privatization on women	24%(5)	10%(1)	18%(3)	22%(4)
Retirement Planning	14%(3)	10%(1)	24%(4)	22%(4)
Child care	14%(3)	20%(2)	12%(2)	22%(4)
Affirmative action	5%(1)	30%(3)	18%(3)	22%(4)
Health and Safety	9%(2)	10%(1)	24%(4)	16%(3)
Pay equity	14%(3)	10%(1)	6%(1)	22%(4)
Sexual harassment	9%(2)	10%(1)	24%(4)	6%(1)
Impact of technology on work	0	10%(1)	24%(4)	16%(3)
Political lobbying	5%(1)	20%(2)	12%(2)	11%(2)
Abortion choice	9%(2)	0	12%(2)	11%(2)

*multiple choices given, % don't add up to 100

The numbers from each union are very small and therefore little analysis can be done.

What these women feel OWW can offer them

In summary active women would like to see OWW offer: 1) training and support in handling grievances and employee relations that the union staff don't have the time to do; 2) other courses that their unions offer but without attention to the struggles of women on the job and in the union; 3) literature on the situation of women in their locals; 4) workshops on stress; 5) information sharing workshops on how to get women involved in their unions; 6) an OWW speaker for a CUPE 503 membership meeting; 7) an educational on how to run for election; 8) opportunities for women from various unions and locals to meet and share common concerns; 9) continuance of its present support to union women; 10) social events; 11) more workshops on public speaking; and 12) a drop-in centre.

Inactive women would like to see OWW 1) provide support and techniques for getting through their union structures when a grievance is not being taken seriously by their union rep.; 2) raise their profile; and 3) offer a means of meeting women from other locals and unions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This organizational review was instituted at the request of the Executive Council of Ottawa O.W.W. The organization is in a period of transition. Members are reflecting upon past activities and their impact and are searching for new directions. This reflection has resulted from a concern over declining membership and participation at O.W.W. sponsored activities.

The source of the information upon which this organizational review is based resulted from a two-phase research design: 1) the distribution, collection and analysis of questionnaire responses from 68 women who were members of five unions in the Ottawa area. The questionnaires sought the women's reactions to the present activities of O.W.W. and suggestions as to activities in which O.W.W. should be involved in future; and 2) in-depth personal interviews with a sub-sample of these women about their work and work-related personal concerns and how these impacted their union involvement. A review of the literature on women and unions and of O.W.W. documents, as well as discussions with past and present O.W.W. members provided a framework for the research.

The analysis of the findings from this study and the resultant recommendations are cognizant of the fact that the unions sampled were selected by the Executive Council of O.W.W.

and that the individual women sampled were chosen by a contact person within each of the locals. It was, therefore, not a random sample. This selection process undoubtedly resulted in a more homogeneous sample of union women than would have been the case in a random sampling process. Additionally, the women interviewed were self-selected. I chose the interviewees from this group of volunteers. It is important to keep in mind that the conclusions and recommendations made here may be applicable only to this particular sample of union women.

This review suggests that there continues to be a need for an organization like O.W.W. The questionnaire responses clearly show that union women are interested in learning more about O.W.W. The personal interviews indicate that union women continue to find themselves out-numbered and silenced in their locals when they attempt to become active. These active union women expressed a need for the type of activity that O.W.W. was formed to provide: support, education and guidance. They need support in order to become and stay active in their locals. The inactive union women, however, see less of a role for O.W.W. in their lives than do their active counterparts.

In my review of the structure and philosophy of the organization and in the process of attempting to explain O.W.W.'s role to the women I contacted, it became apparent that, in practice, the purpose of the organization is unclear. For instance, does O.W.W. intend to provide support for both active and inactive union women? what role does the organization take in "organizing the unorganized"? These unanswered questions, I believe, have resulted in a lack of direction and clarity when

structuring activities of the organization and in providing direction for future planning.

O.W.W. is in a process of change, of soul-searching, of attempting to get in touch with the needs of union women. It is at a new stage in its development. The Ottawa chapter began from a grassroots heritage, responding to the needs of union women. It has now become institutionalized but seeks to avoid becoming unnecessarily bureaucratized and removed from the needs of its potential membership. This organizational review should be viewed as a beginning of the process of gathering information on the needs of union women.

The following recommendations, based upon the responses of the women in this sample and a reading of the literature and organizational documents of O.W.W. as well as conversations with past and present members of O.W.W., are offered as directions which the O.W.W. Executive Council might contemplate as a basis for future planning:

RECOMMENDATION 1

Clarify the goals of the organization.

In reviewing the statement of purpose in the by-laws of the constitution and other written materials, it was not clear what the specific purpose of the organization was. Both unionized and non-unionized women were included. The role the organization takes with non-organized women is unclear. The role the organization would like to play in the lives of inactive union women is also unclear. The emphasis upon workshops indicates a primary focus on active

union women. Is a goal of O.W.W. to promote activism by non-active union women? If the goal is to support active union women only, this should be clearly stated in the constitution in order to provide a focus upon which to base program planning. The means by which O.W.W. proposes to support the various populations of women should also be clarified.

This lack of clarity on the purpose of the organization was apparent when speaking to O.W.W. members, who seemed to disagree on target populations and therefore appropriate strategies for reaching and serving them.

The interviews with the women indicated that active union women were much better able to see a role for O.W.W. in their lives than were inactive women. This resulted from the types of activities that O.W.W. presently offers.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Review the structure of the organization, particularly the present committee structure.

One committee presently dominates the organization: education. In light of the comments made by this sample of union women, it appears that they are very interested in a forum for informal gathering and the sharing of information and experiences. The women's expressed concerns indicate that this need may be as great or greater than that for formal educational workshops.

The newspaper and fundraising committees have been moderately active. Little interest has been shown in the

membership committee. More energy into the membership and fundraising committees could serve the dual purpose of raising the profile of O.W.W. while resulting in more members and funds.

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Other committees might be considered. A review of the literature on organizations of the O.W.W. type reveal a broad array of activities, including acting as conciliator between the woman and her employer or a government bureaucracy (or union bureaucracy?) and offering "direct action" (see. Koziara & Insley, 1982; and Kouri, 1982) which results in unfavorable publicity and pressure put on employers to fulfill their legal obligations. These activities could be provided for both organized and unorganized women. This would involve O.W.W. in activities of a "social action" nature. Is a goal of O.W.W. to take on these political issues?

An important area in which organizations like O.W.W. are often involved is information gathering. Ottawa O.W.W. is just beginning such a process by means of this organizational review. More emphasis upon information gathering could inform the members of the needs of union women and non-union women, and thus provide guidance for planning future activities directed at meeting these needs.

An O.W.W. member has made an excellent suggestion regarding developing mini-chapters within union locals. This kind of "division of labour" could provide union women with the support where and when they need it. It is important to keep in mind from the interviews that

both the active and inactive union women expressed reluctance at becoming further involved. Many of these women felt uncomfortable because they thought they had to be involved whole-heartedly and shouldn't be only a little involved. A message which was clear, although unspoken, was that these active union women are giving a lot of themselves and their time to union work and that they need something back in return. Finding out what that something is in order to keep them active in their unions needs to be a priority for O.W.W. The mini-chapters might be able to provide the women with a forum for meeting and receiving support without feeling the necessity to be involved in the hierarchy of the organization.

The structure of an organization is intimately related to its purpose. At this point in time, the goals of Ottawa O.W.W. seem unclear. A clarification of purpose must be sought before decisions can be made regarding which activities and thus structure and committees Ottawa O.W.W. should take.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Review how O.W.W. is presently reaching union women.

The profile of O.W.W. is very low to both active and inactive union women. Seventy-five per cent (75%) of the women we contacted did not attend O.W.W. activities because they were not aware of them.

One conversation with an O.W.W. member suggested that

reaching women through the union executive was not an effective means of making rank and file women aware.

Personal contact with individual union women through this organizational review has proven to be an effective means of making them aware of O.W.W. A follow-up to this review will solidify the impact. Such a process is time-consuming, however, membership building is an important activity for an organization like O.W.W. Perhaps a renewed interest in the organization's "each one, reach one" campaign might be attempted. As the membership grows, so does the potential for reaching more women. At present, the extent of the membership of O.W.W. is in question. Records of members and number of members don't appear to exist, at least not in any readily accessible form. This should be rectified.

A further concern expressed by some members and apparent to an outsider, is that the membership of the Executive Council has a large representation of women who are paid staff of unions as opposed to rank and file union members. Do differences exist in the needs rank and file women vs. union employees? What are these differences and how do they impact participation in O.W.W.?

RECOMMENDATION 4

Review the comments made by the women sampled regarding their experiences of the barriers and benefits of union involvement and the potential role of O.W.W. in supporting them in

their struggles.

Both active and inactive union women spoke of issues which prevented them from either becoming active in their unions or which hindered them in their activism. An analysis of these issues can begin to provide O.W.W. Executive with an understanding of the needs of union women and how the organization might respond to these needs.

A summary of the barriers mentioned by the women include: negative union image; time; money; ignorance of union activities; a major commitment is required; parenting; husbands' and lovers' attitudes; inability to strike; different concerns of professional vs. support staff; the information required to work as a steward, president, etc.; feared of reduced promotion opportunities; difficulty in getting time to take union courses; and the male-dominated structure.

O.W.W. has been addressing some of the above concerns by offering alternative courses which focus on the needs of women as a minority in their unions. Active union women still feel that these are important activities. How can O.W.W. address some of these other concerns? Aiding the union locals in advertising how they can benefit inactive women is one way, particularly through such channels as the "mini-chapters". It is important to keep in mind that over 25% of our sample of inactive women were interested in becoming more active. While this is undoubtedly an exceptional sample, it does reveal the potential for getting women more involved. For some of the other concerns, O.W.W. might take the role of sensitizing the women's locals to these issues.

Raising women's awareness of what is going on in their own locals is an obvious need. Can this somehow be tied in with offering workshops which are tailored to the specific needs of the women in their workplaces? More information on their needs would be necessary to do this. This review begins this process by identifying which of the activities O.W.W. presently offers appeal to women from the different locals: 90% of O.P.S.E.U. women want public speaking; 67% of O.N.A. and 56% of the C.U.P.E. women sampled want workshops on tech change; 80% of these P.S.A.C. women want a writing workshop. Delving more thoroughly into what these needs really mean could result in more tailored and relevant workshops. For instance, the need for public speaking workshops may indicate an underlying lack of confidence in expressing concerns, or even a lack of confidence that these concerns have validity.

What other activities could O.W.W. offer to support union women? Most of these suggestions came from active union women and include the following: 1) a drop-in centre; 2) self-promotion of O.W.W.; 3) workshops on i) the advantages of union involvement, ii) supporting union women, iii) training in working in a unionized setting, iv) assertiveness training, v) financial planning, vi) stress, vii) information sharing, viii) how to run for election; ix) training and support in handling grievances and employee relations; 4) want a presentation at a C.U.P.E. local meeting; 5) guidance in time-management; 6) assistance in getting other union members interested (mentioned by a least 3 women); 8) literature on the situations of the women in their locals; 9) opportunities to meet other union women; 10) social events.

While not all these activities would be possible even if O.W.W. had a full-time paid staff person, it was interesting to recognize from the interviews that one message came out very clearly, the active union women don't necessarily require in-depth information as much as they need an opportunity to share concerns and approaches to those concerns. The O.W.W. Executive might want to question whether more emphasis should be placed on these kinds of opportunities rather than on more formal workshops when they are reviewing the program delivery process.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Follow-up with the women who were reached through this organizational review.]

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the women we contacted (or 47 women) wanted to know more about O.W.W. Contact with this women would provide an excellent source of potential new members. It is essential to keep in mind, however, that both these active and inactive union women felt that time was a major barrier to their involvement.

Most of these women also requested a copy of this report when it was complete. As it is lengthy, a copy might be made available by the O.W.W. Executive to the union contact person in each local for distribution. A gesture of appreciation to the women who took the time to be interviewed might include a copy of the report.