

GENDER EQUALITY IN TRADE UNIONS

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to understand the gender equality in two trade unions namely Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) of doctors and the Public Services United Nurses' Union (PSUNU) of nurses in the state health sector in Sri Lanka. There is large number of women in the membership of these trade unions but it has been observed that women are passive participants of the trade union activity and they do not hold the leadership and are not in the positions of decision making of trade unions. However as women are increasingly subject to greater levels of discrimination and exploitation at work they are expected to be in the forefronts of the trade union activities. The research problem of this study was why women in trade unions are less active than their male counterparts. The objectives of this research were; (1) To understand the current position of women in terms of membership and leadership in trade unions, (2) To understand the reasons why women do not take an active role in trade union activities, (3) To understand the opportunities and challenges women face in trade unions and to identify the strategies taken by unions to promote gender equality.

The main data collection technique that was used in the study was in-depth interviews. At leadership level six respondents from each union were interviewed. At membership level 14 respondents from GMOA and 15 respondents from PSUNU were interviewed to obtain views. In addition to the above interviews key informants such as ministry officials, and medical academics were interviewed. Findings clearly revealed that in both unions women members have hardly taken any leadership role and the gender equality is far from being achieved. A number of reasons was identified for the lack of women in decision making role. They were; (1) Women taking a dual role of productive and reproductive and therefore lack of time for union

activities; (2) Influence of gender prevalent ideology on both men and women that women should keep away from trade union activities, political activism and concentrate more on domestic activities; (3) Barriers for women members to participate at trade union meetings and activities. The study also revealed that the present and the past leadership of trade unions have not taken any measures to change the prevalent gender ideology within the trade union. Union members and leaders in both sexes are either gender blind or had neutral attitude towards gender equality.