

# Avenues into Leadership for Women: The Case of Union Officers in Israel

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This paper analyzes the differential effects of organizational experience on men and women union officers in Israeli industry. The general hypothesis is that among women, prior supervisory experience is instrumental for overcoming the constraints which keep women from leadership positions. A significantly greater proportion of women supervisors than men supervisors is elected to union office. A significantly greater proportion of women without rather than with prior supervisory experience, stated that they had had apprehensions about future performance as union officers, a difference not found among men.

## Introduction

While female participation in the labor force has risen markedly in recent years and with it the number of women members in trade unions (Raphael, 1974; Berquist, 1974; Baker, 1978; ILO, 1977), there has not been a significant increase in the proportion of women in official positions (Hartman, 1976; Legrande, 1978). Women are more visible on the shop floor than in the higher echelons of union leadership, yet even on the shop floor level they are greatly underrepresented (Wertheimer and Nelson, 1975; Izraeli and Poraz, 1980). The absence of women in positions of power in the unions is probably a partial explanation for the tendency, in all societies, toward a neglect of women's issues in the union movements. How to increase the numbers of women in positions of influence in unions is an important issue in the larger context of improving the situation of women workers.

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Most studies of women in organizations have focused on the barriers which keep women concentrated at the lower levels of a hierarchy. Less systematic investigation has been made of the factors conducive to upward mobility, although sponsorship, institutionalized promotion ladders, and universalistic criteria for advancement have been cited as helping women to advance (e.g. Epstein, 1970; Gordon, 1975).

This paper explores another factor, the effects of socialization in the work place on the motivation of women to accept leadership responsibilities and on their ability to generate support for their election. The thesis that adult occupational experience 'has a real and substantial impact' upon people's psychological functioning, observe Kohn and Schooler (1973), goes back to Marx. After a first attempt at an empirical appraisal of this thesis, they conclude that the job *does* play a part in shaping the person and that there is a continuing interplay throughout a person's career between person affecting job and job affecting person. In their review of the adult socialization literature, Mortimer and Simmons (1978) make a similar point, namely that 'occupational experience leads to broad changes in personality through time' (p. 446) and 'changes in self-esteem parallel occupational successes and failures' (p. 443).

Exposure to new situations, acquisition of new roles or the development of new skills can result in important specific changes for the individuals. Women's consciousness raising and assertiveness training programs which are built on this principle seem to lead to significant changes in women's attitudes and behavior (Brush, Gold and White, 1978). Lockheed and Hall (1976) found that women who had an opportunity to develop task specific expectations for their own competence were more active and influential in mixed-sex groups than women who did not have such an opportunity. Furthermore, once a woman established an expectation within a group concerning her competence in a specific task, this expectation tended to generalize to new tasks. Epstein (1976) and Lockheed and Hall (1976) make essentially the same point; namely, that successful experience in task performance enhances a woman's self-confidence and other people's expectations of her competence, as well as her participation in group activities.

Women have fewer opportunities than men to develop a sense of competence and expectation of success outside the home in tasks requiring them to be assertive, authoritative and to exert or withstand social pressure. There is some evidence that women from

lower socio-economic backgrounds are even less certain about their self-worth than those from middle-class backgrounds (Tiedt, 1972; Kaplan, 1973). As industrial workers they, more than men, are consigned to routine and repetitive jobs in which they have little opportunity to develop new skills and increased sense of competence.

### **The Union Context**

This study examines sex differences in the effects of a specific socialization experience, that of being a first line supervisor on becoming a union officer. The data are derived from a larger study of local union officers in Israel known as workers' committees. The workers' committee is the plant level organization of the trade union department of the Histadrut — General Federation of Labor, which represents approximately 80 percent of all wage and salaried workers in Israel.

The committee is comprised of delegates usually elected every two years. In industrial firms, the interest of this paper, there are frequently separate committees for blue collar workers and for clerical and professional workers. The members of blue collar workers' committees may be elected jointly by all workers with each allotted a number of ballots equal to the number of members on the committee. Alternatively, members may be elected by individual departments, or occupational groups. Because within each firm women are generally concentrated in a very small number of departments and occupations, the former method results in a significantly greater proportion of female committee members than the latter. It seems that given several ballots, workers are more likely to vote for a woman than when given only one ballot. Once elected by their constituency, the members collectively represent *all* the employees in the plant. Negotiations over working conditions and other matters take place between management and the committee as a whole.

The workers' committee is responsible for the administration of the pertinent collective agreement within the plant and for ensuring management's compliance with it. In addition, however, union officers have partial or total control over several manpower functions and play an important role in a large number of matters affecting working conditions (Shirom, 1971). They usually participate in decision-making about promotions, negotiate wage increases and

fringe benefits above those determined in the industry-wide collective agreement, and intervene on matters of dismissals, transfers and other changes in worker status or role.

Because workers' committees generally have considerable influence on access to organizational resources and the distribution of benefits, it is in the interest of women that their needs and wants be represented.

Becoming a union officer may be viewed as a final outcome in a two stage process which includes self-presentation and support mobilization. First, the individual must present her/himself as a candidate. Candidacy may be self or other initiated but in every case requires the consent of the candidate. Women, more than men, shy away from participation in the 'political life' of the organization, although lack of support as well as competing home duties help to explain low participation. There is evidence that their avoidance of such activities is in part related to lack of environmental support for leadership roles, low self-confidence in achievement settings (Webster and Sobieszek, 1974; O'Leary, 1974; Stein and Bailey, 1973; Lenney, 1977) and to women's greater tendency to underestimate future performance (O'Leary, 1978). Women's self-derogating behavior is particularly evident when the task is associated with males (Heilman and Kram, 1978), as is that of the union officer, and when it requires competing with others, especially men (Hartman, 1976; Benton, 1973; House, 1974). Moreover, women do not expect to do as well as men in new tasks (O'Leary, 1978). Therefore, they may be particularly reluctant to be a candidate for union office, a situation in which they must compete with men to do new tasks at which they might fail.

The second stage in the process of becoming a union officer requires mobilizing support among workers and getting their votes. Since both men and women tend to consider women less able to command respect and less suitable for leadership roles, even if a woman gets onto the list of candidates, when she competes with a man, her chances of mobilizing the support required for getting elected are smaller than his.

In summary, it appears that at both stages women face greater obstacles than men; they tend to be more reticent to compete for positions and less successful in getting elected.

### **Supervision — An Avenue of Entry**

The main hypothesis of this study is that prior experience in the role of first line supervisor helps overcome the obstacles associated with self-presentation and support generation and, therefore, is an important avenue for entry into official positions within the union, especially for women.

Such experience provides opportunities for developing a sense of competence in activities required of a union officer, thus increasing a woman's willingness to stand for office. For example, the supervisor initiates activities for others, represents workers to management and vice versa, interacts and sometimes negotiates with those in positions of authority. The very fact of management's recognition of her and her formal authority, no matter how modest, enhances a woman's sense of competence and worth. This experience is a form of learning which results in a new assessment of one's abilities and opportunities. Socialization to new ways of thinking about oneself and one's relationship to others which takes place when a manual worker becomes a supervisor, may be abstracted and generalized to other situations and for women, may result in a greater predisposition to run for office.

The supervisory role contributes to mobilizing support by making a woman more visible to others who are her potential voters. While most women's jobs keep them tied to the machine, hidden from all but immediate workmates, supervisors move among workers and often between departments and management offices, open to the view of others. Since they are active, they are also more likely to develop a reputation for leadership; a finding derived from small group research which indicates that the more active members tend to be perceived as more influential by others (Marak, 1964; Zdep, 1969; Morris and Hackman, 1969). Management's selection of the supervisor, furthermore, is an endorsement of her leadership skill and an indication to others that as their representative, she will have access to those who control the organization's resources.

Although the supervisor's formal authority is narrow, s/he is still in a position to do favors for workers. Even small considerations such as dispensing extra overtime, or overlooking misdemeanors, are resources the supervisor can use to accumulate social credit, which may be cashed in for political support at a later date (Blau and Scott, 1962; Israeli, 1976). All these factors combined — greater exposure, perceived leadership qualities and accumulated

social credit — make it more likely that women with supervisory experience will get elected than those without such experience. Since men seem to require such experience less to become an elected committee member, being a supervisor will be a better predictor of election for women than for men.

In Israel it is not unusual for a union officer to serve simultaneously as a first line supervisor. While this is widespread practice, the reasons for it in Israel have not as yet been studied. A common explanation of how the roles come to be filled by the same person is that, for the ambitious worker, the position of committee member is a springboard for promotion. Management, the argument goes, seeking the 'cooperation' of union officers, promotes them to supervisory roles, thus co-opting them and in effect neutralizing their influence over the workers. Since we intend to claim the supervisory role is an avenue of entry into the union officer role rather than vice versa, it will be necessary to establish in the case of our sample, which of the two experiences was temporally prior.

### **Hypotheses**

In the light of the foregoing discussion we formulated the following hypotheses:

1. The proportion of supervisors among women officers will be significantly greater than their proportion in the workforce and the probability of becoming a union officer will be greater for female supervisors than for male supervisors.
2. Supervisory experience will precede rather than follow election to the position of union officer.
3. A significantly greater proportion of women than men will have had apprehensions about becoming a union officer.
4. For women but not for men, apprehensions will be negatively associated with prior supervisory experience.

### **Method**

The sampling frame was a list of firms in Israel in 1977 which met the following three criteria: they were within one of the three female labor intensive industries — food, textiles and clothing, and

electronics; they had a minimum of 100 workers and at least one woman union officer in the firm. Only 50 percent of the firms meeting the first two criteria also met the third. Of the 65 eligible firms 57 (87.7 percent) were included in the final sample. In each, all the representatives of the blue collar (daily) workers were interviewed personally at the factory during work hours. Usable responses were obtained from 259 part time local union officers (111 women, 148 men) who comprised 80 percent of the blue collar officers in the firms studied.

### **Findings**

To test the first hypothesis respondents were asked whether they are currently responsible for the work of others. 46 percent of the women and 54 percent of the men replied in the affirmative, that is, almost half the officers in the sample. Unfortunately, data are not available from our study or from any other source to allow an exact and direct calculation of the proportion of women supervisors and of male supervisors who became union officers. Data collected by the Central Bureau of Statistics broken down by industry, however (Table 1), reveal that of the total semi-skilled and skilled workers in the labor force in each of the three industries the proportion of women who are supervisors is much smaller than the proportion of men (Table 1, Item A). Women comprise 5.2 percent of all supervisors among food workers, 20 percent among textile and needle trade workers, and 2.6 percent among electric and electronic production workers and assemblers (Table 1, Item B). Among the union officers in our study, calculated on the basis of the industry in which they worked, in food women supervisors comprised 24.3 percent of the officers and men 41.5 percent. (The remaining 34.2 percent of the officers were not supervisors.) In textiles, women supervisors comprised 22.8 percent of the officers, men 66.1 percent, and in electronics women 14.6 percent and men 24.3 percent (Table 1, Item C). In other words, the proportion of women supervisors among officers is many times greater than their proportion in the work force and the difference between the proportion of women and men supervisors among union officers is much smaller than this difference in their proportions in the work force. From this we conclude that women supervisors are highly over-represented among union officers relative to their proportion in the

**TABLE 1**  
**Proportion of Supervisors by Industry and Sex<sup>1</sup>**

	Food <sup>a</sup>	Textiles <sup>b</sup>	Electronics <sup>c</sup>
A. Supervisors in labour force as % of total workers			
Men	11.8	4.0	8.0
Women	0.6	1.0	0.2
B. Women supervisors in labor force as % of total supervisors	5.2	20.0	2.6
C. Supervisors in sample as % of all committee officers			
Men	41.5	66.1	24.3
Women	24.3	22.8	14.6

*Key:* Includes semi-skilled and skilled:

a. food and beverage workers;

b. textiles and needle trade workers;

c. production and assembly workers of electric and electronic equipment.

*Source:* Computed from data derived from Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (1976), 'Employed Persons in Annual Labour Force, 1972'. Supplement, Vol. XXVII, 7, Jerusalem, and unpublished data supplied by Israel Central Bureau of Statistics.

labor force and that the probability of a woman supervisor becoming a union officer is many times greater than the probability of a man doing so. That is, being a supervisor is a better predictor of becoming a union officer for women than it is for men. Hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

To test the second hypothesis respondents currently responsible for other workers were asked whether they had been assigned the job prior to our following their election. Those not currently supervisors were asked whether, in the past, they had been responsible for others and if so, whether this was prior to, or following their election. Responses from the two questions concerning supervision responsibility in the present and in the past were grouped as presented in Table 2. Among all those with supervisory experience (Table 2) only 18 percent (27 out of 150) were promoted following their election to union office. The remainder had attained the job prior to election. This finding disconfirms the 'cooptation theory' as



**TABLE 2**  
**Worker Committee Members by Supervisory Experience**  
**and Sex**

	Men	Women
1. Had been supervisor prior to election*	49% (72)	46% (51)
2. Became supervisor following election*	11% (16)	10% (11)
3. Has never been supervisor	40% (60)	44% (49)
	100% (148)	100% (111)

\*includes those currently supervisors as well as those no longer holding the job.

Chi<sup>2</sup> = .34266; p = .NS.

the explanation for the prevalence of supervisors among union officers, and points rather to the movement being in the opposite direction, from supervision to union office. Hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

To test the third hypothesis, respondents' apprehensions concerning becoming a union officer were elicited by the following questions:

Before taking on a new job every person has certain apprehensions and fears. I will read you a number of apprehensions and you tell me which of them you had or did not have *prior* to your being elected to the Workers' Committee:

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>Management Officers</i> | 1. The management would not take me seriously                    |
| <i>Workers</i>             | 2. The other union officers would not take me seriously          |
| <i>Laws</i>                | 3. I would have problems dealing with the workers in the factory |
| <i>Superior Failure</i>    | 4. I would not understand the laws and (collective) agreements   |
|                            | 5. I would have problems with my immediate superior              |
|                            | 6. I would not be successful as a union officer                  |

Each respondent was given a score (from 0-6) based on the number of apprehensions cited. Women and men did not differ significant-

ly in the number of apprehensions they report having experienced. Just over 29 percent of each sex claimed to have had no apprehensions.

On specific items the comparison between men and women (columns 1 and 2 of Table 3) produced inconsistent results. Of the six items more men were apprehensive on three, more women on the other three. The only difference between the sexes that was statistically significant was the fear among more women about understanding Laws. Hypothesis 3 was, therefore, disconfirmed except for Item 4 — Laws.

Controlling for prior supervisory experience reveals that there is an interaction effect between sex and experience in relation to apprehensions. On each of the items (Table 3, columns 3-4), fewer women with prior supervisory experience expressed having had apprehensions, compared to those without. The difference is statistically significant on two — Workers and Failure. In contrast, on three of the six items fewer men without past experience had been apprehensive than those with (columns 5-6), although none of the differences is significant. In other words, experience affected women and men in different ways. It tended to reduce women's apprehensions but it appears to have had no significant effect on men.

Experience also had a differential effect on the number of apprehensions. Women supervisors had significantly fewer apprehensions than non-supervisors ( $\text{Chi}^2 = 5.73$ ,  $p = .02$ ). We found no statistically significant differences for men, although on the average the supervisors tended to have had more apprehensions.

An examination of the possible confounding influence of years of seniority as shop steward (since there are more men than women among the old timers) did not show any significant differences in apprehensions at different seniority levels in the case of women. For men we found significant differences for the items Workers and Failure. In both cases fewer old timers claimed to have been apprehensive. Controlling for seniority, thus, reduces the difference between the sexes on these two items but does not eliminate it. On all other items, however, the findings for both men and women are inconsistent, with new shop stewards more apprehensive on some and less on others.

All in all, therefore, the results support hypothesis 4.

**TABLE 3**  
**Shop Stewards with Apprehensions by Sex and Prior Supervisory Experience (Percentages)**

	Total*		Women**		Men**	
	Women 1	Men 2	Prior supervisory experience			
			With 3	Without 4	With 5	Without 6
Management	18	19	20	21	24	17
Officers	9	14	6	13	16	14
Workers	41	34	22	52 <sup>2</sup>	29	34
Laws	38	21 <sup>1</sup>	33	38	16	31
Superior	29	34	22	38	25	36
Failure	20	13	12	31 <sup>3</sup>	13	10
	(110)	(146)	(51)	(48)	(71)	(59)

\*The columns total more than 100 percent since each person could indicate more than one apprehension.

\*\*Does not include those who became supervisors following election to the Workers' Committee.

(1)  $\text{Chi}^2 = 5.82, p < .05$ .

(2)  $\text{Chi}^2 = 8.65, p < .01$ .

(3)  $\text{Chi}^2 = 4.51, p < .05$ .

## Discussion

We have argued in this paper that supervisory experience increases the likelihood that a woman will become a union officer, partly through its impact on her psychological functioning. An alternative interpretation of our data, however, would be that women who become supervisors are initially different from those who do not and that they are either selected by employers or apply for the job because of these differences in their attitudes. Accordingly, being a supervisor would reflect rather than affect attitudes toward failure and fellow workers.

Unfortunately, we lack longitudinal data that would permit a systematic test of the direction of influence. The researcher's experience based on intensive field work in a number of factories and extensive interviews with supervisors and workers' committee members suggests that managers generally select women known to

be good workers and familiar with different phases of the work process, as supervisors. They are chosen more for their reliability and deference to management than for leadership qualities. I cannot disregard the possibility, however, that women who meet these selection criteria have lower fear of failure or of conflict with fellow workers than other women. There is reason to believe, however, that successful experience in the supervisory role has a significant impact on women's subsequent leadership career.

Fellow workers expect their union representative to look after their interests, and make gains from management on their behalf. The union officer must often justify his/her inability to make greater gains, or ward off undesirable measures introduced by management. S/he must then bear the brunt of disappointed and disgruntled workers and frequently of accusations of favoritism. Women appear to attach greater importance than men to affiliation (Hoffman, 1972) which may lead to the decision that being a union officer is not worth the price to be paid in social relationships.

The strongest specific effect on women of being a supervisor was in reducing fear of facing problems with fellow workers. This was the most prevalent apprehension among the inexperienced and their proportion was significantly higher than among the experienced (52 percent and 22 percent respectively).

Supervisory experience works to reduce apprehensions about relations with fellow workers in two ways. First, the woman learns that having authority need not bring her into conflict with her workmates. Since her authority is very limited neither her boss nor her subordinates develop exaggerated expectations which may result in disappointment and antagonism. Second, her stint in office, the very experience of wielding authority and having discretion — even if only very limited — may increase her sense of competence and make her less dependent on the acceptance of her workmates. If the need for acceptance inhibits advancement, advancement may reduce the need for acceptance by workers. Kanter's suggestion that 'feedback loops connect position and response' is relevant here:

Those with opportunity are thereby induced to behave in ways that generate more opportunity, which in turn, produces further inducement for the behavior (Kanter, 1977: 249)

Supervisors are induced to become worker representatives. Ex-

perience enhances their expectation of success as indicated by the drop in numbers of experienced women who had feared they would fail in the job, or come into conflict with fellow workers. It appears, however, to teach men a different lesson. Perhaps having taken on the job with relative confidence, which would be consistent with the finding that men tend to overestimate their future performance, they learn that to satisfy the demands of fellow workers is more difficult than they had expected.

In sum, in the industries studied, prior supervisory experience is a channel of mobility into union office. This is true for both men and women, for whom this managerial role helps to mobilize support and get votes. In this study we suggest that for women, it seems to serve an additional function — it provides a socializing experience which makes them more predisposed to become candidates and more likely to succeed in the competition for office. Our study suggests, furthermore, that providing working women with other similar competence-enhancing experiences may be highly effective for increasing their ranks among the union leadership.

## Notes

1. The smaller ratio of female to male supervisors in textiles compared to the other two industries may be related to the fact that women comprise a larger proportion of the employed in the textile industry: 54 percent compared to 31 percent in electronics and 29 percent in food the year of the study.

2. The question was purposely biased on the assumption that social desirability would make committee members reluctant to admit having had apprehensions.

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