



“There is something missing if women are not there”

What I Heard:

Regarding the capacity of a Regional Office to be supportive, welcoming and safe for CUPW women.

Ms. Lynda Davies  
November 2007

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“Equality is thus a process – a process of constant and flexible examination, of vigilant introspection, and of aggressive open-mindedness.

*Judge Rosalie Abella*

The National Executive Board and the National Women’s Committee are pleased to present this report for discussion at the 2007 Regional Conferences.

Although we have made some progress in addressing barriers to women, it is clear we have more work to do. Subtle and not-so-subtle impediments to women’s participation continue to exist. The dialogue that began in one region gives us an opportunity to examine practices and attitudes that cause us to lose valuable resources.

We thank the sisters and brothers that participated in this consultation for their courage and thoughtfulness. Your reflections can help us move forward.

In Solidarity,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lynn Bue".

Lynn Bue  
1<sup>st</sup> National Vice-President

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## Background and Context

In the spring of 2007, Deborah Bourque, National President and Lynn Bue, 1<sup>st</sup> National Vice President of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) requested that I provide a consultation in my capacity as an organizational development consultant. The theme of the consultation was to explore the capacity of a certain regional office to provide a welcoming, supportive and safe atmosphere for CUPW women. Concerns had been expressed about this and the goals of the consultation were to explore the issues regarding women's participation in the region and make suggestions for improvement. I was asked to undertake the process as someone with knowledge and experience of unions who could provide an outside perspective that would ensure neutrality and objectivity.

## Methodology

In order to hear the views of the CUPW members in the region regarding the themes of support, welcome and safety, I conducted personal interviews between April 2<sup>nd</sup> and July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007. Twenty three people participated in the interviews, including 7 men and 16 women. Interviews ranged in length from 1 to 3 hours. Ninety percent of the interviews were face to face, the remaining 10% were carried out by telephone. The people interviewed had either worked in the regional office or had worked closely with the regionally elected officers in a variety of capacities. Some had knowledge of the regional office over the course of many years while others had more recent experience. Participants were asked the questions:

1. In what ways is the environment supportive, welcoming and safe for women?
2. In what ways is the environment less supportive, welcoming and safe for women?
3. What suggestions do you have for improvement?

The interviews were conducted using an open ended approach. This allowed me to hear issues as they were identified by each participant and provided an opportunity to explore comments more fully. The people currently working in the regional office were contacted first. I used a technique called a snowball as the methodology for inviting participants; at the conclusion of all but the final interviews each participant was asked to identify other individuals who might be of assistance in the process. Using this approach, people with relevant information were then invited to participate on a voluntary and confidential basis.

I then analyzed the interviews by looking for themes and how frequently each theme was raised. Range and diversity of views was also highlighted in the analysis.

## Scope of the Consultation

Early on in the process, I learned from the participants that many of the issues regarding women's participation were broader than the regional office and whether or not it is supportive to women. Participants also identified a range of barriers to women's participation which are reported here.

## What I Heard: The Concerns

### 1 Structural Barriers to Women's Participation

#### 1.a. Family and care giving responsibilities

I heard from almost everyone that women's participation in union meetings, events, activities and involvement in running for office remains a challenge because women still have primary responsibility for child care and household responsibilities. This is a persistent barrier and means that it is highly unlikely that most women with young children are able to get involved in union work of any kind. I heard that many women also have other family responsibilities. It is often women who provide time consuming informal care for aging, ill or people with disabilities. It was pointed out to me that this type of family responsibility is increasing for women as a result of the undermining of the formal health care system in Canada. I heard also that the lower paying jobs within Canada Post are occupied by women and some women have to work at more than one job to make ends meet which means that they would have even less time for union work.

I heard that for many of the current CUPW membership, 'work is work'. These members are unlikely to be interested in becoming involved in union work. The people who mentioned this issue see this as an emerging theme within the membership that will affect the numbers of people interested in getting involved in CUPW. I heard that as people work harder to make ends meet and have to integrate work and personal responsibilities, it is difficult for many to find time for the union.

## 1.b. Problems posed by relocation

Another structural barrier that many people spoke about was that being elected to a regional position means moving to another city.. Economically, this poses many problems for women who are in relationships. If, for instance, a woman is the lower wage earner in a relationship, it is unlikely that she can move her whole family for a three year period of time. Women would have to have very supportive partners to leave home and go to a new city. I heard that many women members would lack this support. It was suggested by some that the only women who could run for regional positions would be single women or those with grown up children. However, I also heard that as women age and become grandmothers they also want to be with their children and grandchildren and are more and more needed as source of material and emotional support for the next generation.

I heard that housing prices are much higher in the city with the regional office than most other areas, which when added to the child care and family responsibility barriers makes it hard for many women to seek office.

## 2. Electing Women to Positions in the Regional Office

### 2.a. Need for women to be in elected positions

A concern for almost everyone that I spoke with is that the regional office has no women representatives with all positions currently occupied by men. Previously, when women have been elected, there has never been more than one women elected at a time.

Many people mentioned the importance of having CUPW women elected to leadership positions. One member captured the sentiment that was expressed by many by stating 'something is missing if women are not there'. I heard that the numbers of women in the overall membership is increasing; the majority of rural route members are women and most temporary positions are being occupied by women. It was suggested that having women in regional leadership positions would better reflect the current and future membership of CUPW.

I heard that women bring a unique set of skills that may be different than the skills that men bring. The knowledge, perspective and experience that women bring is not as valued as it might be in the region. For instance, it was suggested that in grievances women bring an ability to 'read between the lines'.

There is a very small minority view in the region that states that gender should not be an issue in electing people to regional leadership positions and that the only consideration is to have the best qualified person.

## 2.b. Concerns regarding the election process

I heard that for several years, people in the region have remarked that it is important to have a woman in the regional office. And yet, I also heard that the 'politics and secrecy of elections keeps women out'.

Attempts at strategic voting have been unsuccessful in having a woman elected. Now, for many people, striving to have 'a' woman seems tokenistic. A more inclusive affirmative action approach is needed. Several people indicated that it is isolating to have only one woman in the office as that woman has no peer group and informal support system. I heard that some men in the region are not supportive of women caucusing and organizing to ensure that women are elected. It was suggested that men in the region, including the regional office men, need to be more supportive of women organizing themselves.

Several people suggested that it is now time to have a full discussion and debate within CUPW regionally and nationally about affirmative action, up to and including designating positions to ensure that women are elected to leadership positions. There is ambivalence about this idea and many brothers and sisters indicated it will likely be a contentious, difficult debate.

I heard from several people that there are attitudes in the region that make it difficult for women to be elected. Several people commented that once a person is elected to a position in the regional office, there is a sense of entitlement and ownership of that position, and a 'taken for granted reality' that they are 'jobs for life' and that newcomers, in general, are rarely encouraged, mentored and supported to run for positions. Several suggested that 'brothers need to step aside' for women to be elected.

I heard that women have been supported as long as they run for positions that men in the region want them to occupy. It was suggested that this type of approach reflects support of the principle of equity only when it is self serving. I heard that there is a widely held belief that people 'must have the knowledge, skills and experience needed in the elected positions before they are elected'. This functions as a barrier to women. I heard from several people that this makes it particularly difficult for many women who for the structural reasons mentioned early, may lack specific experiences that are deemed necessary. However, as one person indicated, 'we are all unqualified until we are trained'.

I heard from almost everyone I spoke to that the elected positions are challenging, difficult, and time consuming. Within CUPW, there is a great deal of respect for the quality and volume of work that is done by the regional officers. I heard that the jobs 'take a lot out of people'. I also heard that the picture the union presents is that you 'have to be a super person'. This perception may also discourage women from coming forward.

Many people indicated that the elections are problematic in a variety of other ways. For example, I heard that decisions regarding who will occupy what position are made beforehand by those in power; that elections are played out behind closed doors, in secrecy and that they are frequently viewed as popularity contests. I heard from many people that personal attacks on both men and women are a part of the elections. Several people reported that women are often criticized in much more personal ways than men, with references to lifestyle choices or who they sleep with/have slept with. Several people indicated that there has been pressure on and intimidation of women to run for particular positions and not for others. Several people mentioned that there is a fear in the region that supporting a candidate that the regional office does not support will result in a loss of opportunities for that person in the region, such as opportunities for conference attendance, training and education, travel, committee work, or facilitation opportunities.

The elections were described to me as 'brutal', and a 'spectacle' and several people indicated they are reluctant to encourage women to run given the current tone and feel to the elections. I also heard that many women in the CUPW membership, including potential leaders, 'have experienced harassment in the workplace, at home and in their communities and will therefore avoid the type of campaigning that goes on in CUPW'. In summarizing the election process and the impact on women in particular, one person noted that 'our values and principles are thrown out at election time' while another indicated 'campaigning in the CUPW way is hard for most women'.

### 3. The Culture of the Region

The culture of the region was mentioned by many of the people I spoke with as a barrier to the full participation of women. The culture has a long history and many people reflected back over several years of working for Canada Post and within CUPW. There are varying views on the amount of progress that has been made in women participating more fully within the union. Many people indicated that there have been some improvements for women in CUPW and also indicated there is a long way to go. Several other people feel a lot has changed in the last few years and the situation has improved for women in the region. For some people I spoke to the fact that several locals have Executive Committees composed of women and that approximately 1/3 of the locals in the region have women as presidents is an indication of overall increase in women's participation. A women's retreat to be held this summer is an example that many people mentioned as a positive step.

On the other hand, I heard that the culture in the region is one that allows 'people in power to use that power to reinforce gender inequalities'. I heard, for example, that women's issues are still not taken seriously by some of the brothers. This is displayed in examples that were described to me where there has been and

continues to be a disrespect of women's opinions and views. I heard that International Women's Day events still produce flippant comments such as 'when is it men's day?' I also heard that the importance of women being able to caucus together has been resented or trivialized by some CUPW brothers. Several people indicated that the CUPW environment in the region, including the regional office has been, and continues to be, predominantly a 'male dominated culture' and one that is 'subtly sexist'. It was referred to as an 'old boy's network', with 'male privilege often unchallenged'.

I heard that there appears to be a lack of common understanding among brothers in the region as to the purpose and role of the men's caucuses. Several people indicated that there is a frustration and confusion about the men's caucuses. I heard that some of the caucuses have gone well and others not as well. Several people posed the confusion as questions, 'what are we supposed to be doing there? And 'what do the men's caucuses have to do with women?'

There are differing perceptions regarding the role of the regional office in the culture of the region. Some people I spoke to feel that women have been promoted, supported and given opportunities by the regional office. On the other hand, I heard from several people that behaviours and comments directed towards themselves and other sisters have been patronizing, condescending, intimidating, undermining, manipulative, silencing and hurtful. A few women provided examples of not being given adequate resources to do their jobs while working in the office and noticed their requests for resources were trivialized or ignored.

Several people indicated that when women are supported and encouraged by those in power in the region it is because those women 'are not a threat to the status quo'. Several people remarked that 'behaviour is tolerated that would not be tolerated at Canada Post'. A few others commented that unfortunately some of the behaviours seen as necessary when dealing with Canada Post find their way into relationships between brothers and sisters. Canada Post's authoritarian, military style of management is seen by some as permeating working relationships within the region.

Several people expressed disillusionment and disappointment with the region for not putting union principles into practice. A few people noted that they, and others they know, have taken their activism elsewhere as a result of the culture and politics of the region.

#### 4. Women's Solidarity

I heard from many sisters that there is currently a lack of solidarity among women in the region. It was suggested that some women have internalized the belief that 'men are better and continue to listen first to men'. As one person noted 'traditional male power seems to be more valued—it makes some women feel safer'. I heard that trust and support between women needs to be developed and that currently, some women are less than honest with each other, especially during election campaigns. I also heard from many people that the women in the region have had difficulties organizing themselves at Convention, which has resulted in many women feeling betrayed, discouraged and disappointed. I heard from many people that women have put other women down.

I also heard that some women feel uncomfortable organizing to get a woman elected as it feels like the women are ganging up on the brothers or are anti-male. I heard from many women that building solidarity in the region is very important to them but they are not sure where to start. I heard that women want to be more organized; as one woman put it, 'women need to do it without men'. The retreat to be held later this summer is being looked to by several women as a place where some healing can begin. A few women mentioned that 'getting things in the open' or 'naming the issues' through this consultation process may also act as a catalyst for change.

<b>What I heard: Suggestions for Improvement</b>
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I heard many creative and thoughtful suggestions for improving the current situation and obtaining the full participation of women in the region. Due to the integration and coordination of responsibilities across the various parts of the union, I heard suggestions that included ideas at all levels of the union. The first section captures those ideas that relate to all levels. I have organized the next three sections into the organizational levels within CUPW. I have also included suggestions that relate to training and education at all levels under the heading of Training and Education.

#### **1. Systemic Suggestions.**

There were several suggestions that were not specific to any level within CUPW and all of them have relevance across the organization. These suggestions were:

- A code of conduct for the working relationships within CUPW needs to be developed. As one person put it we need to have a 'harassment free environment'"
- The language in the constitution regarding gender could be reviewed and enhanced to assist gender equity to be more of a priority.

- Leaders at any level of the organization need to understand their role as role models in gender relationships.
- A discussion within CUPW about affirmative action as a means to have women elected.
- Women only spaces and/or caucuses need to happen at all CUPW events, meetings and conferences, whatever level. As one person put it, 'we need to get together as women as often as we can to share our experiences'

## **2. At the local level, I heard that:**

- Bringing women in through a 'variety of paths' is important in building the union. I heard that there are many different 'portals' where women can be encouraged to become active. I heard that there will be many activists retiring in the next few years and it is important to build the secondary leadership now to ensure there are people, and women in particular, ready to step in to fill the leadership roles.
- It is important to recognize that women may want and/or need to meet in informal ways with out the requirements of formal union structures and processes. Several people mentioned that having to have a chair and take minutes may discourage some women who already are juggling home and work responsibilities. Being able to bring children and meet in homes were suggested as possible methods for increasing participation in local women's committee. I heard from several people that locals need to 'be more flexible around space, time and structure' for women's committees.
- Having childcare at all union events remains important and was mentioned to me many times. For women who want their childcare in-home, assistance with obtaining and paying for childcare is important to bear in mind. Supplying and/or organizing transportation is also important in encouraging women to attend women's committees.
- There needs to be more outreach to women and that talking with women on a one-to-one basis about their concerns is the best approach. As one woman put it, 'when you talk to members, they get involved'. The 'one-to-one shop floor organizing' was seen by several people as critical in engaging women. I heard that a 'back to basics' approach at the local level would be helpful. I also heard that 'each new women needs to be approached individually'.

- Locals need to look for issues in their communities that women care about, get involved in those issues and/or ensure that women members know what the local is doing on that issue. As one participant put it, 'when women see that CUPW is involved locally and regionally in issues of importance to them, it will build participation by women'. Childcare, peace and the environment were mentioned as important.
- Speaking one on one with women can be emotionally draining work. Talking with women can highlight areas of their lives that they need support and providing this support adds to the work of outreach. Support is needed for those who take on the one to one work.
- Supporting women's leadership in smaller, rural and outer region locals is important.

### **3. At the regional level, I heard that:**

- Many people want to change the culture in the region; to be one that 'walks the talk' of CUPW. I heard that it is very important 'for men and women in leadership positions to be role models of respectful behaviour'. As one person noted, 'policies are great but we need our leaders to be role models'.
- Developing a culture of respectful criticism and feedback instead of personal attacks must be developed if women are to feel welcomed and safe within the region.
- Training, resources and support need to be in place to facilitate women becoming confident, and skilled in elected positions.
- It is important to include women in as many ways creative ways as possible. As one person put it, 'there are all kinds of members, all kinds of work to do and many ways to bring members in'. I heard that the types of experience, knowledge and wisdom that women do have needs to be valued more.
- There needs to be organizing to get more women at regional conferences and national conventions to ensure women's voices are heard. Similarly, I heard that, at these meetings, 'men need to support women's right to caucus'.
- 'Local committees need support from the regional office'. Outreach to the more rural, remote and smaller locals were particularly highlighted as helpful to ensuring that women see more of their union. I heard that in

some areas, officers from the regional office have begun to do this and it is appreciated by those at the local level.

- At the regional level, as at the local level, it is important for elected representatives to be more actively working on issues of importance to women. Attending rallies, events and demonstrations on issues within the community that 'mean something to women' is another way that women will be encouraged to be more active in their union.
- The development of a regional women's network is needed and could be resourced from the regional office. An informal network is now being maintained on a voluntary basis. Many women see it as a valuable form of networking that could be better developed with some designated resources.
- There needs to be a planned and organized strategy at the regional level to develop the secondary leadership for succession planning. As one person put it, 'do not take the jobs and run with them'. I heard that focusing the regional training and education on the skills that people need to take on leadership roles would be beneficial. A few people mentioned not knowing what the regional jobs entailed. Shadowing regional officers was suggested as being one way for people to find out more about what is required. It was also mentioned that an 'open, inclusive and transparent process' to seek interested members would be necessary.
- The regional men's caucuses need to review their role, purpose for being there and relationship to women's caucuses in the region.

#### **4. At the national level, I heard that:**

The National Women's Committee (NWC) can play an important role in ensuring the participation of women in the region, and by extension across the country. Many people did not want to dictate to the National Committee what its role might be, rather, they suggested the committee itself have an in depth discussion and explore the possible roles it could play. I heard a variety of suggestions for the NWC to consider:

- Survey all CUPW women members regarding the barriers to participation and women's leadership similar to the survey undertaken recently within CUPE. This would help the development of a long-range plan to increase participation.
- The NWC could consider 'tackling only one issue at a time but more in depth'.

- Several people mentioned that what happens at the national level does not often reach the local level and that knowing more fully what the union is doing at the national level would be of real benefit in bringing women in.
- Regularly monitoring the percentage of women in the membership and the percentage of women in elected positions at the local, regional, and national level would provide useful information.
- It would be helpful to provide union leave time for the representatives who come from each region, where the committee work is not part of their paid work. This would assist the women to connect with the membership in the region before the NWC meeting and afterward. This was seen as a way to improve communication between the national and the local level. As new members come to the NWC after the National Convention, it was suggested that an orientation to the work of the NWC and what is expected of members would also be helpful.
- The 'back to basics' or 'one-to-one shop floor' approach that was mentioned earlier could be better supported from the national level. Several people mentioned that the majority of members do not know what the NWC and/or the national level is doing regarding issues of concern and importance to women. One suggestion was that the national level develop materials for use at the local level. This information could take the form of educational packages, short fact sheets and speaking notes in clear, straightforward language that could be used in the one-to-one, face-to-face work at the local level.
- *The Rose* is viewed as a valued communication tool that could be published more frequently. There was a suggestion that the better use of technology be explored to increase communication. Consideration could be given to the development of a women-only online moderated discussion group as a way to reach women, particularly younger women.
- At least once each mandate, the NWC could have a longer 'retreat like' meeting to explore the issues of importance to women in depth.
- At least once each mandate, the NWC could convene a women-only conference.
- The NWC could oversee the development of a national program of mentoring for women, (referred to frequently as femtoring). Women newer to the union or activism mentioned that it would helpful to have other women to talk to. More experienced women who will be retiring soon would like to provide support for women as a way of succession planning and developing secondary leadership. I heard that 'talking to a woman

who has been through it' and 'having peers' could build women's confidence in becoming leaders.

- It was suggested that when there are very important/precedent setting cases at the local level involving key women's issues, the NWC could provide more resources, guidance and assistance to those working at the local level.
- The NWC could consider ways to support all women who are running for office in the regions.

## **5. Education and Training Across all Levels**

The CUPW training and education program was mentioned by many people as being critical in their own development as union members and as activists. For many people, what the education and training program strives for in terms of understanding gender relationships is applauded. The focus on gender and women's issues across all aspects of the education program was noted by several people as important to keep and develop at the 'cutting edge'. Several people indicated ways in which the education program could be strengthened to increase the participation of women. The suggestions I heard were:

- Women need more training and education in women-only spaces. Women's leadership training and a basic course for women were two of the specific suggestions for women-only training. The basic course could be developed and delivered across the region with travel to the outer areas. A related suggestion was a specific course for temporary workers. As one person put it, 'lots of temps are women'.
- A course for men on how to be, as one woman put it, 'our allies'.
- Development of an advanced gender sensitivity training for elected officers at the local, regional and nation level. Some felt this should be a mandatory course, others saw it more on a voluntary basis. As one man put it, 'anyone in the leadership needs training on leadership and gender'.
- A course for 'up and coming women' to become more knowledgeable before being elected. As one person put it, 'we are all unqualified until we get training'. The goal of such training was described by one person as 'if you want to get elected, here is how to get the training and experience'.
- More education and training generally for everyone is needed to, as one person put it, 'help everyone understand gender issues; the words are there for equity but not in practice'. The focus of 'learning from the heart' was seen as important in gender sensitivity training.

- The facilitator training might include time working on the issues of gender relationships in the co-facilitation role. For example, how to share power in the training, negotiate roles and responsibilities as equals, including the sharing of those tasks that are traditionally female.