

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Strategies to encourage women workers to sign up and remain in trade unions

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ABSTRACT

For more than a decade, researchers have been interested in the study of trade unions across the world, including Malaysia. Although trade unions have been in this country, but there have been a number of withdrawals of women's membership in the past few years, from 2018 to 2021. The objective of the study is to discuss why women refuse to join trade unions, the reasons behind it, and how to encourage women to join and stay in trade unions. To highlight, this study discussed several factors that explain why women still refuse to join trade unions in the first subtopic. In the discussion, it was stated about gender inequality, work culture, different ideologies, low awareness, anti-union sentiments and work imbalance. Meanwhile, the second subtopic explained and justified the reasons women leave the union, including factors such as leadership, personal and family factors, insufficient facilities and support, working factors, dues factors and union structure. In the third part, this research discussed multiple strategies that can be implemented to encourage women to join and stay in trade unions. Many roles need to be played together as a whole body, regardless of the organization itself, to enforce the participation of women in trade unions. Thus, this research suggests providing societal and economic support for women, paying attention to the structure of the organization, developing a supportive and positive work environment, developing a women's empowerment campaign and promoting equality policies in trade unions. Overall, future research needs to be explored to stay in trend and relevant to current developments and situations in trade unions.

Keywords: trade unions; women; participation

1. Introduction

A trade union is an association of workers and employers who are engaged in a business, career, or industry on a temporary or permanent basis in order to pursue authorized purposes^[1]. A trade union is essential for an employee to implement his or her right to collective bargaining with the employer^[2]. It seeks to promote the social, economic, and political interests of workers. The primary concept of this protection entails a better human right in their job, which includes, among other things, the right to fair wages, improved employment terms and conditions, a safe working environment, and the ability to form a collective voice against unfair acts by employers, free of all types of influence or constraints^[3]. In Malaysia, there are three sorts of trade unions,

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which are public sector, private sector, and employers' unions^[1]. Trade unions provide members with benefits that they would not be able to obtain through individual bargaining.

The establishment and functioning of a trade union hinge on the fundamental right of freedom of association, which is recognized globally as one of the four Core Labor Standards by the International Labor Organization (ILO)^[4,5]. This right is essential for unions to operate effectively and advocate for workers' interests. Importantly, in the context of Malaysia, the Federal Constitution guarantees freedom of association^[2]. This constitutional assurance grants workers in Malaysia the right to establish and join trade unions. The Trade Union Act of 1959 further plays a pivotal role in regulating union activities, ensuring they operate in an organized and peaceful manner. This legal framework helps to foster a conducive environment for unions to pursue their objectives, as long as they align with the provisions specified in the trade union constitution.

These legal and constitutional provisions not only safeguard the rights of workers in Malaysia but also underline the importance of regulating trade union activities to maintain order and facilitate their vital role in representing labor interests. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), the percentage of memberships in the United States dropped from 10.8% to 10.3%. Additionally, 7.0 million workers in the public sector were union members, the same number as in the private sector. Over the course of the year, there were 191,000 fewer union members in the public sector. Public-sector union membership increased by 1.2% in 2020 but decreased by 0.9% to 33.9% in 2021. Local government continued to have the largest union membership rate in 2021, at 40.2%, since it employs many workers in strongly unionized occupations, including police officers, firefighters, and teachers. Over the course of the year, there were fewer union workers employed in the private sector. Although the number of women in the labor force is close to 50%, it is still lower than that of men, at 76%^[6]. This follows an upward trend that is slowed down by the additional duties that this sector adopts.

However, recently, empirical studies have shown a fall in union membership in certain European nations over the previous decade, as well as in Malaysia. This has been attributed to the economic cycle or the ineffectiveness of trade unions. Due to a decline in both union membership and the number of unions, the trade union movement in Malaysia also appears to be fading. As of 2020, approximately 956,542 workers were union members, compared to 940,914 in 2021 in total. While in the private sector, the membership of trade unions was 359,273 in 2021 from 371,512 in 2020, as depicted in **Table 1**. In contrast to the rate of the number of unions in the government sector, in 2021 there are more than in 2020, with 505,864 and 501,032 respectively, as depicted in **Figure 1** by gender from 2017 to 2021.

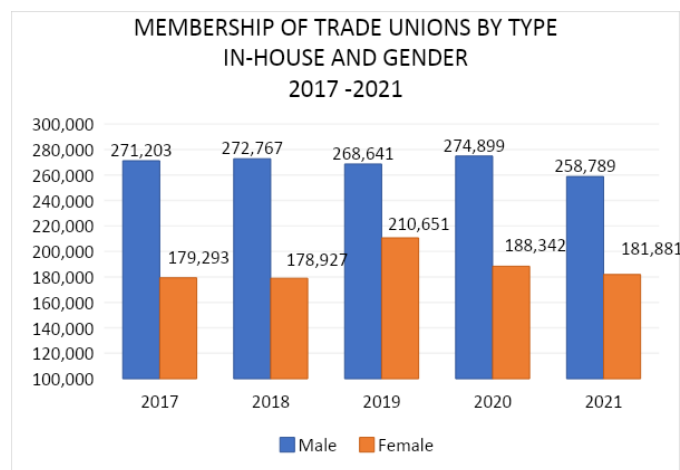


Figure 1. Membership of trade unions by type in-house and gender 2017–2021.

Source: Jabatan Hal Ehwal Kesatuan Sekerja Kementerian Sumber Manusia, 2021.

Table 1. Trade unions membership private and government sector by gender 2017–2021.

Year	Government		Total	Private		Total	Statutory body		Total
	Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female	
2017	191,041	298,907	489,948	252,855	116,813	369,668	44,096	25,520	69,616
2018	173,507	297,657	471,164	271,943	117,942	389,885	44,178	25,507	69,685
2019	173,468	326,423	499,891	255,756	110,661	366,417	50,068	32,396	82,464
2020	174,600	326,432	501,032	259,315	112,197	371,512	52,138	31,860	83,998
2021	173,880	331,984	505,864	250,670	108,603	359,273	46,700	29,077	75,777

Source: Jabatan Hal Ehwal Kesatuan Sekerja Kementerian Sumber Manusia, 2021.

To highlight, the membership of trade unions by type in-house by gender as depicted in **Figure 1**, shows a drop in the number of women from 188,342 to 18,881 in 2021. Thus, the purpose of this research is to analyze why women decline to join trade unions, the reasons behind this, and how to persuade women to join and remain in trade unions.

2. Discussion

Over time, there has been a noticeable increase in the participation of women in all aspects of life, including employment and career progression. Women’s involvement in both the industrial and occupational systems significantly marked high engagement in this current state. Prior to that, it showed some movement and changes in the participation of the trade unions. For instance, in **Figure 2**, it shows the rising numbers of women’s membership within the national scope of the trade unions throughout the years, from 2017 until 2021. In 2021, the total number had increased by 9.0% to 287,783 from 261,948 recorded in 2017. As a matter of fact, these enlargements have been happening across developed countries like European, Western, and Asian countries since a few years ago and imply that increased labor supply and productivity can help a nation’s economy grow if there is a high female labor force participation rate^[7]. Notably, when there is a high female labor force, it could raise the number of women participating in trade unions. Nonetheless, it’s essential to acknowledge that there are still a limited number of women who remain hesitant to join trade unions. In the subsequent sections, we delve into the factors that hinder their participation, explore the reasons behind women leaving these organizations, and discuss strategies aimed at both encouraging women to join trade unions and ensuring their continued engagement.

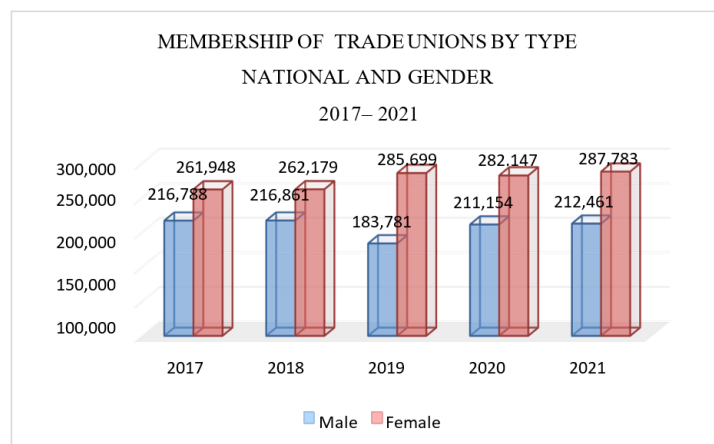


Figure 2. Membership of trade unions by type national and gender of the year 2017–2021.

Source: JHEKS, 2021.

2.1. Factors women still refuse to join trade unions

2.1.1. Gender inequality

In nations with both developed and developing economies, gender discrimination continues to be a serious issue^[8]. Gender discrimination or gender inequality has become a buzzword. In many recent years, multiple previous studies have highlighted this subject. Observed gender inequality and feminism in Portugal as the major factors that exclude women from unions^[9]. Even in highly skilled occupations, there are significant gender disparities. Not to mention, these women struggled with their femininity in environments where hegemonic masculinity predominated because they shared an ideology that categorizes men and women according to particular traits, competencies, and duties^[10]. Moreover, points out that “in Britain, although women appear to benefit from their investment in union membership, there are no additional returns to being in a workplace where union bargaining power is strengthened through high density, raising questions about the extent to which unions are focused on using their organizational strength to tackle gender wage inequality” (p.15). Thus, it is clearly evident that gender inequality does not tend to happen only outside of the unionization, but it is still possible to occur in unions^[11].

2.1.2. Companies also provide employees protection

Unions make promises to provide workers with respect, dignity, voice, safety, and “living wage,” security, compliance with employment laws, identification with a successful, winning organization, and freedom from harassment, discrimination or retaliation. However, employee-friendly employers can (and should) adopt policies, practices and procedures to provide those same benefits to workers—at no additional cost to the workers. Human resource management that is characterized by giving salary and rank increases according to performance for workers who give full commitment to the organization causes workers not to be attracted to trade unions^[12]. According to the union, for a worker to get a high salary and promotion, it will take a long time and through a collective agreement that takes a long time. From another point of view, first, the provision of benefits to divert the workers’ attention from being involved in trade unions^[13]. Second, the burden of costs must demonstrate that the establishment and involvement of a trade union are losses. Employers can apply these two dimensions simultaneously. The purpose is to influence the values and perceptions of workers so that they follow the employer’s wishes. For example, making workers see unions only as a source of conflict. So, employers also balance instrumental tactics with culture. Employers instill a culture that makes workers loyal to the company. For example, corporate identity and a fun work atmosphere. This way can present the employer as a good employer and the best company to work for. However, the goal is to discourage workers from organizing trade unions. The internalization of these norms will create a harmonious relationship between employers and workers despite exploitation and problems. In addition, two-way communication as a company culture can avoid strikes among workers^[14].

In addition, women’s work participation, it is crucial to consider the multifaceted factors that influence their engagement in the workforce. One significant aspect is women’s empowerment, which plays a pivotal role in determining their ability to pursue employment opportunities and economic independence^[12]. Additionally, the role of consent from husbands or older family members can either facilitate or hinder a woman’s decision to work outside the home. These issues highlight the complex interplay between societal norms, family dynamics, and individual agency in shaping women’s work participation^[15]. An academic exploration of these factors is essential for a comprehensive understanding of women’s labor force participation and can provide valuable insights for policies aimed at promoting gender equality and economic empowerment. Furthermore, women’s participation in the workforce is closely tied to their level of empowerment^[16]. Empowerment encompasses various aspects, including access to education, financial independence, and decision-making power within the household. Higher levels of empowerment often lead to

increased work participation among women, as they can make choices regarding their careers and economic activities independently.

Moreover, in many societies, including some in Malaysia, women may require the consent of husbands or older family members to engage in paid work. This practice can be a significant barrier to women's employment^[17]. It is crucial to examine the reasons behind such consent requirements, whether they are based on cultural norms or legal obligations, and their impact on women's economic opportunities.

2.1.3. Different ideologies

In any organization, the members of the union adhere to different ideologies. It means that here in the unions, they work for the ideology of left-wing politics and some of the members are not into left-wing politics, but they are on the side of right-wing and conservative instead. These two elements have their own pros and cons. Furthermore, not all workers agree with the left-wing political ideology^[18]. It is because left-wing politicians put the political agenda over economic goals and they also think that politics and labor unions should be closely related. In fact, there are some politicians take advantage of the existing trade unions as a medium to approach the workers and use the trade unions as tools of agitation that give power to the working class. Hence, women do not have an interest in engaging in office politics and it makes them feel uncomfortable when the members of unions show too much political spirit in the organization. In the same vein, a lot of women respond negatively and have an allergic reaction to office politics^[19]. Female workers prefer to work in a more harmonious working environment where collaboration and ethics are promoted as part of management's core values^[15].

2.1.4. Low awareness

Female workers are unaware of the union's role and importance because they believe male workers control labor unions^[17]. They have a blurry understanding of what it means to be a member of a trade union. They have rights, as for example, to be able to speak out on important issues such as industrial action or the best way to approach pay bargaining. Trade unions actively oppose discrimination and work to ensure equal and diverse workplaces. If a woman is a member of a minority, her experience and prospects at work will benefit directly, as will the motivating feeling of being an advocate for change. According to studies, diverse workplaces have many advantages as well, so this will have a positive effect on women's employee experiences regardless of background. Even in places where labor unions exist, they are still weak because of unclear vision, and the state has discouraged unionism for specific occupations, making women's participation in trade unions lower. In addition, women are also concentrated in low-skilled and low-grade jobs. This clearly shows the weakness of women in associations. The root of a trade union is a skilled organization and the trade union will be stronger when workers have an important position in the organization and the economy^[20]. Men are better at organizing because they have skills and giving insight into skills is important. On the other hand, women think that women's work involves work that lacks the objective of skills and women think that they are not skilled^[21]. Therefore, women are less involved in organizing.

2.1.5. Anti-unions sentiments

Anti-union sentiments can also be one of the aspects of this matter where women refuse to take part in trade unions. The phrase "anti-union" is used to describe actions that hinder, thwart or delegitimize labor union organizing campaigns, occasionally going as far as first-contract or collective bargaining discussions. The occurrence of anti-union sentiments arises when union members feel that the union did not fulfill their expectations and dislike paying union dues because they believe they receive nothing in return for their money. For instance, greater bargaining power in terms of job security, higher payments, and greater benefits^[16] In some cases, workers are prevented from exercising their right to collective bargaining by employers using

threats, intimidation, and harassment^[22]. Prior to this, the right to organize cannot be guaranteed by their employers themselves, and the employer's intimidation tactics result in workers who want to join a union feeling unsafe and becoming afraid.

2.1.6. Family commitment and work imbalance

Family commitment and work imbalance also become the reasons why women still refuse to join trade unions. Eventually, the trade union issues within Malaysian context will require women workers to pay attention too. As mentioned by the study^[23], despite the fact that women's educational attainment has greatly increased, their labor force participation is still far lower than men's. The findings of the research enlightened women facing more difficulties in balancing work and family life, whereby women play a more caring role at home than men do. In their daily routine, they need to take care of children and the elderly. At the same time, they play an ultimate role at the workplace as such, it can cause them to feel burdened in terms of their responsibilities. On top of that, in the newspaper, *The Star* reported that Malaysia has not given women enough legal protection against sexism, abuse, and discrimination at the workplace, which means that the significant obstacles that women still face in order to meaningfully participate in labor unions have not been significantly reduced.

2.2. Factors women leave the unions

2.2.1. Leadership factor

The first reason women tend to leave their trade union is the presence of a male-dominated leadership aspect in every organization. As a result, many women believe that there is no difference between joining or not joining the union because the leadership component is often controlled by men. Men, for example, are more highly regarded in terms of expertise than women^[24]. Numerous research cited by the study^[25] show that, while both sexes have an inclination to underestimate women's abilities in contrast to men's, males may do so more frequently than women. Further data supports this by showing that women's position, influence, and speaking time decline as they become more numerous and that males perceive leadership as being more masculine than women do^[26]. Thus, it may be more difficult for women in circumstances where men predominate to be heard, accepted in positions of leadership, and valued for their knowledge^[27].

2.2.2. Personal and family factor

This includes responsibility for a child's birth, significant diseases, or divorce, all of which might influence a choice to quit a labor union^[28]. For those who are married, it is often considered a constant struggle to find a balance between their career and family, as they spend a lot of time with their busy daily schedules. They cannot divide their attention between the union and their other duties^[29]. Feeding to care for dependent family members or suffering from a serious disease may also be reasons to leave the job, thus union-leaving. A work-life conflict scenario leads to negative effects on the employee, such as decreased job satisfaction, increased stress levels, increased turnover, absenteeism, low productivity, and a lack of commitment^[6]. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) Department of Statistics, the fact that women who quit the labour sector over the age of 26 will not re-enter is one of the factors contributing to the gap in the labor force participation rate due to negative outcomes. This reinforces the women's belief that the union is capable of functioning despite their absence and involvement.

2.2.3. Insufficient facilities and support

To some extent, this is due to their intended position in society, which emphasizes women's primary commitment to the house rather than outside activities, as well as their prior education, which supports this. For example, when environmental conditions become overly strict for businesses, managers need workers who

are devoted to the firm and who are dedicated to their work during the day^[6]. Women abandon unions because unions do not provide supportive facilities for women to attend union activities, such as arranging union meetings where women can attend and providing nurseries and during courses, especially if the courses demand a significant amount of time away from home^[30]. In addition, employers' reluctance to provide leave for women to attend union courses should be addressed in collective bargaining by the major unions, as well as by urging the government to do so^[31].

2.2.4. Working factor

Women also leave unions because they influence their work. Changes in employment status, satisfaction of the job, and treatment by the employer are examples of work-related incentives^[32]. In these situations, women do not criticize the union or its operations. Motives, including social rewards such as group or professional identities and competitive identification, may be present in work-related difficulties. A new job means a new work environment and perhaps new factors that influence the formation of such social or professional identities^[33]. It should be underlined that logical cost-benefit analyzes, which are undoubtedly instrumental in nature, contribute to the employment-related causes of union departure. The advantages of membership, for instance, can be nearly entirely balanced by losing a job.

2.2.5. Dues factor

Members regularly contribute to their union by paying dues. According to the research^[34], women provide funding for essential union activities, including organizing, contract negotiations, and member-driven initiatives. Active members will also consider fees and are more inclined to leave if they are thought to be excessively expensive. In many unions, a portion of the budget is set aside for a strike fund, which, in the case of a strike, goes directly to the workers. The majority of unions charge one percent of gross revenue as registration fees. Although not much, it becomes a burden factor for someone who is a member^[35]. Recruiting fees or related charges refer to any fees or expenditures incurred in the recruitment process in order for workers to get employment or placement, regardless of the method, time, or location of its imposition or collection^[30].

2.2.6. Unions structured

The styles and structures of trade unions vary by nation and even by industry within the same country. The union will produce significant amounts of money every year. Several factors impact this, such as weakening the labor movement, which leads to increased economic inequality^[36]. Also, women tend to leave unions because of union-related reasons that often involve conflict with the union, such as disagreements over harassment, discrimination, or workplace bullying. In addition, if the outcomes of the union's bargaining are viewed as unnecessary or insignificant, or if union services are not enough, these situations may provide strategic reasons for quitting the union^[31].

2.2.7. Unions don't have a good record of representing workers

The role of trade unions is also very important for the participation of workers in trade unions. According to the research^[37], the main role of trade unions is to fight for and fulfill the needs and wishes of workers with collective legislation between workers and employers. Workers usually support and are interested in joining a union due to job dissatisfaction such as wages and benefits, job security, job security, promotion and dissatisfaction with supervisors. In addition, they consider the union to be a body that helps each other, is fair and has great power to influence the decisions made by the other party. In addition, women workers join trade unions due to their dissatisfaction with basic physiological needs, workplace safety, social and self-esteem needs^[38]. Workers also decide to join a trade union depending on the benefits received through the trade union versus the cost to the trade union. However, the implementation of the concept of internal trade unions in Malaysia has invited criticism and is often disputed in terms of its effectiveness because internal trade unions

are seen as unable to deal with worker problems but often comply with the policies set by the employer (management-controlled lapdogs) and are known as a union of companies^[12]. This concept turns out to be different from the internal trade union concept practiced in Japan because their internal trade union involves all workers, including management.

2.2.8. Unions may pit workers against companies

Some may argue that unions pit workers against companies—always fighting for their rights instead of working together with the company to fight towards a common goal. For companies, of course, this can hurt the culture of the workplace. The trade unions, among others, have the role of negotiating the terms and conditions of employment through collective bargaining with employers, advising employees and employers regarding labor policies in the organization, resolving complaints of injustice experienced by employees, organizing reasonable pickets, representing and protecting workers in accordance with the requirements of labor laws in Malaysia^[12]. However, the opposite happened. The Trade Union Act 1959 and the Industrial Relations Act 1967 have caused management to oppose the movement of the union movement because unhealthy communication practices reflect the negative characteristics of legislation^[39]. Acceptance of trade unions in the workplace is one of the factors contributing to the failure of union recognition. The management at the workplace does not cooperate with the existence of trade unions. They often take carelessness and take advantage of the weakness of the leadership of the trade union. This will cause the trade union to fail to get recognition in the workplace and they tend to fight instead of working together^[40].

2.3. Strategies to encourage women to join and stay in trade unions

2.3.1. Provide societal and economic support

Organizations should address mindsets that lead to inequalities, implement legal changes to lower or eliminate barriers to economic opportunity, and provide societal and economic support for parents. In this study, the provision of societal and economic support for parents especially women, who take on the many responsibilities in every family, is a necessary need. As exemplified by one of China's top trade unions, namely the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). They are dedicated to increasing support for the female workforce. For example, the company gives flexibility to motherhood during working hours when in need. Some companies show concern and give a lot of support to their female workers by providing infant rooms at the workplace. In fact, China has also established a legislative framework with more than 100 laws and rules to protect the rights and interests of women^[41].

2.3.2. Well-structure organization

The structure of the organization matters. Gender inequality, such as discrimination, disparity in promotions, sexist stereotypes, and the wage gap, still prevails for women in the organizational structures, processes or practices due to ignorance. So, what is the solution for this corporeity? A study^[42] found that gender inequalities have a significant impact on the performance of the company. Then the researchers come up with the suggestion that companies disclose and implement gender equality policies. Additionally, the organization may reform paradigms and create awareness within the organization. Reforming or changing paradigms here means the organization should eliminate the older ideology that puts women at a low level in the workplace and the union^[43]. Women have to seem much more competent and passionate in their work, and they have to empower their knowledge or skills^[44]. There is nothing wrong when women become representatives in the union. It should have a room in the union where women can contribute, which will form different styles of leadership among the memberships^[45].

2.3.3. Develop supportive and positive work environment

According to the study^[46], the work force becomes more diverse as a result of increased female

involvement, which might lead to new concepts in management and production that increase overall productivity. In order to increase women's labor force participation and other results for women's empowerment, promoting women's financial inclusion is a crucial policy instrument^[47]. Financial inclusion is defined as the availability of practical and reasonably priced financial services and products for both individuals and businesses. Reduced poverty and increased prosperity are both made possible by financial inclusion. Most importantly, financial inclusion alters conventional gender norms and expectations, which helps women's self-esteem grow. On top of that, unions must make more effort to assist their female members and give them more authority. Amarjeet Kaur, the general secretary of All India Trade Union (AITU), has emphasized that women are far more likely to stay in unions when the environment is supportive. Union leaders have the same rights to certain benefits as other working women, and they too deserve an atmosphere free from harassment and equal opportunities for success^[48]. Generally, a supportive and positive work environment does affect collaborative projects and teamwork. Workers are more willing to engage and maintain a constructive relationship among the members of unions when a positive atmosphere is presented, like respect, empathy, kindness, patience, acceptance, and openness.

2.3.4. Women empowerment campaign

Recruiting and nurturing women's participation in trade unions pose notable challenges. To bolster the involvement of women in trade unions, adopting integrated strategies is essential, such as the implementation of an empowering women campaign. This campaign should be initiated at the grassroots level, focusing on fundamental aspects. For instance, it involves providing improved educational opportunities, delivering comprehensive training, and establishing mentorship programs. These steps are instrumental in not only enhancing the practical skills of women but also in elevating their confidence levels, preparing them to assume leadership roles within organizational unions. This viewpoint aligns with the findings of the study^[49], who emphasize that the success of women's empowerment initiatives relies on empowering women and cultivating dedicated, well-trained, and motivated leadership.

2.3.5. Equality policies

Now, it is time for policymakers to acknowledge the need to change their generally pro-firm policies and create legislation that offers support and protection to both firms and trade unions. The policies made should not be biased. The equality policies of the union are vital. As an example, the establishment of required collective bargaining on gender equality in big firms as a lever for their own and their union's commitment to creating gender equality, as well as the support of gender equality or diversity policies by the French government^[50].

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have explored three key aspects intertwined with women's involvement in trade unions. To summarize, there are various factors contributing to women's reluctance to join trade unions. Our discussion has covered aspects like gender inequality, workplace culture, differing ideologies, limited awareness, anti-union sentiments, and work-life balance challenges. Additionally, we've delved into the reasons behind women leaving these organizations, such as male-dominated leadership, personal and family considerations, insufficient support, work-related issues, dues, and structural aspects.

Furthermore, we've examined several strategies that can be employed to promote women's participation in and retention within trade unions. It's vital to emphasize that a collective effort is necessary, extending beyond the organization itself. As for recommendations, the most effective approaches to attracting women to trade unions involve providing societal and economic support, addressing organizational structures, cultivating

supportive and inclusive work environments, launching empowerment campaigns, and advocating for equality policies within these unions.

In this era of modernization, it is imperative not to leave women behind. Their active participation in labor unions is essential. Working towards women's empowerment is not only a matter of social justice but also a means to enhance diversity in leadership, ultimately creating a competitive advantage for businesses. Fostering gender-oriented cultural and structural changes within unions is vital. This evolution enables unions to boldly address gender issues within companies, acknowledge the value of women and their struggle against discrimination, form committees dedicated to women's concerns, and align with contemporary business practices to jointly pursue common objectives within the union.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, AAK; methodology, AAK and FI; software, AAK; validation, AAK, NAHMA and HMY; formal analysis, AAK; data curation, AAK and NAHMA; writing—original draft preparation, AAK, NAHMA and HMY; writing—review and editing, FI, NAHMA and HMY; supervision, FI. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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