

SISTER | to | SISTER

OFL Women's Leadership Summit
December 10 - 12, 2012 | Kempenfelt Centre, Barrie



REPORT

Objectives of the Summit:

- To encourage and support development of leadership in women of all generations and all backgrounds
- To promote mentoring between and among women
- To ensure leadership reflects women's diversity
- To integrate women's voices and perspectives into organizing and mobilizing
- To strengthen and deepen our links and support of women and equality groups
- To challenge ourselves and draw lessons from women leaders of today and tomorrow
- To reaffirm that women's leadership and an equality focus are key to fighting the austerity agenda
- To ensure that support and action for our issues and work becomes a priority on labour and political agendas

Through panel presentations, interactive plenaries, knowledge and strategic circles, participants worked at these objectives over the course of the Summit.

Women in Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities

We began with an amazing panel of women in leadership positions who discussed their personal experiences and shared stories of their respective journeys to becoming leaders. Moderated by Sister Barb Byers, Executive Vice-President of the CLC, these leaders encouraged participants to consider moving into leadership positions in their unions and provided advice based on their own personal journeys.



We heard from sisters:

- Jenny Ahn (CAW) National Director of Membership Mobilization and Campaigns and OFL Vice-President
- Sharon DeSousa (PSAC) Ontario Regional Executive Vice-President and OFL Vice-President
- Carolyn Egan (USW) President USW Toronto Area Council and member of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council Executive Board
- Yolanda McClean (CUPE) Diversity Vice-President CUPE Ontario and Equity Vice-President, CUPE Local 4400
- Maureen Weinberger (ETFO) Vice-President and OFL Vice-President
- Barb Dolan (CEP) Ontario Region Administrative Vice-President and OFL Vice-President

Key Messages:

- It is possible for women to be strong leaders in our movement
- Women leaders bring different skills and strengths to union leadership
- A union benefits when women get involved in leadership roles
- Women's experiences working with women and community groups strengthens their leadership skills and abilities
- To be successful, it is helpful for women leaders to develop:
 - A base of support
 - Allies
 - Support networks
 - Mentors
 - Role models
- A sense of humour helps too.



The panel and participants discussed some of the challenges that women continue to face in becoming leaders and holding leadership positions.

- Long hours of work required for women in leadership create difficulties when women are still responsible for the bulk of family care in addition to union responsibilities
- Women continue to face stereotypes about the way we are expected to behave
- Women have different leadership styles, are more likely to favour consensus-building as a way of reaching decisions and, are less likely to yell and pound the table to make their point
- Although there are many supportive brothers in the labour movement, some sisters continue to experience the 'good old boys' network
- The lack of women role models in leadership can make it a very isolating experience
- Strong and safe support networks are needed for women to share and learn from each other

This provocative panel set the stage for more in-depth discussion throughout the Summit.



Are We There Yet

Tuesday morning began with the video “A Struggle to Remember: Fighting for our Families” which documents the long-term battle for paid maternity leave, the alliances built between the women and labour movements, and the central role unions played in winning this important demand for women’s equality.

Next Sisters Linda Briskin (YUFA) and Margaret McPhail (retired OSSTF and OFL Women’s Committee member) delivered a presentation about the findings of the research project “Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada”. This exciting project explores the current climate and attitudes towards women, feminism, leadership and equality in Canadian unions through the insights, voices and experiences of women union leaders, activists and staff.

Unions in Canada have played a significant role in promoting women’s equality yet evidence suggests that equality issues have still not moved into the mainstream of union culture. Among other questions, the project asks whether, in the current climate of recession, cutbacks, and austerity, we may even be losing ground?!

The presentation set the stage for the day by examining three questions to lead participants into the afternoon's Knowledge Circles.



Key Topics

1. Encouraging and Supporting Women Leaders
2. Women's Structures – Do They Still Work?
3. The Big Picture – Impact of the Social and Economic Climate on Women's Equality

Sisters Briskin and McPhail began by noting that:

1. *“The trade union movement is one of the few organizations in society with the capacity to make changes on behalf of working people.”*

At the same time:

2. *“Unions are institutions that can either push forward on social change or hold it back.”*

Presentation Highlights and Project Findings:

1. Encouraging and Supporting Women Leaders

The numbers alone indicate that there is a problem. While for the last several years the majority of union members are women (54%), it remains the case that the majority of leaders continue to be men. This is even the case in most unions where the large majority of members are women. The picture is even more troubling for Aboriginal and racialized women and women living with disabilities; very few are in top positions in their unions.

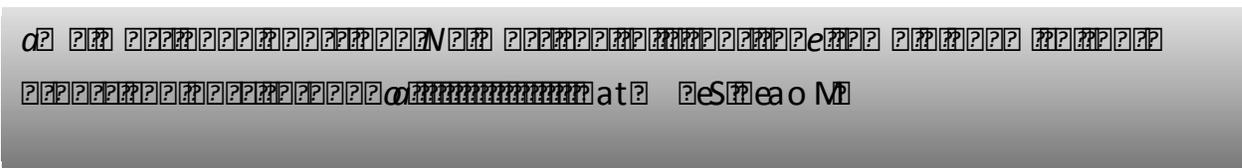
They went on to examine some of the factors leading to this result:

- Isolation and burn-out, work/life balance continues to be a challenge.
- There is still a "chilly climate" for women in leadership positions.
- Aboriginal, racialized and younger women especially experience marginalization; they often don't feel welcomed into the inner circles.
- Disrespect, isolation and dismissal of women, especially when they are outspoken or are critical.
- In some cases, harassment and bullying have occurred to further exclude strong women.
- Women leaders do not often feel support from their sisters in their roles. One sister in the project said:

"The one word I've used to describe my position it's lonely. People know you're busy so your friends don't call so often."

Strategy ideas for future discussion:

- How effective are "designated seats" for women and other equality-seeking groups? They are meant to be floors, not ceilings, which seems to be more the case.
- Should we have designated seats on bargaining committees?
- The need to develop new pools of leadership, work with younger activists, and support new forms of leadership.
- To build a work/life balance campaign within our unions and make them model institutions.
- The need to enforce harassment policies.
- The need to find ways and take time to support our women leaders.
- Break the silence and find ways to speak collectively about issues that concern women.



2. Women's Structures – Do They Still Work?

Women's committees provide opportunities for sisters to meet collectively to identify issues, set agendas, strategize and organize to bring about change. They can also offer a training ground to develop organizing and leadership skills and build self-confidence.

It was suggested that it may be time to review the effectiveness of our committees and conferences. There is some evidence to suggest that women's committees are not as effective as they once were or should be. Some issues identified in the project were:

- Have our committees become too formal and institutionalized so that rank-and-file women activists are sidelined?
- Some women's committees focus on a few key days in the year and don't look at ongoing activity around women's issues or see a role for themselves in encouraging their union to really fight for equality.
- Women's committees lack power, unlike bargaining or health and safety committees and are not linked to core union functions.
- Women's committees are not seen as a way to leadership. Younger women do not want to be known as a leader in equality issues only.
- There are issues of competition between equality-seeking groups for resources and leadership attention.
- Some are not inclusive enough and are seen as "white women's" committees.

Again, some strategy ideas suggested for future discussion:

- Balance space for all equality-seeking groups to come together, with the need for each to have space to discuss their own issues. Have open discussions about the benefits of cooperation and build a broad equality agenda.
- Ensure real, inclusive representation of all sisters on our women's committees.
- Renew and revitalize our women's committees, have a look at our roles and develop links to the core campaigns of our unions, bringing our equality lens.
- Build a power base with women and equality-seeking members to encourage the inclusion of all members in the work for full equality in all areas.

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3. The Big Picture - Impact of the Social and Economic Climate on Women's Equality



As union sisters, we are all aware of the challenges we face in today's climate. Among many other issues, we are experiencing significant job loss in government and the private sector, a rise in precarious, part-time, contract and casual employment. For those in unionized employment, we are witnessing a blatant attack on unions, increased demands for bargaining concessions, attacks on public services, legislation limiting and eliminating free collective bargaining and organizing, federal legislation limiting women's rights to pay equity, choice, child care and anti-immigrant and refugee legislation that encourages racism and ethnocentrism. Overall, the situation for workers in Canada is extremely challenging.

We know too that women are disproportionately affected by these challenges. The "Big Picture" presents special challenges for equality organizing as our unions are feeling the pinch. Equality issues seem to be sidelined as we take on the "important" issues. The language of equality is being dropped in favour of concepts like "fairness" – which doesn't have a very clear message.

Possible strategies to ensure that equality work is taken seriously include developing our understanding that equality and diversity are absolutely key to union renewal strategies. With a workforce and membership that is increasingly racialized and feminized, promoting equality is a critical component of our work to rebuild the movement. Unions must be representative and be seen to represent an increasingly diverse membership. The loss of younger, racialized and Aboriginal women is a loss for the labour movement. We need to talk about equality this way in this climate.

We could look at organizing across unions, like we are doing at this Summit. And we need to look at rebuilding links with women’s organizations to share our stories and build common ground.

The sisters concluded their presentation by acknowledging that there are still many challenges to women’s equality facing us in the labour movement today but that the real solution is to do what we do so well: Organize, organize, organize! This old saying is a reminder that we need to keep on being active:



(Note: This power point presentation is available in full, along with longer theme documents on the three areas covered at the Summit, plus two other theme documents are available at the “Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada” project website at: <http://womenunions.apps01.yorku.ca> In the spring of 2013, a series of strategy summaries will be posted here as well.)

Knowledge Circles Report Back:

Knowledge Circles:

1. *Encouraging and Supporting Women Leaders*
2. *Women’s Structures – Do They Still Work?*
3. *Big Picture: Impact of the Social and Economic Climate on Women’s Equality*





Sessions began by examining the problems presented in each of the areas. Participants established an amazing series of ideas, actions and plans to drive our movement forward on the path to equality.

1. Encouraging and Supporting Women Leaders

In this Circle, sisters looked at and discussed a number of questions and a set of statements from women in top leadership positions from across the country.

On the double-standard facing women leaders:

“I have never, ever seen a man in a leadership role ever be criticized about what colour tie, what colour suit, what his hair looks like that day. But as women in leadership roles, it’s a free-for-all.”

On the importance of diverse leadership:

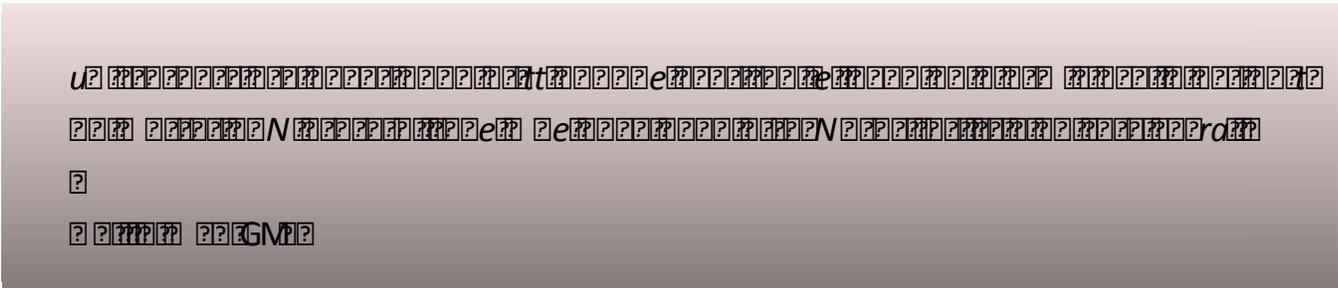
Why is it important to have women and members of equality-seeking groups in leadership positions?

What leadership positions do women hold and why:

“It seems like the girl jobs are secretary treasurer or recording secretary and then the boys get to be president.”

For the last part of the discussion, they came up with plans going forward:

“It’s lonely up here.” What can we do to encourage women to run for leadership positions? What can we do to support women leaders?



Key Ideas and Recommendations

- Demand the development of women leadership training programs in your own union and through the OFL and CLC.
- Support and encourage women and equality group members, recognize their strengths, even if they don't realize they have them; be a mentor and supporter.
- Develop strong networks to encourage and support women leaders at all levels.
- Invite women speakers in leadership roles to explain the importance of building strong women leaders, the challenges faced and talk about ways to meet those challenges.
- Encourage all members to understand the importance of diversity in leadership, different voices and strengths make the union strong.
- Remember to take the steps to let women leaders know you appreciate the work they do and that you support them.
- Goal is to make diverse leadership the norm, not the exception.



2. Women's Structures – Do They Still Work?

Sisters in this Circle looked first at a frequently heard comment and then discussed what role our women's committees are playing and what ideas could make them more effective.

"The time for women to meet alone is over."

What issues do your union's women's committee focus on?

Does your women's committee work jointly with other equity committees? Is there cooperation or competition among equality-seeking committees?



In the last part of the discussion, participants developed ideas to help women's committees move forward:

What can we do to encourage our women's committees to become organizing centres for equality work in our unions?

Key Ideas And Recommendations

- *Incorporate “work/life balance” into the work of women’s committees by being flexible on the time and frequency of the meetings; consider using social media or teleconferencing to keep in touch.*
- *Encourage women from diverse groups to join the committees.*
- *Focus some time on educating and mentoring women in the committee.*
- *Make sure women’s committees receive resources from the union for their work; develop a women’s committee newsletter or space in union’s newsletter for equality issues; develop information resources on equality issues.*
- *Consider broader, cross-union seminars to train committee members on the history and importance of women’s committees in the union movement, on the need to work in alliance with other equality-seeking committees, on the need for women’s committees to move beyond limited action only on IWD and December 6th and to share ideas and strategies.*
- *Learn from and help each other; build solidarity and hope.*

Plenary: Sisters

Solidarity: Union & Community Organizing



Natalie Mehra: Ontario Health Coalition

Candace Rennick: Secretary Treasurer, CUPE

Carrol Anne Sceviour: Step It Up Campaign, Our Role in Stopping Workplace Violence

Katie Arnup: Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, Child Care is a Union Issue

Pat Bird: United Steel Workers, We Can Win Pay Equity

Deena Ladd: Workers' Action Centre, Organizing unorganized workers

Sister Candace Rennick led the Summit in discussions on four important campaigns for women's equality. Each panelist provided information both on their issues, why the issue is important for working women and made important suggestions about the support union women and their organizations can provide to make these campaigns as successful as possible.

Natalie Mehra gave a powerful overview and involved us in a participatory exercise of the impact of austerity on equality in Ontario. The Falling Behind Report, which was authored by Natalie for the "Common Front", was a clear study of how far Ontarians have fallen behind other provinces.

This panel set the stage for the final Strategic Circles on the last morning of the Summit.

Evening Social with NDP Sisters

The sisters enjoyed a lively and spirited social evening with NDP Leader Andrea Horwath. Andrea brought Sisters Catherine Fife and Monique Taylor with her, both elected NDP MPPs. All of these amazing sisters were not expected to win an election... but did ... reinforcing the message that women are amazing leaders and that with determination and support we can achieve great things!



Strategic Circles

There were four Strategic Circles based on the four issues presented in the panel.

1. *Pay Equity*
2. *Child Care*
3. *Violence Against Women*
4. *Organizing Vulnerable Workers*



In each of the Strategic Circles, participants discussed the following questions:

- ***Does your union support the work of the pay equity/child care/violence against women/organizing campaigns presented in the Sisters in Solidarity Panel? How?***
- ***Does your women's committee focus on this issue? If not, how would you encourage the committee to take up the issue?***
- ***How can we engage women in our unions in these campaigns?***
- ***How can we use these campaigns to build women's activism and leadership?***
- ***How can we use these campaigns to educate our members about the importance of equality work in the context of a general fightback campaign against austerity?***

At the end of the Circles, they developed ideas for how to move us all forward.

Key Ideas and Recommendations: Pay Equity

- Continue to support the work of the Equal Pay Coalition (EPC) in Ontario; financial support is always needed to help this work.
- The Coalition is beginning an educational campaign designed to reach the broader public; the OFL and our unions should support and share the materials developed.
- We need to continue to educate our members that the battle for equal pay for work of equal value is not yet over and to reactivate our members on this issue; many employers are in non-compliance; it could be an issue for unions' women's committees to take up.
- We need more educational work on the maintenance provisions of the Pay Equity Act.



Key Ideas and Recommendations: Child Care

- Continue to support the work of the Ontario Child Care Coalition (OCBCC) and encourage members who are parents to participate in their upcoming survey of parents with small children.
- The OFL Women's Committee should continue its excellent work with the Coalition.
- We should be more engaged in lobbying our MPPs on this issue; we could consider organizing online petitions or old-fashioned letter writing campaigns.
- Individually, it is important for us to remember to talk about the issue, the inadequacy of the federal child care handout and the need for permanent and stable funding for public child care; the benefits of child care to parents, children and the economy; learn more about the Quebec program and the campaign for \$10 a day childcare in BC and possible adoption of a similar campaign.
- We need to get more information into the hands of our members.



Key Ideas and Recommendations: Violence Against Women

- *More training on Occupational Health and Safety Act, Bill 168 is needed for staff and members; many still do not understand their rights at work; and review of legislation to investigate if lobby required strengthening it.*
- *The OFL and our unions need to be visible in our support for actions against violence against women like Take Back the Night marches and December 6th actions.*
- *The OFL should develop a statement and online action campaign in solidarity with One Billion Rising, the international action against violence against women; publicize the event widely.*
- *We could consider developing pins and posters for union bulletin boards on the issue, in other languages where needed.*
- *Publicize and support Sister in Spirit and the Native Women's Association of Canada's petition calling for a public enquiry into the missing and/or murdered Aboriginal sisters.*



Key Ideas And Recommendations: Organizing Vulnerable Workers

- *Encourage our unions to financially support the Workers Action Centre.*
- *Build support for their campaigns on raising the minimum wage (this is an important part of the Equal Pay Coalition's campaign as well).*
- *Re-establish the "Talking Union" program in local schools; women's committee members should be part of the program and raise the important work unions do for equality rights.*
- *"Take Your Kids to the Union" events so that they know why unions are important.*
- *Participate in campaigns to support workers who are not yet unionized, like the Workers Action Centre campaign on stolen wages.*
- *Support your union's organizing work.*
- *Talk union.*
- *Lobby for legislative change.*



We Are Ontario



Katie Arnup, OCBCC and a member of Common Front, gave an overview of the We Are Ontario and the organization's critical work on equality. The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, Equal Pay Coalition, Step It Up Campaign and many other groups working with the OFL Women's Committee are members.

We Are Ontario is a labour and community-based campaign launched by the Ontario Common Front – a coalition of over 90 community groups and labour unions that represent millions of Ontarians. Together, the Common Front represent the majority of Ontarians and who oppose government's austerity agenda which attempts to balance their budgets on the backs of poor and the most vulnerable.

An important new mobilizing tool developed by We Are Ontario is their website. The site allows for posting of events at both the provincial and regional level. Katie gave an overview of the website and how to use the site to post events, organize and mobilize. – www.weareontario.ca



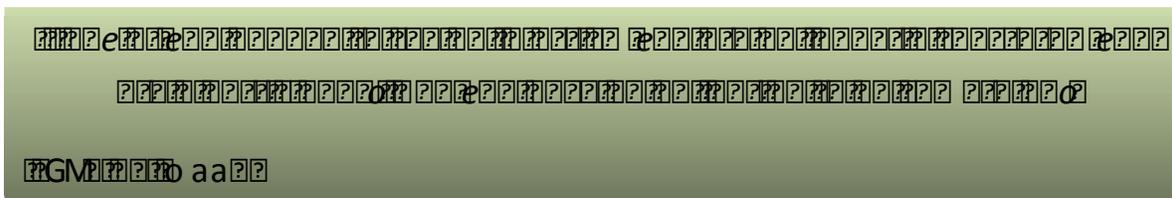
Our Participants' Views on the Women's Leadership Summit

It was clear from the evaluations that the sisters who participated found it to be an overwhelmingly positive experience.

One survey question was "What did you like most about the Summit?" Comments were:

- Networking and meeting sisters from other unions
- Loot bags
- Women's leadership and equality focus
- Andrea Horwath and other NDP Sisters
- Space and time to connect with women after sessions
- Information sharing
- The Sisterhood
- Great speakers and discussion leaders
- Women's commitment – it was inspiring
- Range of ideas and groups
- The panels - many really appreciated the leadership panel
- "I felt empowered and inspired"
- The Knowledge and Strategic Circles
- "It energized me to do more!"
- The Falling Behind Report

Some sisters issued the challenge for each to bring at least one more sister to the next Women's Leadership Summit!



Conclusion

The struggle for women's equality continues both inside and outside the labour movement. While we have made progress, the analysis of the current state of women's equality is that we have reached a plateau or that we are actually moving backward. There is no doubt that austerity programs threaten each and every equality gain that we have made and any future movement forward.

But, our struggle continues and we must find ways to engage our members and our unions. We must deliver on our commitment to train, mentor, support, and inspire new leaders in the labour movement.

That work must bring not only equality for women in positions of leadership, but also new methods of analyzing power and influence that are based on an inclusive vision of leadership.

As we use our activism in unions to advance women's equality, we cannot ignore the intersection between the struggle for women's equality and the fight for a more socially-just world - free of racism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia and poverty where we create a just and equal society.

Key Recommendations for Ontario Federation of Labour Action

- 1. Hold cross-union seminars to train on the history and importance of women's committees in the union movement, on the need to work in alliance with other equality-seeking committees, and to share ideas and strategies.*
- 2. Hold a Woman's Leadership Summit every two years and explore the feasibility of regional Summits.*
- 3. Encourage our affiliated unions to work closely with community and equality-seeking organizations to understand the important role our unions have played historically in the struggle for equality - such as the Common Front and using the We Are Ontario website.*
- 4. Continue to ensure that equality is central to everything we do; include equality issues as we take on the propaganda war against unions; make sure people know what unions have accomplished on equality and how central our unions are to winning and maintaining equality gains.*
- 5. Develop a statement and online action campaign in solidarity with One Billion Rising (1BR), the international action against violence against women; publicize the event widely.*
- 6. A key demand for One Billion Rising is publicizing and supporting Sister in Spirit and the Native Women's Association of Canada's petition calling for a public enquiry into the missing and/or murdered Aboriginal sisters.*
- 7. Provide cross-union training on OHSA Bill 168. Effectively using legislation to address workplace violence and harassment. Strategies to strengthen the Act.*

8. *Work with affiliates and partner groups to lobby for a comprehensive provincial poverty reduction plan with targets and timelines, employment standards and labour code changes to help lift women's wages and standard of living.*
9. *Continue to support the work of the Equal Pay Coalition (EPC) in Ontario and educate our members that the battle for pay equity is not yet over and to reactivate our members on this issue.*
10. *Continue to support the work of the Ontario Child Care Coalition (OCBCC) and encourage members who are parents to participate in their upcoming survey of parents with small children.*
11. *Work with OCBCC and other child care advocates to demand the provincial government implement a childcare system in Ontario, looking to Quebec as an example of a system that is provincially controlled and is effective.*
12. *Promote and participate in campaigns to support workers who are not yet unionized, like the Workers Action Centre campaign on stolen wage.*

