

# Characteristics of Female Union Officers in Canada

## La femme et les postes de direction dans les syndicats

Gary N. Chaison and P. Andiappan

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Article abstract

This study focuses on the characteristics of women who have reached national union office in Canada. Questionnaire responses are analyzed to determine if women are found primarily in un-paid, part-time and union secretary of treasurer positions and to find if less competitive officer positions are occupied by younger, married officers as well as those with children. It was also determined whether female officers tend to run against other females in union elections and come from unions where female members are in the majority.

# Characteristics of Female Union Officers in Canada

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A major feature of North American labour movements in the past decade has been the growing visibility and militancy of women union members. This has been exhibited in a variety of ways, including the establishment of the Coalition of Labor Union Women in the United States, the union related work of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, the growth of labour education programs for female union officers, the development of new unions for primarily female clerical and service workers, and the efforts of women's caucuses in unions and federations. These efforts have brought about a critical reappraisal of the labour movement's present and potential ability to meet the needs of working women and to organize women into existing union structures. (E.g., Baker and Robeson, 1981; Bannon, 1976; Bourne, 1979; Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), 1980; Cook, 1968; Goldstein, 1971; Giroux, 1978; Hartman, 1976; McFarland, 1979; Simmons et al., 1975, pp. 115-141; Townson, 1975; White, 1980, pp. 53-74.) The demand for equality on the job has prompted a demand for equality within the union. A continuing and very visible sign of inequality is the inability of women to attain a 'fair share' of union governing positions.

In 1980, women constituted thirty percent of the unionized workers in the United States, but did not head any of the AFL-CIO affiliates and serv-

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\* CHAISON, Gary N., Professor, Department of Management, Clark University, Mass. ANDIAPPAN, P., Professor, Faculty of Business, University of Windsor, Ont.

ed in very few positions in union governing boards (CLUW, 1980). Female officers have traditionally been found in employee associations and/or serving as secretary-treasurers or appointed department heads (Dewey, 1971; Bergquist, 1974; LeGrande, 1978). In 1977, women constituted 28.6 percent of Canadian union membership but only 16.7 percent of union executive board positions, although this latter proportion had increased substantially in the past decade (White, 1980, p. 23). While the low participation rate of women in union governance has received considerable attention, there are few empirical studies in this area and most deal with female officers on the local level (e.g., Abicht, 1976; Fonow, 1977; Geoffroy and Sainte-Marie, 1971; Wertheimer and Nelson, 1975). This study focuses on the characteristics of women who have achieved national union office and tests common assumptions about the barriers to female participation in union governance. Questionnaire responses were analyzed in an attempt to answer the following questions:

- Are female union officers confined primarily to part-time, unpaid vice-president positions and full-time paid secretary, treasurer or secretary-treasurer positions?
- Do female officers in less competitive positions tend more frequently to be married and younger and have children relative those in the more difficult to attain positions?
- Are female officers most often from unions where men are in the minority and do they tend to run primarily against other women in union elections?

An adequate sample of female office holders is obtained by surveying those in the Canadian national unions, the only union structures in North America, aside from locals, where women have reached officer positions in large numbers.

## METHODOLOGY

### The Questionnaire

The data were collected as part of a larger study of female national union officers in Canada. The questionnaire dealt with the characteristics of female officers and their unions, perceptions of discrimination in the respondent's union as well as the labour movement in general and the relative importance of factors which inhibit female participation in union decision-making. A list of names of female officers was compiled after an examination of the directory *Labour Organizations in Canada* (Labour Canada,

1978) and correspondence with union secretaries. In 1980 the questionnaire was mailed to 208 officers of national unions and national and provincial labour federations. Eighty-four usable questionnaires were received (a response rate of 40 percent). Four questionnaires from federation officers were deleted from this portion of the study because meaningful comparisons of the positions and organizations of this small group could not be made with those of the national union officers.

### **The National Unions**

The national union sector in Canada is composed of a wide variety of union types and sizes. On the one hand, national unions include the large public sector organizations, notably the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the National Union of Provincial Government Employees. At the other extreme, many national unions were only recently formed as province-wide professional associations achieved bargaining status (Chaison, 1980; Chaison and Rose, 1981). There are also national unions in the more traditional jurisdictions and with locals throughout the country, such as the Canadian Paperworkers Union and the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers. At the time of the survey, there were 128 national unions, with over 1.7 million members (50.1 percent of Canadian union membership). A larger proportion of these organizations were small; more than half had under five thousand members (Labour Canada, 1980). Many represented teachers, health care workers and other professional or service groups, and were confined to a single province or region (Chaison, 1980).

A substantial proportion of female officers are found in the private sector national unions, the organizations with the most female members. In 1977, 24.4 percent of these unions' executive board members were women, compared to 8.8 percent for the public sector national unions and 4.5 percent for international unions. However, women were clearly underrepresented in officer positions; female membership was 40.7 percent, 35.6 percent and 17.1 percent of private sector national unions, public sector national unions and the international unions, respectively (White, 1980, pp. 23-25).

### **Officer Positions**

The respondents had been asked to indicate their positions from among the categories of a) president, b) vice-president, c) secretary, treasurer, or secretary-treasurer and d) other. This last category included such positions as director, regional coordinator and general chairperson.

Studies in the United States and Canada have suggested that female participation in union government on the national level is generally confined to the part-time, unpaid vice-president positions or the full-time, paid secretary, secretary-treasurer or treasurer positions. Women are said to infrequently serve as full-time, paid presidents or vice-presidents (e.g. Dewey, 1971; Bergquist, 1974; LeGrande, 1978; White, 1980). However, it should be recognized that these statements are often conjectural; the Canadian data presentations do not differentiate between positions titles and the U.S. surveys include only president, secretary-treasurer and department head positions.

In the present study it was found that the officer positions of the respondents were evenly distributed among presidents, vice-presidents and "other", with 26.3 percent, 28.8 percent and 26.3 percent of the cases in each category, respectively. Women were found less frequently (18.8 percent) as secretaries, treasurers, and secretary-treasurers.

Statistical tests were applied to determine the degree of association between position types and the full-time/part-time and paid/unpaid status of the position<sup>1</sup>. Goodman and Kruskal's Tau indicates the percentage gain in predicting one categorical variable when the second categorical variable is known, relative to when it is unknown. No assumption is made about the ordering of variables. The analysis resulted in a Tau of .009 for the relationship between position and part-time/full-time and .035 for position and paid/unpaid status<sup>2</sup>. Both statistics were not significant at any acceptable level and consequently we can not reject the hypotheses that the measures in the population are zero.

The survey results indicate that while women may achieve a disproportionate number of officer positions *in general*, they were not, as commonly believed, confined to any particular type of office in regard to title, part-time/full time or paid/unpaid status. In the next section, the results for the four position categories are combined to examine other stereotypes of women in union government.

## PRINCIPAL TYPES OF FEMALE UNION OFFICERS

After an examination of the literature on female participation in union government, we are given a strong impression that there are two principal categories of female officers.

1 Tables are available from the authors upon request.

2 *Paid/unpaid* is composed of four categories: 1) unpaid, 2) paid, but less than one-third of the respondent's total income, 3) paid, between one-third and two-thirds of the respondent's income, and 4) paid, two-thirds or more of the respondent's income.

*Type A:* The officer is elected in a regionally based, small union with few locals. Her union is composed of primarily professional, clerical or technical workers. It has a relatively large proportion of female members and officers. The position is part-time and unpaid and the officer usually was unopposed or ran against other women in the election. Most often, the election is regional or conducted among members of an executive board.

*Type B:* The officer is elected in a larger union, with several locals and a geographically dispersed membership. Her union's members are generally unskilled or semi-skilled manufacturing or service employees. There are few female officers and members. The position is frequently full-time and paid. Elections are carried out on a jurisdiction wide basis or at a convention and election opposition from men is usually encountered.

Type A, the prevalent form, represents the stereotype of the female officer sharing rather than competing for leadership positions, while Type B describes the more competitive and sought after offices. Studies of women in union government suggest that those in Type A positions tend to be more frequently married, younger and have children than those in the more difficult to attain Type B positions.

Data from the questionnaires were analyzed to determine if there were any significant relationships between the personal characteristics of the female officers and the characteristics of their positions and unions. It was hypothesized that our knowledge of the union and position would enable us to reduce the error in the prediction of an officer's marital status and age and whether the officer has children<sup>3</sup>. In testing this hypothesis, Goodman and Kruskal's Tau was computed for contingency tables for each independent variable. While Tau is based on the assumption of nominal level data, it has been computed for all variables, regardless of level of measurement, for comparative purposes. In those cases where independent and dependent variables were ordinal, Kendall's Tau-b (for square tables) and Stuart's

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<sup>3</sup> *Marital status* is composed of 1) married and 2) single, divorced, widowed or separated. *Age* consists of ten year categories from twenty to fifty and one category for fifty and above. Whether or not the officer had children is measured by a dichotomous variable of 1) children, 2) no children.

Tau-c (for rectangular tables) were also computed as more efficient measures of association and error reduction. Dichotomous variables were treated as ordinal measures<sup>4</sup>.

### Marital Status

There is a common assumption that female union activists are usually single or formerly married. Women with families would have little time for union activities after work hours. Accordingly, we would expect to find few married female officers aside from those in the less competitive Type A positions (Cook, 1968; Goldstein, 1971; Koziara, 1980; Simmons et al., 1975; Wertheimer and Nelson, 1975). About half (39) of the responding officers were married. The summary statistics in Table 1 indicate that Marital Status was not found to be statistically significant in the measures of association with position and union characteristics. Knowledge of the characteristics does not aid in predicting whether an officer is married.

### Age

It would appear logical that in the more competitive Type B situations it would take longer for a female (as well as male) to attain an officer position. Political skills must be acquired, alliances forged and some reputation of competency must be established over time in order to run for office in a large union and/or one with many locals and widely dispersed membership (Chaison and Rose, 1977, pp. 547-554). In contrast, younger officers would be found in less contested part-time or unpaid positions and in the smaller

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<sup>4</sup> The categories for the independent variables are:

- a) *full-time/part-time*: 1) full-time, 2) part-time.
- b) *paid/unpaid*: see footnote 1.
- c) *method of election*: 1) by membership vote of entire union, 2) by membership vote in region or district of union, 3) by vote of delegates at convention, 4) by vote of executive board, 5) other type of election.
- d) *election opposition*: 1) men and women, 2) men only, 3) women only, 4) no opposition.
- e) *size*: 1) less than 500 members, 2) 500-2499 members, 3) 2500-4999 members, 4) 5000-9999 members, 5) 10,000 + members.
- f) *number of locals*: 1) 0-9 locals, 2) 10-24 locals, 3) 25-49 locals, 4) 50-99 locals, 5) 100 + locals.
- g) *membership dispersion*: 1) one province or territory, 2) 2-4 provinces or territories, 3) 5-11 provinces or territories, 4) all provinces.
- h) *type*: 1) professional, 2) clerical and technical, 3) other.
- i) *proportion of female membership*: 1) 1-25 percent, 2) 26-50 percent, 3) 51-75 percent, 4) 76-100 percent.
- j) *proportion of female officers*: 1) 1-25 percent, 2) 26-50 percent, 3) 51-75 percent, 4) 76-100 percent.

unions of primarily professional, clerical or technical employees. They would come from unions with larger proportions of female members and officers and would have run against other women or be unopposed in the election to their present position.

The suggested relationships were not supported by the survey data. Table 1 indicates that statistically significant relationships were found for Age and paid/unpaid (Tau but not Tau-b), the method of election, the election opposition, the size of the union (Tau but not Tau-c) and the proportion of female officers. However, most of these variables do not improve the ability to predict officer age beyond seven percent. The only exception was the relationship between Age and union size. As expected, smaller unions tended to have younger officers. Almost three quarters of the officers in the smallest unions were under forty and more than one third were under thirty years of age. Greater proportions of older officers were found among the larger unions. Further examination of this officer age/union size relationship could follow several directions. First, it should be determined if the relationship differs in strength and direction for male and female officers. Second, it might be important to isolate the effect of union age. The smaller unions might be the younger ones and there would be an expected positive relationship between union age and officer age. Finally, the actual effect of officer age might be more accurately observed in forthcoming studies through the analysis of variables which measure the length of time as a union member or as a union officer, i.e., "age" as years in the organization or its governing structure.

### **Children**

One of the most frequently cited barriers to female participation in unions is the responsibility involved in raising children. As one union officer stated "Children do not mix well with union activities" (Wertheimer and Nelson, 1975, p. 122). Working mothers have difficulty finding time for after work union meetings and those with young children "never become permanent workers and hence do not identify themselves as regular members either of the workforce or of the union" (Cook, 1968, p. 131). The surveyed officers were asked if they have children; slightly more than half (41) indicated that they did.

The only statistically significant relationship was between the variable Children and the nature of the election opposition, but this was only moderate ( $.10 > p > .05$ ) and not in the expected direction. Close proportions of officers with and without children were in positions for which election opposition was both men and women. As predicted, a large proportion (80



**TABLE 1**  
**Characteristics of Female National Union Officers**  
**and Their Positions and Unions**  
**Summary Statistics**

		<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Children</i>
<b>A. Position Characteristics</b>				
1. Full-time/Part-time	Tau	.000	.006	.010
	Tau-b	-.010		.098
	Tau-c		.011	
2. Paid/Unpaid	Tau	.016	.063**	.007
	Tau-b		.135	
	Tau-c	-.009		.084
3. Method of Election	Tau	.086	.069**	.041
4. Election Opposition	Tau	.067	.064**	.222*
<b>B. Union Characteristics</b>				
1. Size	Tau	.070	.067**	.023
	Tau-c	-.040	.235**	-.131
2. Number of locals	Tau	.076	.055**	.037
	Tau-c	-.228	.074	-.156
3. Membership Dispersion	Tau	.014	.046	.033
	Tau-b		.216	
	Tau-c	.083		-.063
4. Type	Tau	.072	.014	.022
5. Proportion of Female Membership	Tau	.069	.036	.041
	Tau-b	-.154		
	Tau-c	-.241		-.077
6. Proportion of Female Officers	Tau	.053	.062*	.007
	Tau-b		-.106	
	Tau-c	-.150		-.047

Note: See footnotes 2, 3 & 4 for categories of variables.

Tau = Goodman and Kruskal's Tau

Tau-b = Kendall's Tau-b

Tau-c = Stuart's Tau-c

\* = significant at .10 level

\*\* = significant at .05 level

\*\*\* = significant at .01 level

percent) of those officers with children were elected in contests exclusively among women. However, when there was entirely male opposition (15 cases) sixty percent of the female officers had children. A more extreme and unexpected result was found when there was no election oppositions. Among these cases, 82.4 percent of the officers did not have children. It may be that the underlying factor here is that the more arduous and time consuming positions (particularly those which are unpaid or in smaller unions with less staff assistance) are uncontested and filled mostly by women without child raising obligations. Future research should deal with the varying work content and time consuming nature of union positions and the form or absence of election opposition.

The results of the analysis provide meager support for the prevalent stereotypes of female union officers. Knowledge of position and union characteristics add little to our ability to predict an officer's marital status, age and whether she has children. At least among the Canadian national unions, women have been able to reach a wide variety of officer positions and in unions of assorted sizes, types and other characteristics. The Type A and Type B officer stereotypes described earlier have been developed in research dealing mostly with union locals in the United States. Perhaps these characteristics are less relevant to the few female national union officers in the United States and the moderate number of their counterparts in Canada. These officers, because of their unique skills and perseverance, might have been able to overcome the barriers inferred by the two stereotypes. It is also possible that relationships have been obscured by the gross measures of Marital Status, Age, and Children. There is no indication of the marital status of the officer at the time of her first or subsequent leadership positions, or when she reached national union office. Marital status may have changed at some point along the officer's career path and this might vary in Type A and Type B positions. It could be argued that the Children variable is best measured by looking at the age and number of children at the time the officer assumed different leadership positions. Women with younger dependent children might be confined mostly to careers in Type A positions, while those with grown children can move to national positions of Type B. Alternative measures of the effects represented by the Age variable have been suggested earlier and should also be included in future attempts to delineate the characteristics of officers in the two categories.

## **THE PROPORTION OF FEMALE UNION MEMBERS**

It is widely believed that women are most often found in officer positions in those unions where men are in the minority (Cook, 1968; Koziara

and Pierson, 1980; White, 1980; Wertheimer and Nelson, 1975). Furthermore, many women are said to lack confidence in their leadership abilities and are reluctant to run for office against men even when women comprise a large proportion of the union membership (Hartmen, 1976; Wertheimer, 1976; Wertheimer and Nelson, 1975). These common assumptions were examined for the responding female officers.

Most officers were from unions with large proportions of female members. More than half (42 officers) were from unions where more than three-quarters of the members were women while about a quarter (18 officers) were from those with less than fifty percent women members. Table 2 indicates the significant relationship between the proportions of female members and officers. Almost two-thirds of the cases were on a diagonal and in only two cases were there larger proportions of female officers than members. Knowledge of the proportion of female members increased by 72.3 percent our ability to predict the proportion of union officers which was female.

**TABLE 2**  
**Proportions of Female Members and Officers**

		<i>Proportion of Union Officers Who Are Female</i>				<i>Total</i>
		<i>0-25%</i>	<i>26-50%</i>	<i>51-75%</i>	<i>76-100%</i>	
Proportion of Union Members Who Are Female	0- 25%	6	0	0	0	6
	26- 50%	7	4	1	0	12
	51- 75%	8	5	3	1	17
	76-100%	3	2	1	36	42
Total		24	11	5	37	77

Kendall's Tau-b = .723

P < .01

Note: Does not include 3 cases for which information on female officers or members was incomplete.

Table 3 indicates a statistically significant relationship between the proportion of female members and the nature of election opposition. Almost two-thirds of those respondents who reached office through contested elections had defeated male opponents. More than two-thirds of these elections against males were in unions where a majority of the members were female. As expected, contests exclusively among women were in those unions with the largest proportions of female members. These organizations also ac-

counted for most cases where there was no election opposition. The picture that emerges is one of women encountering male opposition (i.e., males being nominated to candidacy) even when females are in the majority. Contests *not* involving males (women only or no opposition) rarely occur when males are in the majority. However, two reservations are in order. First, there is a considerable dispersion of cases among the two male opposition categories and the overall measure of association, although statistically significant, was fairly low at .120. Secondly, it should be emphasized that the respondents were all women who *won* elections. A more complete view of any reluctance of women to run against men in union elections would require the inclusion of the cases of females who lost elections or were discouraged for one reason or another from running for office.

**TABLE 3**  
**Female Union Membership and Election Opposition**

		<i>Type of Opposition in Election</i>				
		<i>Men and Women</i>	<i>Men Only</i>	<i>Women Only</i>	<i>No Opposition</i>	<i>Total</i>
Proportion	0- 25%	1	3	1	1	6
of Union	26- 50%	4	7	0	2	13
Members Who	51- 75%	9	2	3	3	17
Are Female	75-100%	7	3	16	13	39
	Total	21	15	20	19	75

Goodman and Kruskal's Tau = .120

P < .05

Note: Does not include 4 cases where there was no election and 1 case for which there was no information on the proportion of female members.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A great deal has been written about the barriers to the participation of women in union government. Most works have been theoretical or impressionistic essays or questionnaire studies of local officers. The present analysis has tested the conventional views and findings in relation to the female officers of Canadian national unions, the largest group of women in higher level union office in North America. Some widely held beliefs about female officers were not supported. First, women were found in a variety of posi-

tions, both paid and unpaid, and full-time and part-time. They were not confined to the office of secretary-treasurer or unpaid, part-time vice-president's positions, as suggested by earlier works.

Few significant relationships were uncovered between officer characteristics (Marital Status, Age and Children) and selected position and union characteristics. While several variables were related to officer age, only union size was of any importance in error reduction in prediction. There was support for the common view that younger officers are in smaller unions, although it was emphasized the Age is an imprecise measure and may not be capturing the magnitude of the predicted effect. A significant relationship was also found between Children and election opposition and it was suggested that this was because the most arduous tasks might be associated with uncontested positions.

Doubts have been raised about the validity of the concept of Type A and Type B female officers, and it was suggested that this stereotype relates more to local than national officers. The barriers associated when marital status and child raising responsibilities, or the need for visibility, experience and perseverance (as measured by officer age) may be most prevalent in locals. Those who overcome the barriers at that level might have a greater ability to reach national office. As suggested earlier the female national officer would assumably have unique abilities and the traditional barriers may have meant less to her. There is also a possibility that the predicted relationships were obscured by the gross measures of Age, Marital Status and Children. More direct statements of these variables would be officer age, number (and age) of children and officer marital status at the time of the assumption of initial officer positions or the first position on the career ladder leading to national office. Until such measures are made and analyzed, the concept of Type A and Type B officers can not be said to be conclusively refuted.

The survey results support the general view that female officers were found primarily in unions where women are in the majority. In those organizations with the highest proportions of female members, the respondents tended to run unopposed or against other women. However, a large proportion of the female officers encountered male opposition, even when women members were in the majority. Does this mean that women are not reluctant to challenge men in union elections, or that men are politically active in even those unions where they are a minority? These questions could be answered with any degree of confidence only after also surveying those women who lost union elections or who felt discouraged from running in local or national union elections because of male opposition or a largely male membership.

While the respondents fared well against male opposition, it should be recalled that their number is small relative to the total number of union office seekers and holders.

Extensions of this study may be made in several directions. One could determine if the findings apply to the few female officers of national unions or intermediate bodies in the United States and the fairly large number of female local officers in both the United States and Canada. On another level, it could be determined if the Type A and Type B officer characteristics relate to male officers. This would not be expected because much of the reasoning behind this concept, particularly the suggested role of Marital Status and Children, deals with barriers specific to female unionists. Future studies dealing with these and other issues might use the refined measure of officer characteristics suggested earlier and include women who lost union elections or were defeated in bids for election candidacy. From whatever perspective taken, it will become evident how little is actually known of why more women cannot or will not seek and obtain a greater share of officer positions.

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## La femme et les postes de direction dans les syndicats

Le présent article traite des caractéristiques des femmes occupant des postes de commande dans les syndicats au Canada et analyse les idées reçues au sujet des obstacles qui s'opposent à leur participation à la direction de ces institutions. On a distribué un questionnaire à des femmes qui faisaient partie de comités exécutifs syndicaux en 1980 et on a obtenu quatre-vingt réponses qui furent analysées en vue de répondre aux questions suivantes.

Les femmes qui font partie de ces comités sont-elles confinées au poste à temps partiel et non rémunéré de vice-président ou à des postes rémunérés et à temps plein de secrétaire, de trésorier ou de secrétaire-trésorier?

Les femmes qui occupent des postes moins recherchés ont-elles tendance à être jeunes, mariées et mères de famille, donc celles qui se trouvent dans la situation la plus pénible pour obtenir de tels postes?

Les femmes font-elles partie de syndicats où les hommes sont moins nombreux et ont-elles tendance à se présenter contre d'autres femmes lors des élections?

Les résultats, tirés de l'étude des statistiques, révélés par les réponses aux questionnaires n'ont pas permis de déceler de caractéristiques générales à leur sujet. On y trouve en premier lieu des femmes dans beaucoup de fonctions syndicales, fonctions à la fois rémunérées ou non, à temps plein ou non. En second lieu, on n'a découvert que peu de rapports significatifs entre, d'une part, les caractéristiques de la dirigeante de syndicat, soit l'âge, l'état matrimonial et la charge d'enfants, et le poste occupé et la spécificité du syndicat, d'autre part.

On a découvert que les membres les plus jeunes des bureaux de direction se rencontrent dans les syndicats de moindre importance, même si l'on a constaté que l'âge est une mesure imprécise qui ne peut expliquer l'importance de l'effet prévisible. Celles qui n'ont pas d'enfant se retrouvent dans les postes incontestés parce que ces femmes peuvent assumer des tâches plus ardues.

Les résultats de l'enquête confirment l'opinion générale selon laquelle les femmes qui font partie des comités exécutifs se retrouvent surtout dans les syndicats où l'élément féminin forme la majorité des effectifs. Cependant, on a aussi constaté qu'une forte proportion des candidates devaient faire face à l'opposition des hommes, même lorsque les femmes l'emportaient par le nombre.

On suggère également en conclusion de faire porter l'étude sur maints aspects différents. Ainsi, on pourrait présenter de bien d'autres manières le rôle de l'âge, du statut matrimonial et de la charge d'enfants dans l'accession des femmes aux postes de direction. On pourrait également procéder à une enquête de même nature auprès des hommes qui occupent des postes directoriaux. Enfin, des études ultérieures pourraient porter sur le cas de femmes qui ont perdu l'élection ou qui ont été défaites lors des mises en candidature.

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