

**Reconciling Class and Patriarchy:
Female Unionists and Union Governance in Ghana**

Akua O Britwum

Abstract

The workplace constitutes an important arena for the perpetuation of gender inequality, while unions are the dominant mode for the pursuit of workers' rights. Studies examining the complex interrelationship between women's and men's positions in unions and the workplace have concluded that unions are failing to provide their female members the required space for articulating their concerns in a consistent and engaging manner. Evaluations of both actor and institutional efforts for addressing gender democracy deficit in unions generally lament the limited impact while celebrating the increasing number of women who are taking up trade union leadership positions. The consensus however, is that the potential of union gender democracy strategies to transform patriarchal union structures depends on the presence of a critical core of women with sufficient consciousness to take advantage of the space generated. In Ghana, there is little understanding of how the utilisation of union space by women union leaders in the pursuit of their concerns has the potential to transform union gender relations. Using case study findings on the six affiliates of the Ghana Trades Union Congress, this paper will examine the forms of democratic opportunities created for women in union governing structures. The paper, in addition, examines how women's consciousness can form the basis for the development of power and authority for transforming union structures in their interests. While gender democracy strategies

might present limited opportunities for women union members, their realisation that they have a right to use union structures to pursue their concerns is an important site for building autonomy and power that has the potential to challenge the patriarchal governing structures of trade unions.

Introduction

Gender democracy is largely used to describe gendered trade union membership and the adequacy of provisions for women to voice their concerns in their unions (McBride, 2001). Underlying the concept of trade union gender democracy is the notion that trade unions operate as male preserves and fail to offer meaningful membership to their female members. Over the past three decades, unions have come to accept that they have a gender democracy deficit in that women members are few and are absent in union decision making and bargaining and negotiating teams. Several studies have attempted to understand the complex interrelationship between women's and men's positions in trade unions and the workplace. Writing in the early 1990s, Briskin and McDermott (1993), deplored the paucity of attempts to examine how union policies and practices systematically discourage women's participation and kept them away from union leadership. Latter works addressed the failure of institutionalised gender democracy strategies to transform the male character of unions (Britwum, 2007a; Graham, 2001; Deslippe, 2000; Curtin, 1999). The conceptual and administrative flaws accounting for the limited success have also come under scrutiny (McBride, 2001; Graham, 2001; Costello & Stone, 2001; Deslippe, 2000; Britwum, 2000). The general conclusion has been that trade unions as social institutions reproduce social gender inequalities and require structural and organisational transformation if they are to be more responsive to the gender needs of their members (Britwum, 2007a).

Attempts to change union structures and offer women workers meaningful union membership have involved several interventions termed generally as gender democracy strategies. Such strategies

come in several approaches and activities which are discussed in detail later in this paper. However, it has been noted that the transformatory potential of gender democracy strategies is predicated on the capacity of a sufficient core of women trade unionists with the required consciousness to expand the space created (Ledwith, 2009; Briskin & McDermott, 1993). Again, it has been pointed out that gender democracy strategies that make the necessary connection between women workers' needs and trade union policy also stand a better chance of addressing union gender democracy deficit (Briskin & McDermott, 1993). This underscores the need to understand the impact of gender democracy strategies on women trade union leaders and the level of gender consciousness they have acquired over the years.

The main labour movement in Ghana, the Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) has been grappling with gender democracy for the past three decades using a three-pronged strategy coordinated by its Gender Desk. The strategies include the creation of women's self-organising units, quota representation and special seats in union governing structures legitimatised through constitutional amendments. These efforts notwithstanding levels of female participation and representation fail to increase according to the stated objectives of the GTUC. Various studies have noted how the GTUC's strategies have been fixated on reform without organisational and structural transformation to deal with patriarchal union norms and practices (Britwum, 2007a; Graham, 2001; Britwum, 2000). There is little understanding of how women members and leaders articulate their concerns and utilise the space created through gender democracy strategies to generate autonomy and power for influencing union priorities to their benefit. Neither is it clear how gender democracy strategies are shaping women trade unions leaders' consciousness. This paper examines the impact of gender democracy strategies on women trade union leaders' consciousness. The basic assumption is that consciousness delineates women leaders' vision and circumscribes the goals they set for using the opportunities provided to alter the dominant male character of the GTUC.

Information for this paper comes from interviews with female trade union leaders of the GTUC¹ conducted from October 2007 to June 2008, in eight (8) out of the 10 regions of Ghana. The women leaders covered included national female office holders, Regional Women's Committee Executives, and Gender Desk Officers of selected national unions. Interview data was supplemented with information drawn from trade union documents. Gender democracy strategies have taken various forms in different contexts yet they share some basic similarities, the second section outlines these main features and provides the framework for examining female leaders' consciousness. This section is followed by an overview of GTUC's gender democracy strategies and critical perceptions of union performance so far. The main part of the paper explores women union leaders' consciousness through their demands and visions and the opportunities to engage critically, existing gender norms.

Unions Dealing with Gender Democracy

The general trend has been a tendency for women to be marginalised as union members and to be absent in union hierarchy and activities. A fact that has been blamed on women's capacity, gendered division of labour in households, labour market barriers, and union exclusionary practices (Ledwith, 2006; Costello & Stone, 2001; Britwum, 2000; Walton, 1991; Rees, 1990). Unions like all social institutions reproduce and reinforce existing inequalities. They therefore absorb forms of social stratifications into their structures and practices. Union activities are shaped to suit dominant male interests and through a prioritisation of male concerns and fashioning out of union practices alongside masculine ways of doing things (Sayce, Greene, & Ackers, 2006; Hensman, 2002). Class and patriarchy therefore mediate women's trade union experiences,

¹ National unions affiliated to the GTUC as at September 2008 are: Construction and Building Materials Workers' Union, Communication Workers' Union, Ghana Mines Workers' Union, Ghana Private Road Transport Union, General Agricultural Workers' Union, General Transport, Petroleum and Chemical Workers' Union, Health Services Workers' Union, Local Government Workers' Union, Maritime and Dock Workers' Union, National Union of Seamen, Public Services Workers' Union, Public Utilities Workers' Union, Railway Enginemen's Union, Railway Workers' Union, Teachers' and Educational Workers' Union, Timber and Woodworkers' Union and the Union of Industry, Commerce and Finance Workers.

expressed through union selectivity and exclusionary practices with the supporting framework of union solidarity (Ledwith, 2009; Creese, 1999). Unions use the principles of solidarity and mobilisation to defend the collective interests of workers. The solidarity principle tends to obscure other determinants of power and privilege that workers bring into their unions, the process of framing collective interest is inherently selective and exclusionary. Union patriarchal norms are informed by a rigid conceptualisation of equality as sameness as well as the separation of gendered social relations within the home and workplace. The resulting structuring of women's trade union membership constrains how they can use union structures for the pursuit of their gendered interests in ways that are consistent with union principles of solidarity and sameness. This has raised concerns about the democratic credentials of unions and forcing them to address their gender democracy deficit.

Gender democracy strategies offer unions avenues to provide meaningful membership for women to address their peculiar workplace needs. Union gender democracy initiatives usually take two main forms; separate organisation, which focuses on women as a group, and promotional representation that targets women as individuals (Figure 1). Various terms such as women's divisions, self-organisation or separate organs, separate organisation involves the creation of women's autonomous bodies to promote their autonomy and independence from mainstream union structures (Figure 1). It includes events and activities like women-only conferences, educational workshops and seminars (Koch-Baumgarten, 2002; Costello & Stone, 2001; Healy & Kirton, 2000).

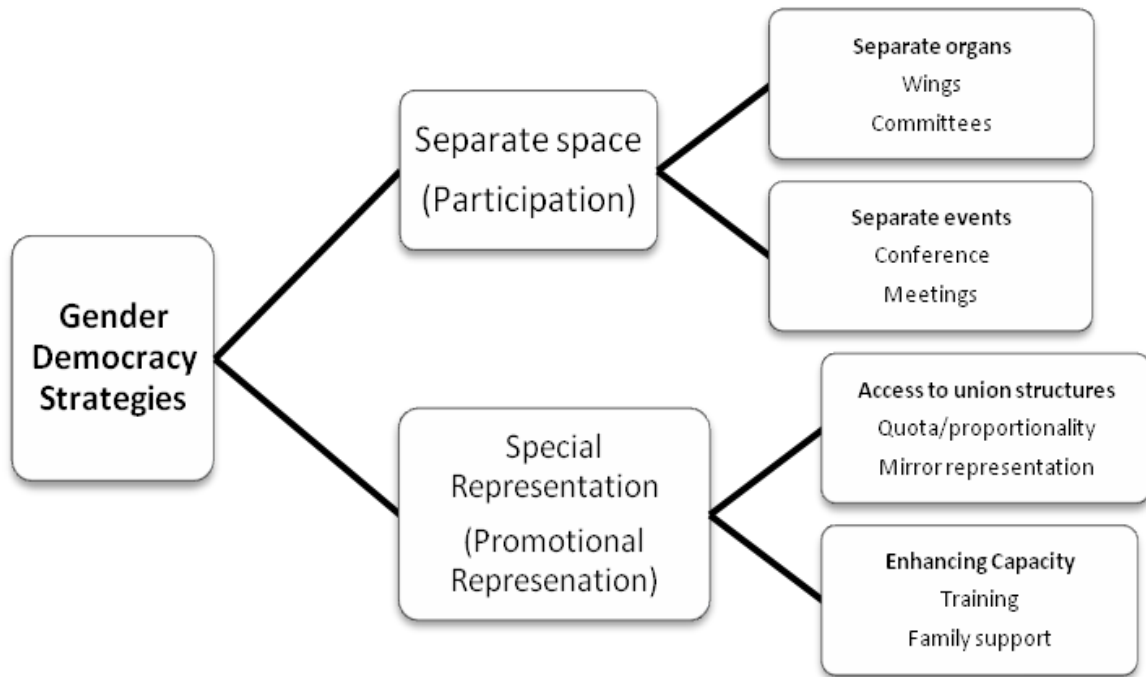


Figure 1: Union Gender Democracy Strategies

Promotional or rights of representation, attempt to integrate individual women into mainstream union structures through reserved seats in visible union positions, official or staff appointments or quota representation (Costello & Stone, 2001; McBride, 2001; Curtin, 1999). Special representation also takes the form of structured opportunities to create greater opportunities for women with family responsibilities to attend union activities by either adjusting the time for holding the events or provision of childcare support (See figure 1). Gender democracy strategies accompany alterations to union rules, processes and structures of political representation (McBride, 2001).

After three decades of implementing gender democracy strategies women have acquired leadership skills, achieved greater legitimacy, visibility and occasion to invent further strategies for promoting women's rights (Britwum, 2007a). Gender democracy strategies however, are still failing to transform gendered inequalities within union participatory and representative democracy, because of limited power accorded prime movers of gender democracy strategies and the problematic institutional isolation of women's organs. Women's organs remain starved of

resources with no obligation on the part of mainstream union structures to take on board concerns generated in the separate spaces (Ledwith, 2009; Koch-Baumgarten, 2002; McBride, 2001; Briskin & McDermott, 1993; Briskin, 2006). Constraining success of gender democracy strategies is also the touchy issue of the qualification of women as best representative of women and the procedure for determining women's real needs which rest on a notion of universal set of issues that can pass as women's concerns (Costello & Stone, 2001; McBride, 2001; Deslippe, 2000; Curtin, 1999). Weak linkages between women leaders and women's organs and trade union members also limit gender democracy strategies to tokenistic practices more for political expediency than for transforming unions.

Solutions offered for addressing shortcomings point to building bridges across communities as well as collaboration with women's groups outside trade unions on key gender agendas; an approach termed rainbow politics by Ledwith (2009). Other suggestions identify the need for a vibrant core of female activists and intellectuals who work to generate consciousness to transform unions (Ledwith, 2009).

Examining Union Gender Democracy

Evaluations of union gender democracy usually focus on the persistence of male dominance and conclude that unions are embedded in a system of power relations that lends support to the status quo by ordering union structures and operations to serve male interests (Costello & Stone, 2001; McBride, 2001; Deslippe, 2000; Creese, 1999; Curtin, 1999). McBride has provided useful tools for understanding the female/male union dynamics through the use of Bachrach and Baratz's typology of power to explain how male power is maintained through the mobilisation bias and rules of the game to organise women's concerns out of union agenda or neutralise women's ability to challenge male norms. This typology has been instrumental in explaining how union male dominance is maintained. Curtin's notion of contingent solidarities pushes the debate from what

she describes as the 'politics of gender' to the 'politics of difference' helps to account for how differences among women can block gender democracy strategies (Curtin, 1999). Curtin draws attention to the various forms of social and class positioning among women as a social category and how such factors mediate the manner in which they access their unions. Social differentiation among women union members also structures forms of intra gender contestations that can emerge from gender democracy strategies. Ledwith, (2009) uses Gramsci's dynamic of hegemonic class relations to suggest that the formation of counter-hegemony and transformation is the means for securing forms of inclusive democracy against the traditional masculinised union hegemony. Her concern is the key ways in which dominant hegemony can be destabilised and a counter gender democratic hegemony established. Ledwith's framework offers opportunities to explore how women are utilising trade union spaces and the conditions under which women trade union members can transform trade union structures and processes. It also offers useful analytical tools for identifying how disadvantaged groups derive sufficient consciousness to destabilize dominant ideologies. Beyond the inter and intra gendered dynamism likely to be produced from gender democracy strategies, it is necessary to have the tools for exploring the internal dynamics among women trade union members and how the space provided by gender democracy strategies is impacting their consciousness.

There is need for a framework that shifts attention from women as passive agents under the manipulation of union patriarchal norms to identify sites of women's agency within the spaces that union gender democracy strategies have offered. This demands an examination of how strategies impact women's consciousness and allow them to frame their demands in ways that challenge the male norms that underpin trade unionism. Behrens, Hamann and Hurd's (2004) dimension of union power resources was altered to incorporate a class analysis. The framework follows the notion of redistribution of power to oppressed groups in representative institutions as proposed by McBride (2001) (Figure 2).

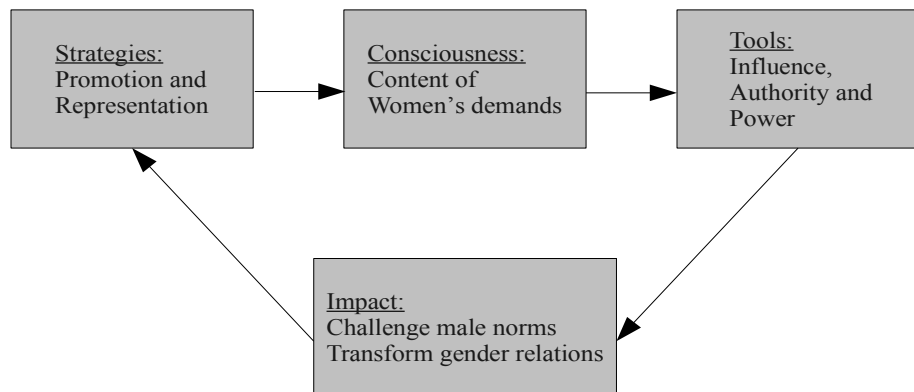


Figure 2: Consciousness and union gender democracy strategies

By expanding space for female participation and representation, trade unions provide women space for the possibly undermining of structures and practices that support male dominance. Women's consciousness provides the framework within which they frame their claims and utilise existing strategies to pursue their claims (see Figure 2 above). The outcome of women's pursuit will be the acquisition of tools such as power, authority and influence, that they can rely on to generate additional demands for utilising the strategies to their benefit. Framing and pursuing claims will lead to further empowering of women only to the extent that they are able to gain authority, influence and power within unions (figure 2 above). Each gain in power and authority enhances consciousness and plays directly to challenge male norms while at the same time refining women's demands on their unions to push for alterations in gender democracy strategies. I turn now to examine how the GTUC gender democracy strategies have proceeded and the specific manner in which women trade unionists intend to utilise the space provided them.

The GTUC and Gender Democracy

GTUC's gender democracy strategies summarised in Figure 3 below are similar to those presented earlier in Figure 1 above. Separate organisation in GTUC takes the form of Women's Committees that provide women members the occasion to participate in union activities and special programmes to build capacity to take up union leadership (Figure 3). Special representation or promotional strategies are in the form of reserved seats and quotas. The second vice chairperson position in the GTUC and the national unions is set aside for women only to contest. Promotional strategies also include a quota of at least 30% female participation in all union education and training programs (Figure 3).

The women's self-organs operate in tandem with the consultative structures in the regions and districts, the Regional and District Councils of Labour (RCLs and DCLs). The regional and district Women's Committees are backed by a constitutional provision to pass their concerns to the DCLs and RCLs for action. Decisions of the National Women's Committee are supposed to feed into the deliberations of the Executive Board.

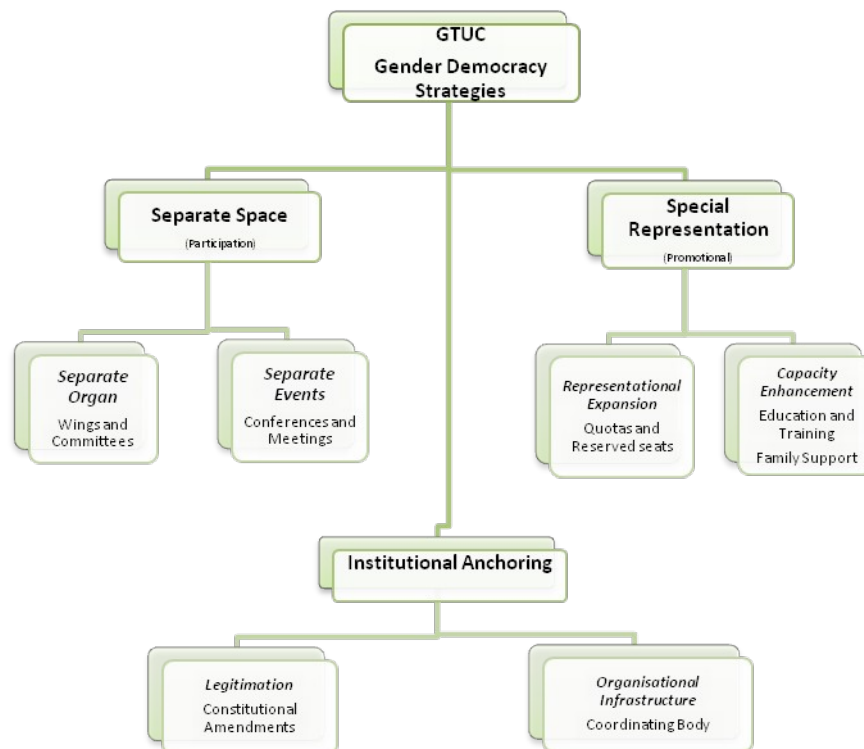


Figure 3: Profile of GTUC's Gender Democracy Strategies

Gender democracy strategies of the GTUC and their affiliates originated in 1969 as top down projects usually at the instigation of an external partner and were intensified in the late 1980s through to the 1990s. Donor support dwindled in the early 2000s amid calls for gender mainstreaming. This shifted emphasis from separate organisational to promotional measures like special seats and expansion of quotas in union activities. At the time of data gathering, few Women’s Committees were active. The problem was blamed largely on union dwindling finances and lack of political will on the part of trade union leadership to ensure some minimal regular allocation of whatever little union finance was available. Funding problems were compounded further by the manner in which union events were conceived, poor communication infrastructure in Ghana and the lack of resources for the regional union offices. Union meetings call for a heavy outlay of funds to pay for venues, as well as travelling and feeding costs of attendees. Poor communication network hikes up costs because written notices, important to secure the release of

members from their workplaces, have to have to be produced at commercial centres at a fee and sometimes hand-delivered. The high costs and low financial allocation for separate organisation made promotional activities the most important gender democracy strategy.

The Women's Committees and Reserved Seats

As noted in the works reviewed earlier, the institutional location of women's separate organs determines the extent to which it can challenge male norms and open up union spaces for greater female representation. Women leaders interviewed underscored this potential. They expressed concerns, however, about the general ambiguity of relations between the National Women's Committees and union policymaking bodies like the Executive Board (EB) of the GTUC and the National Executive Councils of the affiliate national unions. The ambiguous relationship, compounded by union bureaucracy, had the tendency to filter out women's voices and limit the influence of Women's Committees on union policy. Decisions have to emerge from the districts through to the regions and then to the national level. Women trade union leaders expressed dissatisfaction about the powerlessness of the women's organ to influence the allocation of union funds and unions' reluctance to commit funds for its operations. They were equally critical of the limits on regional and district initiatives to raise funds outside the ambit of national union supervision and cited numerous occasions when some such initiatives that had been thwarted.

Promotional representation was one strategy that was operating in full force with the support of the GTUC and the national unions. The process of creating special seats for women in all union decision making structures, from the local to the highest national body, was instrumental in increasing women's representation in mainstream union decision-making. Leadership role in the Women's Committees provided the major conduit for female trade unionists to access mainstream union leadership positions and to enlarge female presence in union decision-making. Female

representation on the EB of the GTUC for example increased from 5.6% in 1996 to 16% in 2003 (Britwum & Martens, 2008; Britwum A. O., 2007a).

Special seats and quota representation have strongly influenced individual women office holders. Women trade union leaders interviewed noted that their engagement with their unions constituted a journey in self-discovery, an awakening of individual ability and heightened self-confidence. Women leaders' access to mainstream union office had broken two myths, male scepticism about female capacity to hold office and female reticence about their ability to succeed as office holders.

Misgivings about the effectiveness of special seats as some women leaders explained was the result of the limited perception that women leaders should only hold special seats. The goal of union gender democracy strategies is to bring 'women up to rub shoulders with men' so they can run for mainstream union offices such as the Secretary-General position.² Reserved seats, they explained, seemed to suggest that women were only suitable for middle and not top union positions. In addition, it created the perception among some male union leaders that women leadership was limited to the reserved seats and not mainstream union positions. Some of the women executives interviewed reported male surprise and displeasure with women who vie for mainstream union positions as taking "their positions."³ The institutional disconnection between women office holders and the women's organs was an additional factor cited as limiting the impact of gender democracy strategies in the GTUC. Women leaders' occasion to relate to the general female membership and the women's organs was weakened by their lack of constitutional access. One female in mainstream trade union leadership position recounted her embarrassment when she was walked out of a National Women's Committee meeting on grounds that she had no constitutional mandate to participate in the meeting.

² Interview with Regional Women Committee executives April, 2008

³ Interview with Regional women committee executives May, 2008

This sense of isolation was especially evident in the first batch of women office holders who had to find their way in uncharted terrain amidst hostility from males and older women who felt uncomfortable with younger women challenging traditional norms. The first woman on the GTUC's Executive board notes that it was 'hectic because there was no woman around, no one to learn from and no one to consult.'⁴ The institutional isolation of women leaders raised questions about their credibility among female members in whose name they have been granted access to union political office. This denied them a constituency support for pursuing claims in the interest of women members. The absence of a support base was slightly ameliorated for younger women leaders by the presence of some older woman union leaders who provide support and motivation.

When the question was raised as to who should first organise women; women trade union members believed that the responsibility rests with the unions especially the GTUC to bring women together and provide resources for maintaining organisation. Women union leaders were convinced that the union structures provided women with space to develop the required awareness and pick up the necessary leadership skills for accessing union positions to engage union structures. Separate events were important for drawing them out and granting women the needed confidence to operate within the union structures. The fact that more women were taking up leadership positions, it was pointed out, was the result of the union educational activities. They harboured the fear that the crop of women offering themselves for union leadership positions might dwindle in the face of a reduction in union education for women.

Despite their misgivings, women union leaders insisted that promotional strategies have a potential to expand women's ability to utilise union spaces for influence, and power to challenge male norms. As their numbers increased, the limitations of institutional isolation should reduce. Clearly, the limited impact has not been at all a failure and women leaders were upbeat about the benefit of

⁴ Interview with former GTUC gender desk officer February 2008

gender democracy strategies. What then has been the impact of participating in union structures on the consciousness of women union leaders? The next section sets out to explore this question.

Consciousness and the Content of Women's Claims

This section examines the impact of gender strategies on women's consciousness and their ability to utilise the space offered, however limited, to alter male power dimensions within the GTUC and the national unions. The level of consciousness was discerned through an examination of women's demands on their unions and the goals they intend to pursue for the realisation of these claims.

The sets of demands that emerged from the responses of women trade union leaders revealed their interpretation of union gender situation as revolving around women's domestic and work experiences as well as their integration in the trade unions. The first set was exacting support for the performance of women's gender roles such as income generation skills, family life education, health and leisure. The second set targets women's work experience by asking for an end to discriminatory access to work benefits and sexual harassment. The third and fourth were demands to improve women's capacity to engage their unions and a request to strengthen the women's committees (Table 1).

Table 1: Women Leaders' Demands on their Trade Unions

Target of Demands	Content of demands
Domestic responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Skills development➤ Income generation➤ Family Life Education and Marital Counselling➤ Women's health and leisure
Workplace situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Working conditions➤ Workplace benefits
Work in the trade unions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Trade union education➤ Leadership commitment➤ Leadership skills
Trade union structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Better functioning women's organ➤ Support/funds for union activities➤ Better Contact with Gender Desk/national officers➤ Broadened space for participation and representation➤ Better operational framework➤ Re-conceptualisation of trade unions➤ Inter union collaboration➤ National union intervention at the local level

Source: Field data, 2008

The demands targeting women's health and domestic responsibilities called for unions to provide women workers avenues for income generation, entrepreneurial skills and capital for developing enterprises to supplement low incomes (Table 1). Women's incomes, they insisted, were lower than what men earned. As one leader put it 'we earn monthly salaries yet we are like beggars hopping from one credit scheme to the other.'⁵ Assisting women to take care of children and other domestic responsibilities, will free them to devote more time to union work.

⁵ Interview with regional women committee Members; February, 2008

Women leaders based their demand for trade union education on the fact that women generally had a lower educational background and virtually no other source of union education. Again, they believed that trade union education for women was empowering and would get women to understand the structure and function of their unions and improve on their sense of union ownership. In all group interviews, respondents emphasised the impact of union education in enhancing their capacity to engage in trade union activities by improving their understanding of union functions and structures and developing their sense of union ownership. As one respondent put it, ‘union education has changed us, we longer see our union as a welfare association’.⁶ The benefit of trade union education for women, they insisted, was that it helped to enhance women’s background, deal with ignorance, create awareness and give women confidence and capacity to speak in public. These they considered were important ingredients for making women trade union leaders. Trade union education, they further explained, was important for broadening the minds of women. The specific content of trade union education that were demanded included an introduction to the Labour Act, women’s labour rights and responsibilities, collective bargaining agreements, trade union constitution, government policies on wages and salaries as well as leadership skills. There was the general agreement that women need special preparation like mentoring and public speaking skills to boost their confidence for union leadership positions. Women leaders’ demanded a better framework for the functioning of the Women’s Committees as a platform for channelling women’s concerns into mainstream trade union structures and others asked for a re-conceptualisation of trade union activities in order to broaden the space for the operations of women in the trade union (Table 1). For example, they insisted that women membership in the activities of the DCLs should be expanded in order to improve the functioning of the Women’s Committees in the districts where the bulk of union members are located. Some women leaders were unhappy about their national union’s approach to mainstreaming gender into union activities and asked for such efforts to be halted. They worried for example about the fact that the appointment of women organisers had stopped in preference for general gender neutral

⁶ Interview with executives of regional women’s committee, April 2008

organisers. Women organisers they explained constituted a platform for grooming women leaders and producing women union activists. They also based their demands on the fact that women's needs especially in trade union structures were special and should not be subsumed under general issues.

Women leaders demanded financial support for the women's committees and women's only events such as meetings, seminars and workshops. Some stated that the GTUC should allocate specific proportion of its dues, like 20%, to cover the work of the Women's Committees. Others called for a debate on union finances by demanding that the GTUC especially account to women on the percentage of union finances spent on gender democracy strategies. They justified their claims on grounds that, women's committees were the creation of the GTUC and it behoves it to provide the funds to sustain it. There were suggestions for GTUC to move away from relying on donor funding and set to building its own internal resources to run the women's committee. Others demanded special space for meetings and administrative work. Meeting space will provide a conduit for reaching women trade union members and promote contact between women leaders and members.

Women leaders recognise the opportunities offered by the women's organ and women's only events beyond capacity building and believed that an efficient functioning women's committee should provide more space for women leaders in the trade union structures. For those who had the occasion to be involved in early trade union gender promotional activities, women's organs were seen as instruments for mobilising women to fight for their rights. They demanded the inclusion of Women Committee leaders on key decision-making bodies such as the National Executive Councils of the national unions and the Executive Board of the GTUC with voting rights, regular branch and district meetings and a reliable database on trade union situation in the regions and districts. There was concern also about the power allocated women leaders at the regional level. Some felt that trade union regional officers wielded too much power in the running of the Regional

and District Women's Committees. They asked for an end to the prerogative of Regional Officers to determine who participates in union activities.

Union bureaucracy was seen as instrumental in undermining the work of regional and district structures of the GTUC and the national unions especially the autonomy of the women's committees. All regional women leaders expressed frustration about the need to seek permission from National Headquarters for every single activity and felt that it could and did indeed stifle initiative. Seeking approval for carrying out an activity can take anything between 3 to 4 months, the women trade union leaders complained. National union leaders were weary of granting too much autonomy to regional and district structures citing some experience of the GTUC in one region which amounted to the hijacking of union structures for personal gain. The need for some level of decentralisation was recognised but the balance between a central action and local autonomy was yet to be determined. Others felt however, that if national leaders and desk officers would visit the regions and districts regularly then some of the issues of local autonomy and central control could be resolved. At the moment, however, they lamented that national leadership visits were tied to elections. 'It is only when they need our votes that they come to us in the regions'. 'Once they get our votes we have to wait till the next election year.'⁷ This accusation of neglect was pointed at gender desk officers as well. Women leaders and members in the regions insisted that they did not know their Gender Desk Officers.

Overall, women holding leadership positions in national union structures were more likely to raise demands bordering on gender relations within their unions than leaders at the local level. The latter were more concerned with working conditions and access to workplace facilities, like equipment, uniforms and occasion to acquire skills and engage in income supplementing activities. Regional and national women leaders were more concerned about the use of gender democracy facilities to

⁷ Interview with union leaders, April, 2009

promote women's concerns in the trade unions and their efficient functioning to promote greater union gender democracy.

Women's demands of their unions reveal a general conception that unions can and should solve all problems that women have, ranging from domestic responsibilities to health and workplace issues. Their demands also underscored their belief that failure to deal with their concerns was due to a lack of political will and a prioritisation of union concerns to the exclusion of women's needs. There appeared to be some link between women's position on union structures and the nature of their demands. As a measure of their level of consciousness, their demands reveal how gender democracy strategies are making a better impact on women as individuals but failing to build group cohesion. What this means for women's sense of autonomy and their acquisition of tools for influencing union structure and operations in their favour is immense. The major tool for acquiring influence, authority and power remains with individual women leaders at the higher levels within union decision-making structures. The challenge is translating this potential into group power and influence. This transition is investigated within the content of their visions and the agenda they intend to pursue from their leadership location within their trade unions.

Trade Union Women Leaders' Agenda

In terms of vision, women union leaders were concerned about improving women's access to trade union education as an avenue for capacity and confidence building to facilitate their entry into trade union (see Table 2). Women trade union leaders stated among their vision and goals, the desire to ensure that trade union education was available for all women members. They considered access to trade union education as an empowering tool that gives women an occasion to pursue their rights and develop their sense of union ownership (Table 2). Other goals outlined included getting women's concerns mainstreamed into trade union activities and structures. The desire to

get the Women’s Committees to serve women’s interests was expressed variously as: ‘serve as women’s mouthpiece’ and ‘use it to get women’s potential known’ (Table 2).

The efficient functioning of the women’s organ featured as an important goal of women leaders interviewed. Their desire was to use the Women’s Committees to serve as a networking platform for sharing ideas, experiences and building unity (Table 3). The Women’s Committees at the various levels, it was envisaged could serve as the tool to empower women and increase their participation in the trade unions. Others wanted to use their Women’s Committees to generate information to feed trade union decisions and action on women.

Table 2: Improving Women’s Operation in the Trade Unions

Vision Content	Specific Issues
Education and capacity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Higher education for women b. Upgrade women’s professional competence c. Broaden women’s mind d. Trade union education e. Get women to break out of traditional barriers f. Capacity building for newly employed or elected women g. Civic education to participate in elections h. Leadership/public speaking skills, i. International exposure

Vision Content	Specific Issues
Representation and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Mainstream women's concerns into union structures b. Enlarge women's voice in the trade union c. Stop men from looking down on them d. Get women's potential known e. Improve women's sense of union ownership f. Get women to hold high union office g. Promote women's active participation in trade union h. Improve levels and nature of women's representation i. Provide information for national unions/advice leadership on women's special needs

Source: Field data: 2008

Some women leaders aimed to source funding to ensure that their Women's Committees became functional through writing proposals to the international donor organisations and their District Assemblies. Others were considering setting up income generating ventures and to utilise the proceeds to support the work of their women's committees (Table 3).

Table 3: Improve the functioning of Women's Committees

Vision Content	Specific Issues
Women's Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Networking platform for sharing ideas, experiences, and building unity b. Space to organise and empower women c. Coordinate women's committees d. Link women to national women's committees e. Get women to determine their union agenda f. Improve contact with district organs g. Raise funds to support programmes for women

Source: Field data: 2008

Women leaders were clear about the empowering potential of the Women's Committees and the vision of most was to secure the proper functioning of these organs. The effectiveness of the women's organs therefore could provide the basis for generating group solidarity. In this way individual consciousness could be mobilised into promoting group cohesion and women leaders insist that trade union education is the tool.

The women's committees of the GTUC and its national unions therefore hold the potential to enhance union gender democracy and therefore provide women union members the occasion to use their unions to address their workplace concerns. The ability to realise this potential depends on dismantling union patriarchal structures. Events so far reveal that women trade union leaders stand in a better stead to advance this cause once they transform their individual consciousness into group conscious to mobilise for change. In generating the needed space to challenge union structures women leaders call for changes in union governance that will offer greater representation and promotion of participation for all union members irrespective of their gender. It is in this way that gender democracy strategies can be made to promote more responsive union governance.

Conclusion

Though the GTUC and its affiliates had failed to provide women with space for the articulation of their concerns in a consistent and engaging manner, their promotional strategies have been instrumental in increasing women's awareness. Women's understanding of this shortcoming, proved an important indication of some level of consciousness, and could serve as the basis for the development of power and authority for mobilising to secure redress. The promotional measures have impacted trade union women leaders in very significant ways. Promotional strategies therefore, offer a site for women to mobilise to push for the development of transformational gender democracy strategies. Women's tools for pursuing a changed agenda in their unions were

their increasing numbers in leadership positions, which they are using to challenge the fixed notion that mainstream union positions are a male preserve. Women's position in union leadership serves to enhance consciousness, deepening their sense of union ownership. Depending on their location in union structures, they can gain influence, once they succeed in breaking negative perceptions about female abilities. The realisation that the union is about them and that they have a right to demand that their needs are met is an important site for building power. The challenge is how to connect these sites into mobilisation points that should generate some higher levels of power within the unions. This should provide the ingredient that should propel women from holding back to asserting their right of ownership of the union. For the moment however the informal mentoring at play in the lives of women trade union leaders provides an important site for developing bonds and generating sites for building solidarity and pushing for a union gender transformational agenda.

References

- Behrens, M.; Hamann, K., and Hurd, R. (2004). "Conceptualizing Labour Union Revitalization." In C. Frege and J. Kelly(eds). *Varieties of Unionism: Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Globalising Economy* (pp. 11-29). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Briskin, L. (2006). "Victimisation and Agency: the Social Construction of Union Women's Leadership." *Industrial Relations Journal* , 37 (4), 350-378.
- Briskin, L. and McDermott, P. (1993). *Women Challenging Union: Democracy, and Militancy* . London: University of Toronto Press.
- Britwum, A. O. (2000). "Female Representation and Participation in Trade Unions." In P. Agbesinyale(ed)., *Democratic Workers' Participation for Economic and Social Development: The Case of Ghana* (pp. 102-122). Accra: TUC-UCC/APADEP.
- Britwum, A. O. (2000). "Female Representation and Participation in Trade Unions." In P. Agbesinyale(ed). *Democratic Workers' Participation for Economic and Social Development: the Case of Ghana* (pp. 102-122). Accra: TUC Ghana/APADEP.
- Britwum, A. O. (2007a). "The Gender of Trade Union Democratic Participation." In G. Kester(ed). *Trade Unions and Workplace Democracy in Africa* (pp. 227-251). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Britwum, A. O. (2009). "The Gendered Dynamics of Production Relations in Ghanaian Coastal Fishing." *Feminist Africa* , 12 (2), 69-85.
- Britwum, A. O. (2007). *The Ghana Trades Union Congress: Sixty Years of Promoting Workers' Rights*. Accra: Ghana Trades Union Congress.
- Britwum, A. O. and Martens, P. (2008). "The Challenge of Globalization, Labor Market Restructuring and Union Democracy in Ghana." *African Studies Quarterly* , 10 (2-3).
- Brueggemann, J. and Brown, C. (2000). "Strategic Labour Organising in the Era of Industrial Transformation: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Unionisation in Steel and Coal, 1870 and 1916." *Review of Radical Political Economics* , 32 (4), 541-576.
- Cook, A. H.; Lorwin, V. R. and Daniels, A. K. (1992). *The Most Difficult Revolution: Women and Trade Unions*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Cooke, F. L. (2006). "Informal Employment and Gender Implications in China: the Nature of Work and Employment Relations in the Community Service Sector." *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* , 17 (8), 1471-1487.
- Costello, C. and Stone, A. J. (2001). *The American Woman 2001-2002: Getting to the Top*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Creese, G. (1999). *Contracting Masculinity: Gender Class, Race in a White Collar Union 1944-1994*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Curtin, J. (1999). *Women and Trade Unions: A Comparative Perspective*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Deslippe, D. A. (2000). *"Rights not Roses" Unions and the Rights of Working Class Feminism, 1945-80*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Graham, Y. (2001). "Changing the United Brotherhood: An Analysis of the Gender Politics of the Ghana Trades Union Congress." In D. Tsikata(ed). *Gender Training in Ghana: Politics, Issues and Tools* (pp. 293-320). Accra: Woeli Publishing Services.
- Healy, G. and Kirton, G. (2000). "Women, Power and Trade Union Government in the UK." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* , 38 (3), 343-360.
- Heery, E. and Fosh, P. (1990). "Whose Union: Power and Bureaucracy in the Labour Movement." In P. Fosh and E. Heery(eds). *Trade Unions and their Members: Studies in Union Democracy and Organisation* (pp. 1-28). London: British Sociological Association.
- Hensman, R. (2002). "Organisational Strategies of Women Workers in India." In F. Clogan and S. Ledwith, *Gender*(eds). *Diversity and Trade Unions: International Perspectives* (pp. 95-112). London: Routledge.
- Koch-Baumgarten, S. (2002). "Changing Gender Relations in German Trade Unions: From 'Workers' Patriarchy' to Gender Democracy?" In F. Cogan and S. Ledwith (ed). *Gender, Diversity adn Trade Unions: Intenational Perspectives* (pp. 132-153). London: Routledge.
- Ledwith, S. (2009). "Encounters Between Gender and Labour Policies: Towards an Inclusive Trade Union Democracy." In M. F. Ozbilgin (ed). *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at Work: Theory and Scholarship* (pp. 272-287). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Ledwith, S. (2009). "Encounters Between Gender and Labour Policies: Towards an Inclusive Trade Union Democracy." In M. F. Ozbilgin (ed) *Equality, Diversity adn Inclusion at Work: Theory and Scholarship* (pp. 272-287). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Ledwith, S. (2006). "Feminist Praxis in a Trade Union Gender Project." *Industrial Relations Journal* , 37 (4), 379-399.
- Ledwith, S. (2006). "The Future is Female? Gender, Diversity and Global Labour Solidarity". In C. Phelan (ed). *The Future of Organised Labour: Global Perspectives*. (pp. 91-134). Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Ledwith, S. (2009). "Vive la Différence? Women and Trade Unions in Britain." *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* , XV (2), 87-112.
- Ledwith, S. ; Colgan, F. ; Joyce, P. and Hayes, M. (1990). The Making of Women Trade Union Leaders. *Industrial Relations Journal* , 21 (2), 112-125.
- McBride, A. (2001). *Gender Democracy in Trade Unions*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Rees, T. (1990). "Gender, Power and Trade Union Democracy." In P. Fosh and E. Heery (eds) *Trade Unions and their Members: Studies in Union Democracy and Organisation* (pp. 177-205). London: Macmillan (British Sociological Association).
- Sayce, S., Greene, A-M. andAckers, P. (2006). "Small is Beautiful? The Development of Women's Activism in a Small Union." *Industrial Relations Journal* , 37 (4), 400-414.
- Walton, J. (1991). "Women Shop Stewards in a County Branch of NALCO." In N. Redclift, and S. M. T (eds) *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Ideology* (pp. 149-171). London: Routledge.