

## **Organizing Women in the Spaces between Home, Work and Community**

### **La syndicalisation des femmes à la frontière de plusieurs espaces : le foyer, le travail et la communauté**

### **La organización de mujeres en los espacios entre el hogar, el trabajo y la comunidad**

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#### Article abstract

Since women began mobilizing more than 40 years ago to transform the labour movement, unions have made significant changes to increase women's participation, leadership and interest representation. Yet, there are limitations to this progress. Unionized women are concentrated in the public sector amongst full-time employees. Moreover, women's interests have tended to be added onto existing union agenda; women are therefore encouraged to adjust to existing union structures and practices rather than unions undertaking transformational organizational change. Unions tend to socially construct the collective interests and identities of women workers in gender-neutral ways that end up limiting union capacities to make bigger organizing breakthroughs amongst women.

The article develops an argument that women's relationship to work is distinct from men's. Women are more likely to experience a blurring of the boundaries between work, home and community, which leads many women workers to be less responsive to union appeals that focus strictly on the job and workplace. These ideas are explored using a case study of a province-wide organizing drive amongst child care providers by the B.C. Government Employees Union (BCGEU).

The BCGEU used methods of community unionism to build a sense of collective identity and capacity for collective action amongst a diverse group of child care providers, including those who work in child care centres, in-home providers and migrant domestic workers. The union built its campaign around shared relationships of caring and love, and by rejecting the devaluation of child care as unskilled, women's work. The article concludes with an evaluation of whether this approach to organizing women opens new possibilities for reaching out to non-union women.

# Organizing Women in the Spaces between Home, Work and Community

Charlotte A.B. Yates

**When unions recruit women they tend to recruit them in gender blind ways, appealing to them as workers around job and workplace focused interests. This approach to collective representation ignores women's gender-specific experiences and understanding of their relationship to work as a blurring of the boundaries between work, home and community. By shifting their organizing strategy from the workplace and work to the community and relations of caring, this blurring of the boundaries opens up new strategies in which unions might organize and represent women workers. Using a case study of the organization of child care providers by a British Columbia union, the article explores how organizing in the interstices of work, home and community around relations of caring allowed this union to build a coalition of workers with divergent interests and employment relations.**

**KEYWORDS: union organizing, women, emotional labour, child care providers**

Since women began mobilizing more than forty years ago to transform the labour movement, unions have made significant changes to increase women's participation, leadership and interest representation. Union efforts have focused on the twin goals of improving women's equality at work and removing barriers to women's labour force participation arising from their greater responsibilities in social reproduction. Pay equity, greater job security, pensions, paid maternity leave (White, 1990), and later, provisions for workers caring for dependents (HRSDC, 2007; Bentham, 2007) have been fought for and won by unions over the last forty years. Alongside these changes, unions underwent a cultural transformation wherein overt sexism disappeared from formal union proceedings and practices. Unions began to offer child care during union conventions and conferences in recognition of the impact of child care on reducing women's opportunities for participation. Rayside concludes that: "...Canadian labour has shifted as much or more towards recognition of diversity in the labour force and within its own ranks than its counterparts elsewhere" (Rayside, 2007: 242).

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However, there are limitations to this progress. Unions overwhelmingly represent women in the public sector, most of whom are employed full time. Union representation amongst low paid, part-time or casual workers in the private service sector is below 15%. Bargaining breakthroughs in areas of family leave, flex hours and benefits for women are heavily concentrated in the public sector (HRSDC, 2007). Yet, seventy-five percent of women work in the private sector, a small proportion of whom belong to unions (Me and Giovannelli, 2003). Women have also been disproportionately affected by labour market restructuring that is characterized by increased casualization, and an attendant growth in part-time, short-term and self-employment. Women find themselves pushed into employment with low pay, few, if any, benefits and casual forms of employment with little of the flexibility lauded by some labour market analysts (Hughes, 2003). If unions are going to make significant breakthroughs in organizing women workers, it must address these labour market tendencies as well as women's particular interests.

To date, women's interests have tended to be added to existing union agenda. Opportunities and accommodations are most often aimed at helping women to adjust to the existing union structures and practices rather than undertaking transformational organizational change. Rayside's analysis of levels of union change is useful here. He argues that Canadian unions are quick to respond to "transparent inequality", such as pay differences for the same work, but "are usually least responsive when equity claims call for a questioning of core union practices..." (Rayside, 2007: 242). Results from my multi-year research project on union recruitment amongst women workers suggest that union resistance to the transformation of core union practices and structures is especially evident when unions organize female dominated workplaces or sectors.

This article explores how gender-blind approaches to organizing limit union capacities to make bigger breakthroughs in organizing women. Although labour market and economic structures have a strong influence on how unions approach the organization of new groups of workers, as important is how unions socially construct collective interests and identities out of these material conditions. Unions socially construct the collective interests and identities of women workers in gender-neutral ways that need to change if unions are going to extend their representation of women beyond existing parameters. The starting premise for this argument rests on the blurring of boundaries between work, home and community that results from women's greater responsibility for, and in many instances desire to be involved in family and community. This blurring of boundaries, and the spaces in between, arguably offer unions new and distinct opportunities for appealing to women workers and forging collective identities that make sense of women's lives. The paper explores these ideas using the

concepts of emotional labour and community unionism. This is followed by a discussion of an illustrative case study of union organizing amongst child care providers by the British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU). The BCGEU organized a highly diverse group of women child care providers by drawing on their collective experience of love and caring, rather than on the basis of work or employment issues. This shifted their organizational focus from the workplace to the interstices of home, work and community.

This is an exploratory piece intended to provoke discussion. It is the start of a conversation, not the final word. To date, unions have attempted a wide range of alternative approaches to membership recruitment, few of which have resulted in significant breakthroughs. Results from a series of interviews revealed discontinuities between how women understood their work and life and how unions organized and represented women. In the following, I use these paradoxes as a basis to articulate new forms of collective representation that grapple with the overlapping spheres of work, home and community.

## Methodology

This article is based on an ongoing comparative study of union organizing amongst women in four countries, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and South Africa. The core of data collected comes from a series of interviews with union officials, as well as recently joined union members employed mostly in female-dominated sectors. The study uses a comparative case study approach wherein each case study is a recently organized workplace/sector or the target of current organizing. My research team sought interviews with active and non-active members, local union activists and union officials, including the heads of organizing and persons responsible for equity and human rights. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours and were recorded with the permission of respondents. The 140 interviews completed to date were carried out at places of the respondent's choice. Results from the interviews within each case study have been triangulated to get a picture of how women were collectively represented in the organizing drive. We also compared answers from similar interviewees (such as amongst local activists or equity officers) across unions, sectors and organizing drives.

In all but a couple of cases, each case study was matched with at least one comparable case study in another country. For example, once we had completed a case study in Canada of union recruitment amongst child care workers, we identified and completed case studies of union organizing amongst child care workers in Great Britain and Australia. This allowed us to draw preliminary conclusions about the impact of sector, union strategy and national context on how unions organize and collectively represent particular groups of women. Working on this project was one post-doctoral fellow who was a woman of

colour and a research assistant, who was a young, white male. This diversity in our research team was important given the large number of highly vulnerable, diverse groups of workers we interviewed, including hotel staff, child care workers, office cleaners and nursing home workers. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) has cautioned us, in asking questions of subjects who are historically muted, we have to mark our positionality as investigating subjects. Our research team recognizes the locality of our research and are reflexive of our positionality in the context of this research. Our positions as feminist social scientists who are male and female and visible minority<sup>1</sup>/white played a key role in our relationship with the respondents, the research process and the findings of our research.

While I only report on one case study to develop my ideas, the research questions posed in this article arose out of an effort to explain some common themes, and apparent paradoxes that kept surfacing as we analyzed multiple case studies across different countries. Although unions recognize that they have shifted their attention to different areas of the labour market where women predominate, the result of which was growing female membership, the vast majority of union officials offered a genderless view of work, workers and union organizing. This way of framing union collective representation was at odds with how most women member-interviewees described their work in terms of relationships with other spheres of their lives, namely family and community. The distinctive experiences of women as workers seemed almost to disappear in union organizing strategies. In this context, it was therefore noteworthy that the BCGEU advanced a unique approach to organizing amongst child care workers around love and community.

### **Gendered Workers, Genderless Representation**

There is a complex tension in how women workers are recognized in the spheres of industrial relations, and union organizing. Many industrial relations scholars have tended to focus on women's structural place in the labour market, and reject any notion that women's gendered experience at work and in society might have more profound influences on women joining unions. In seeking an explanation for widespread increases in female union membership around the world, Visser (2006: 47) argues that "It probably reflects the greater attachment of women to the market for paid labor, as shown in rising participation rates and longer tenure; the higher female share in public services [in Europe]; and the adoption of equal opportunity policies." Waddington and Whitson conclude that any differences between women and men in why they join unions are "a function of employment location rather than sex (as quoted in Wajcman, 2000: 188)." In these analyses, it is the labour market and not women that are important to understand.<sup>2</sup>

Yet how unions organize and collectively represent workers does not emerge reflexively out of political-economic or labour market structures. Collective representation and identity formation are socially constructed in ways that engage unions in a constant process of expressing worker interests and experiences and redefining them in ways that bridge the gaps between different groups of workers (Offe and Wiesenhal, 1985), and also between workers who may not readily see themselves as union members and union organizations.

Unions have for some time focused their collective representation strategies on standard forms of work and employment interests. Yet unions now face a number of challenges to these practices, two of which concern us here. First, employment has been transformed so that work is increasingly contingent and workers are expected to have multiple employers in their lifetime (Stanford and Vosko, 2004). Yet unions continue to be associated with standard – and increasingly outdated – forms and interests of employment. Secondly, as has already been noted, who is working has also changed. Women are steadily increasing their labour force participation, alongside growth in the ethnic, racial and status diversity of the workforce, a subject not dealt with in this paper. Unions have tended to add women onto existing understandings of work and employment. This “add women and stir” approach encourages unions to add women’s interests onto union agenda and elect occasional women leaders, all of which have been positive for women’s representation inside unions. But this approach has also allowed unions to avoid a more fundamental reconsideration of the meaning of work and union structures and practices of collective representation. Today pressures of declining union membership and influence begin forcing unions to consider new forms of recruitment and collective representation. Some unions are transforming radically their approach to organizing women in the knowledge that they have hitherto failed to make breakthroughs amongst several groups of workers and economic sectors.

A first step in grappling with new forms of representation is to expose how dominant understandings of work and workers’ relationships to employers and labour markets are framed in universalistic, non-gendered terms (Bakker, 1996; Porter, 2003; Walby, 2009). When organizing, unions have tended to accept socially constructed understandings of work that universalize male interests and experiences; these tend to be articulated around a singular notion of work as a job and identities and interests articulated around relationships with the employer. Union collective representation and identities emphasize the commonality of being a worker. Gender and racialized identities and experiences are added as interests on top of gender neutral conceptions of work, and workers. The ‘us’ in union collective identities that aims to unite workers, often ends up denying gender and race in the constitution of the collective.

The masculinity of union collective identities and forms of representation are further obscured by the tendency to universalize male characteristics as inherent to industrial relations and union-employer bargaining, and as the defining features of militancy and class consciousness (Briskin and McDermott, 1993). Thus, whereas the masculine is made universal, the feminine continues to be treated as outside the norm, with women's interests often allocated secondary status (Walby, 2009).

Industrial relations institutions and law in Canada reinforce these structures and approaches to union representation. Unions are required to focus primarily on collective bargaining. With the exception of the construction trades and cultural industries, certification of unions is done one workplace at a time, and often distinguishes between different groups of employees on the basis of type of work – office, skilled trades, production – and types of employment – casual, full time, part-time – relationships. Provincial labour laws further limit union capacities to diverge from work and workplace based collective representation, impeding moves towards broader based bargaining, whether on the basis of the sector or job (Fudge, 1991).

Industrial relations institutions have been built on assumptions of the distinct boundaries between the public sphere of work and the labour market from the private sphere of the home and personal relationships. Employers institute human resource practices aimed at guarding the boundaries between work and home. Denying workers the right to phone home to check on a sick child, preventing pictures of family in office spaces and refusing time-off for workers to participate in their children's lives are all commonplace in many workplaces, including unionized ones, and speak to the determination of employers to keep home out of the workplace (Leach and Yates, 2012). Yet, in reality, the boundaries between work, home and community are becoming increasingly porous. Understanding this blurring of boundaries and its impact on women's employment relations, the kinds of work that they do and how they define their interests provides an entry point for identifying women's particular understanding and experiences of work. It also provides an entry point for exploring how unions might transform their practices of collective representation to better represent women.

The blurring of boundaries is driven by structural and social imperatives. Structural changes to the labour market have deepened women's ambiguous and conflicted relationship between home and work. As good employment opportunities dry up, employment growth is taking place in the service and non-profit sectors. Growing reliance on part-time, casual and short term contract work adds to the tensions in women's lives, as this work pays less and is often characterized by unpredictable hours, therefore requiring more juggling

between work and home. Work has been reorganized in ways that facilitate subcontracting and the use of technology to geographically disperse work, often blurring further the lines between work and home as more paid jobs can be done at home. In some instances, employers advertise the benefits of caring for children while earning a pay cheque, playing into the very dilemmas that mark women's experiences of work as so distinct from that of men. Set against a backdrop of lack of quality, affordable child care and the retreat of the state from income supports in Canada, the imperatives for women to work and figure out their own solution to child and elder care are heightened.

At the heart of this question of the blurring of boundaries lies women's role in social reproduction. The choices women have made about paid work – whether as a widow to establish a boarding house in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or to work part-time in the 1990s – have been moulded through the centuries by social norms of womanhood and their caring responsibilities. Notwithstanding the growing proportion of women active in the labour market today, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of the caring responsibilities in households (Miranda, 2011). This results in the double day and few choices for women about when, how and under what conditions they can work (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1993). But women's caring work is also bound up with love and emotion that ties women to their home and family, as well as often to the persons they work with, in ways that make women's experience of and relationship to work messier and more complicated.

Recent literature on women and caring has begun to explore how love and emotion impact work and relationships with employers and unions. Hochschild's (1983, 1989) path-breaking work on emotional labour points to ways in which new types of paid work and employer demands on women have commodified and commercialized caring labour, with expectations that women will manage their emotions to maximize customer satisfaction and service delivery. Pocock (2006) argues that although nurses and elementary teachers are trained and paid to care, many also develop deep caring relationships with patients or students and their families. Parreñas (2001) and Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002) have looked at how migrant domestic workers develop loving relationships with the children or elders in their care, as a way of coping with the absence of their own family. Motivation at work by love and emotional commitment and the way in which this complicates women's relationship to a workplace, employer and union is illustrated in a recent example of nursing home aides in Windsor, Ontario who continued to look after their elder patients in spite of not having been paid for nine weeks. These unionized workers cared about these elders and wondered who else would care for them if they walked off the job as part of a labour dispute (CBC, 2011).



Although unions (and governments through social policy) have addressed some issues related to the impact of social reproduction on paid work, these efforts have been restricted mostly to full time workers in a limited number of sectors. Only amongst a small number of unions has this recognition occasioned a broader debate about how unions organize and collectively represent workers. In the next section of the paper, I argue that by focusing on the interstices of the three spheres of work, home and community, some unions are opening up new ways of organizing that reflect a gendered understanding of work and collective representation and that shift their focus from the workplace and a job to broader understandings of work and society that wrestle with relations of love and emotional commitment.

### **The “L” Word: Love in Organizing Child Care**

Some unions have adopted renewal strategies that challenge more fundamentally the relationship between paid work, family and the community. Community unionism covers a broad range of organizing practices in support of workers' rights. In its diverse forms, community unionism has tended to involve unions, or employment centred community organizations (such as Living Wage coalitions or Worker Centres) in building alliances between unions, vulnerable workers and community groups in efforts to improve employment conditions on a broader community scale (Holgate, 2009, 2005; Cranford and Ladd, 2003; Tattersall, 2010; Tufts, 1998; Wills, 2001). Community unionism has tended to shift the locus of worker rights' campaigns from the workplace and a job, to local geographic and identity-based communities (Fine, 2006). This strategic change represents a shift in the form of worker representation away from specific workplace interests to collective interests articulated around a broader set of issues and identities. Unions engaged in community unionism tend to shift, at least on a short-term basis, their strategies of representation away from union certification and collective bargaining to mobilizing community power through coalitions and broad based social pressure on political and civic leaders. For many, community unionism has been held out as an alternative to traditional union activism and representation that has the capacity to build alliances between unions and community groups, and represent and improve the employment rights of vulnerable workers employed in non-standard, precarious forms of work (Cranford and Ladd, 2003; Holgate, 2005). It tends then to blur the lines between work, workplace and community, thus making it a potentially valuable form of union organizing amongst women workers.

The remainder of this discussion is based on a blending of secondary and primary material with information gleaned from 15 interviews with workers and union activists and officials involved in BCGEU's campaign to organize child

care workers. Unions have advocated in support of accessible, affordable and quality child care since their female membership increased significantly. The BCGEU joined with other unions and child care advocacy groups across Canada in advocating and lobbying the federal government for a national child care program (interview with Head of Organizing, BCGEU June 9, 2009). As part of their 2005 election campaign, the Liberal Party promised a national child care strategy. Their defeat by the Conservatives put an end to this hope. Instead, the Conservative government introduced its own child care policy that consisted of tax credits to encourage businesses or non-profits to create child care spaces and a \$1200 subsidy to be given to parents so they could 'choose' how to care for their children, an approach that the Conservatives defended as allowing parents (writ mothers) to stay home (Greenway, 2006). In B.C., the provincial government followed suit with cuts to their child care budget. Unions across British Columbia, including the BCGEU, regrouped in efforts to resume their fight in support of universal child care. In preparation for the 2009 provincial election, the New Democratic Party announced that if elected, it would support a comprehensive provincial child care program that included financial support for all forms of child care, including in-home providers.

It was in this context that the BCGEU decided in 2008 to prioritize the organization of child care workers as part of the union's broader political campaign to secure universal accessible child care. This organizing campaign had the potential to bring into the union thousands of new members, notwithstanding the difficulty of recruiting members amongst such a diverse group with seemingly divergent interests. According to the lead union organizer for some of the child care centres, those employed in child care centres worked in conditions similar to those of other public sector workers represented by the BCGEU. They saw themselves as professionals. In contrast, in-home child care providers were considered by law, but also as part of their identity, as small businesses (Saggers, Woodhead and Banham, 1994). Typically, small businesses have seen their interests as fundamentally opposed to unions. Migrant domestic workers had even more divergent conditions and interests, as they live and work at their employer's residence without the full rights of citizenship. The invisibility and isolation of migrant workers, added to by their fear of deportation, made this group a particular challenge for the union to identify and recruit. The challenges of articulating common interests and identities amongst this diverse group were heightened by conflicts amongst these workers. In particular, our interviews with organizers, as well as with active and non-active members, pointed to a tension between workers in child care centres, some of whom were organized by the BCGEU around 2005, and in-home child care workers. The former looked down on in-home family child care providers, seeing them as less trained and more akin to glorified babysitters – an identity that studies have shown is rejected by in-

home child care providers themselves (see Tuominen, 2003). The importance of education to their identity is revealed in the following excerpt from an interview with the lead organizer of a campaign who was herself an early childhood worker in a child care centre:

...people are still not educated about early childhood educators. Today people will skip that word and say, for example 'What do you do?' 'Oh, I'm an early childhood educator.' 'What is that?' And I'll give my background that I work with 3 to 5 children. And 'Oh, you're a babysitter.' 'No, I'm not a babysitter.' I believe the public needs to be more educated on we have a lot of education.

Labour law was a further impediment to the union's goals of uniting all child care providers under the BCGEU. While child care centres were covered by the labour code, and therefore eligible to belong to a union, small business owners were not. Migrant domestic workers rights vary across provinces, and where they are eligible to unionize they cannot do so as single-employee bargaining units. Thus, the union had to solve twin problems. It had to overcome internal divisions and articulate common interests and identities amongst this group, convincing them that the BCGEU was the best means by which to address their concerns. Second, the union had to devise institutional means other than certified bargaining units by which to pursue the goals of child care providers not eligible for unionization.

The BCGEU adopted a community-based organizing strategy that organized child care providers through their community of residence. BCGEU union organizers travelled across the province holding rallies and town hall meetings where child care providers could express their concerns and get help solving problems. From these interactions the union concluded that child care providers shared some common problems and concerns that could form the basis for union collective mobilization. Interviews with active and non-active members revealed that child care providers were motivated by the emotional bonds of love and caring for children, often seeing themselves as surrogate parents, caring for others' children as they would their own. Yet, many of these care providers expressed frustration that their caring role opened them up to abuse by the parent-clients who arrived late to pick up their children and expected the child care provider to go that extra mile for love of the client's child. The shared motivation by love and care combined with these dynamics of abuse of their 'emotional labour' provided common ground around which the union could organize. So too did workers' common sense of pride in their work and a shared frustration in the devaluation of their work in society as unskilled and 'natural' to women.

Looking at B.C. organizing campaign materials, their website and results from interviews, it was clear that the BCGEU determined that there were two potentially

unifying elements of this group: their gender – virtually all of these workers were women, although from different ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds –; and their motivation by love of the children and a commitment to good quality care. The union built its campaign around shared relationships of caring and love, and by rejecting the devaluation of child care as unskilled, women’s work. These appeals not only united child care providers, but also allowed the union to appeal to parents for support in union demands for improved provincial funding. Demands for improved funding of child care, whether delivered at a child care centre or in the home, was framed around the importance of high quality child care and tied to improved valuation of ‘women’s’ work. The union developed a sophisticated organizing strategy that appealed to the common interests of child care providers by emphasizing the common emotional bonds of caring alongside the rights of carers – and of children and their parents – to improved child care conditions which the union linked to regulated standards and improved incomes, employment and safety conditions. The union’s proposal for up-skilling of child care work became a solution to in-home child providers’ desire for improved recognition of their work, while also addressing the concerns of child care centre workers that untrained in-home providers prevented greater professional recognition and threatened quality child care.

The BCGEU had considerable success in organizing child care centres over several years. For these workers it could bargain collectively, including over wages and working conditions. To draw in-home child care providers into its coalition, the BCGEU created in 2009 a special membership category, as these workers were not eligible by law to unionize. Through Special Associate Membership (SAMs), these caregivers received financial and organizational support from the union to establish their own community-based chapters to advocate for their child care concerns, received early childhood education as well as leadership training paid for by the union and were represented politically by the unions as part of its larger child care campaign. To engage migrant domestic workers, the BCGEU played an active role in supporting migrant domestic worker associations and provided domestic workers with access to union-paid early childhood education, leadership training and political advocacy. By 2009, the union had organized approximately 100 child care centres with an estimated 1000 plus members. It also organized almost 2000 in-home child care providers and several migrant domestic workers associations. The enormity of the BCGEU’s success can be gleaned from a comparison of the 3000 child care providers organized through this campaign with the organizing efforts of all unions in B.C. which, in 2010, resulted in the recruitment of 4600 workers in total (British Columbia Federation of Labour).

Yet this success was short-lived, undercut by changing political conditions and the legal impediments to representing workers outside the scope of bargaining

units. With the NDP's defeat in the 2009 election, promises of broad-based funding for child care vanished. Looking for a new means of framing their demands for quality accessible child care, province-wide child care coalitions shifted their political strategy away from the proposal for a broad reaching child care sector including migrants and in-home child care providers, to a focus on early childhood education with a clear institutional and educational bias towards child care provision. This shift in the political environment undercut the potential benefits to the BCGEU and political support for organizing a broad coalition of child care workers. The BCGEU moved to disassemble its coalition. The union shifted back to a more conventional organizing strategy of child care centres. SAMs and some migrant workers Associations in Vancouver and Kamloops soon formed their own organizations. Although the BCGEU continued to engage with these organizations on a more informal basis, and offered them discounted Early Childhood Education training and access to various supports such as meeting space and printing, the coalition around caring dissolved.

## Conclusion

What does this analysis tell us? The paper started by developing an argument that conventional union organizing strategies that focus on work and the job, and are organized around one workplace do not fit large numbers of women's experiences of and approaches to work. The result was that unions were not making breakthroughs in organizing large number of women workers, especially in the private and non-profit sectors. Secondly, the argument was made that articulating collective interests and identities is a central part of what unions do, and that these collective interests cannot be 'read off' either from labour market positions or the stated objectives and interests of individual workers. Rather, unions play a complex role of interest and identity intermediation which involves assembling and rearticulating workers' interests in ways that emphasize the bonds of collective solidarity. From the opening discussion, it was concluded that most articulations of union collectivity reflect male experiences and masculine understandings of work and workplaces. This article has proposed that women's experiences of work are blurred by their caring responsibilities. This blurring suggests that unions might be able to make breakthroughs in organizing hitherto hard-to-organize groups of women workers by focusing their efforts on the interstices of work, home and community, tying these spheres together instead of attempting to maintain a separation of work from home.

These ideas were explored through the use of one case study of the BCGEU's campaign to organize child care providers. The BCGEU's organizing strategy was a community based one, shifting its focus from the workplace to geographic communities. But unlike the more commonly understood community campaigns,

such as living wage campaigns (Holgate, 2009; Wills, 2001) that continue to build support in a geographic area on the basis of labour market issues, the BCGEU's campaign focused on building a community of identity around love and pride of the socially undervalued work of caring. This is not an insignificant shift for two reasons. First, the BCGEU's campaign was framed around the shared emotional bonds, and occasional exploitations, of caring relationships. From this vantage point, the union was able to build broad-based support from child care providers for a union and political campaign aimed at high quality, accessible child care. Second, the union had to shift its focus from labour market, work and job issues pursued through bargaining unit certification and collective bargaining to the emotional spaces in between that connected work, family and community. In turn, this shift led the union to engage in a whole new set of actions, such as providing and paying for early childhood education, in support of this new strategy. Based on the numbers of child care providers who joined the BCGEU, whether as bargaining unit or special association members, this campaign was a significant success. The BCGEU knitted together a set of coalitions around caring labour and the rights of care providers in their homes and communities that resulted in the founding of a number of new advocacy associations (such as the United Family Child Care Society [UFCCPS]) and established long standing community ties between the union and these groups, offering the latter ongoing access to resources that would otherwise be unavailable. To this day, the union expects gradual membership increases and new organizing contacts to continue amongst those former migrant domestic workers who gain landed immigrant status and move into other areas of the health care or caring services, and seek out the union as a result of their positive experience with the BCGEU. So in this sense, the union's decision to shift the lens of its organizing around a collective identity that appealed to women on the basis of their emotional relationships and caring responsibilities seems to have paid off.

Although this strategy ultimately foundered, the point of this article was not to assess whether or not this approach was sustainable. Rather, the case study suggests that unions that shift from organizing strategies based on the job and workplace to the interstices of work, home and community open up new opportunities for articulating collective interests and identities. The diversity of interests, places of work and forms of employment contract found in this sector precluded the union from using a traditional, workplace-based campaign. Rather than settling for the limited opportunities presented by organizing the 20% of the workforce employed in child care centres alone, the union shifted its lens to reframe the collective. The union discovered that it could overcome the gaps and conflicts that arose amongst child care providers as a result of different employment relations by shifting its focus to shared relationships outside the workplace and beyond legally defined employment relations.

The biggest danger of the line of argument developed in this article is that it could be accused of essentializing women's interests and differences from men. Not all women have dependents for whom they care, nor do all that care for dependents do so in the same way. But there is an inseparableness of women's roles and social responsibilities of caring and their limited choices for work, and ways of approaching work. Women's relationships to work and role in their families and communities are socially constructed in ways that, despite the advances of feminism, continue to exert powerful influences on women. If unions are going to organize and represent women workers, it is worth exploring whether they should organize them as women and community members first, and only later as workers.

## Notes

- 1 A visible minority is a person who is visibly not from a majority race in a given population. According to Visible Minority Population and Population Group Reference Guide, 2006 Census Canada, the *Employment Equity Act* defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour."
- 2 This genderless view of unions and workers represents significant progress on earlier, more explicitly, sexist views of women and men at work. For much of the postwar period, and before, employers and unions saw women as interlopers in the workplace. Women workers were viewed primarily as women, whereas only men were workers. This latter view perpetuated many of the separate industrial relations structures that reinforced women's secondary place in the labour market, and delivered substandard wages, seniority provisions and benefits (Forrest, 2007). Men were the breadwinners and were the primary subject of unions and industrial relations.

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## SUMMARY

### Organizing Women in the Spaces between Home, Work and Community

Since women began mobilizing more than 40 years ago to transform the labour movement, unions have made significant changes to increase women's participation, leadership and interest representation. Yet, there are limitations to this progress. Unionized women are concentrated in the public sector amongst full-time employees. Moreover, women's interests have tended to be added onto existing union agenda; women are therefore encouraged to adjust to existing union structures and practices rather than unions undertaking transformational organizational change. Unions tend to socially construct the collective interests and identities of women workers in gender-neutral ways that end up limiting union capacities to make bigger organizing breakthroughs amongst women.

The article develops an argument that women's relationship to work is distinct from men's. Women are more likely to experience a blurring of the boundaries between work, home and community, which leads many women workers to be

less responsive to union appeals that focus strictly on the job and workplace. These ideas are explored using a case study of a province-wide organizing drive amongst child care providers by the B.C. Government Employees Union (BCGEU).

The BCGEU used methods of community unionism to build a sense of collective identity and capacity for collective action amongst a diverse group of child care providers, including those who work in child care centres, in-home providers and migrant domestic workers. The union built its campaign around shared relationships of caring and love, and by rejecting the devaluation of child care as unskilled, women's work. The article concludes with an evaluation of whether this approach to organizing women opens new possibilities for reaching out to non-union women.

KEYWORDS: union organizing, women, emotional labour, child care providers

## RÉSUMÉ

### La syndicalisation des femmes à la frontière de plusieurs espaces : le foyer, le travail et la communauté

Depuis que les femmes ont commencé à se mobiliser il y a plus de 40 ans pour transformer le mouvement ouvrier, les syndicats ont entrepris des changements significatifs afin de permettre une plus grande participation des femmes, d'augmenter leur représentation dans les instances et de mieux représenter leurs intérêts. Cependant, il y a des limites à ces progrès. Les femmes syndiquées sont surtout concentrées dans le secteur public parmi les employés à temps plein. De plus, les intérêts des femmes ont eu tendance à se superposer à l'ordre du jour syndical existant ; les femmes sont donc encouragées à s'ajuster aux structures et pratiques syndicales existantes plutôt que de voir les syndicats transformer leur organisation. Les syndicats tendent à construire socialement les intérêts et identités collectives des travailleuses de manière asexuée ou sans aborder les questions de genre, ce qui finit par limiter leur capacité à faire une plus grande percée dans l'organisation collective des femmes.

L'article développe l'argument selon lequel le rapport des femmes au travail est distinct de celui des hommes. Les femmes font bien plus face au brouillage des frontières entre le travail, le foyer familial et la communauté, ce qui conduit beaucoup de travailleuses être moins sensibles aux appels des syndicats qui se concentrent strictement sur le travail et le milieu de travail. Ces idées sont explorées en utilisant une étude de cas sur une campagne de syndicalisation des travailleuses en services de garde à travers une province canadienne menée par l'Union des employés du gouvernement de la Colombie-Britannique (BCGEU).

Le BCGEU a employé des méthodes misant sur l'aspect communautaire du syndicalisme afin de créer un sentiment d'identité collective et de construire les aptitudes menant à l'action collective parmi un groupe diversifié de travailleuses en services de garde d'enfants, comprenant celles qui travaillent dans des centres de la petite enfance, à domicile ou encore les travailleuses domestiques immigrées. Le syndicat a établi sa campagne autour des notions et rapports communs à toutes

ces travailleuses, la responsabilité des soins et l'amour qu'elles apportent, tout en rejetant l'image et l'argument négatifs selon lesquels la garde des enfants est une activité non qualifiée réservée aux femmes. L'article conclut avec une évaluation de cette approche de la syndicalisation des femmes qui ouvre de nouvelles possibilités pour atteindre les femmes non syndiquées.

MOTS-CLÉS : campagne de syndicalisation ; femmes; travail affectif ; services de garde d'enfants

## RESUMEN

### La organización de mujeres en los espacios entre el hogar, el trabajo y la comunidad

Dado que las mujeres empezaron a movilizar hace más de 40 años para transformar el movimiento sindical, los sindicatos han realizado cambios significativos para aumentar la participación, el liderazgo de las mujeres y la representación de sus intereses. Existen sin embargo limitaciones a este progreso. Las mujeres sindicalizadas están concentradas en el sector público, en las empleadas a tiempo completo. Además, la tendencia ha sido de añadir las reivindicaciones de las mujeres a la agenda existente del sindicato; las mujeres son por lo tanto, invitadas a adaptarse a las estructuras sindicales y las prácticas ya existentes en lugar que los sindicatos se impliquen en un cambio para transformar la organización. Los sindicatos tienden a construir socialmente los intereses colectivos y las identidades de las mujeres trabajadoras en una forma neutra de género que terminan por limitar la capacidad sindical de hacer avances más importantes en la organización de las mujeres.

El artículo desarrolla un argumento en el sentido que la relación de las mujeres al trabajo, es distinta de los hombres. Las mujeres son más propensas a experimentar una confusión de las fronteras entre trabajo, hogar y comunidad, lo que lleva a muchas trabajadoras a ser menos sensibles a la convocatoria del sindicato que se centra estrictamente en el trabajo y el lugar de trabajo. Estas ideas se exploran mediante un estudio de caso de una organización provincial de proveedores de cuidado de niños del Sindicato de empleados del Gobierno de Colombia-Británica (BCGEU).

El BCGEU utiliza los métodos del sindicalismo comunitario para construir un sentido de identidad colectiva y la capacidad de acción colectiva entre un grupo diverso de proveedores de cuidado infantil, incluyendo los que trabajan en centros de cuidado infantil, en el hogar y los proveedores de las trabajadoras domésticas inmigrantes. El sindicato ha construido su campaña en torno a las relaciones compartidas de cuidado y amor, y rechazando la devaluación del cuidado de los niños cuando es considerado como trabajo no calificado, un trabajo de mujer. El artículo concluye con una evaluación a saber si este enfoque de la organización de las mujeres abre nuevas posibilidades para acercarse de las mujeres no sindicalizadas.

PALABRAS CLAVES: organización sindical, mujeres, trabajo emocional, proveedores de cuidado infantil