

Women's Participation in Education Unions in a Time of Covid-19

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October 2022



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Education International (EI)

Education International represents organisations of teachers and other education employees across the globe. It is the world's largest federation of unions and associations, representing thirty million education employees in about four hundred organisations in one hundred and seventy countries and territories, across the globe. Education International unites teachers and education employees.

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Prepared for Education International by
Carol Miller and **Houda Sabra**

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We could not do justice in this report to the richness of the stories shared or to document the vast range of information and examples provided by participants. We apologize in advance if we have inadvertently misquoted or misrepresented what they shared. The analysis presented here is just one part of the story.

Report authors

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Abbreviations

<i>AME</i>	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
<i>BIPOC</i>	Black, Indigenous, and people of colour
<i>EI</i>	Education International
<i>FGD</i>	Focus group discussions
<i>GBV</i>	Gender-based Violence
<i>ILO</i>	International Labour Organization
<i>IT</i>	Information Technology
<i>KII</i>	Key informant interviews
<i>LBTQI</i>	Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex
<i>MENA</i>	Middle East/North Africa
<i>UN</i>	United Nations
<i>VAWG</i>	Violence against Women and Girls

“Before the pandemic, men dominated our in-person meeting spaces. So, we saw an almost immediate shift to a huge increase in participation generally, where much more often women members and women who had never been part or never really identified with the union groups before were participating and attending union meetings.”

(KII-Europe)



Introduction

Education International (EI) is the Global Union Federation that brings together organizations of teachers and other education employees from across the world. It is the world's largest, most representative global, sectoral federation of unions with more than 32.5 million trade union members in 384 organizations in 178 countries and territories.

EI is committed to promoting and advancing gender equality in education unions, in education and in society through its mission to promote quality education for all, promote and protect the rights and status of teachers and education support personnel, defend human rights, particularly trade union rights, and democracy, and build union power.

It has been recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted women in several dimensions. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has documented disproportionate job and income losses suffered by women worldwide during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Data collected by UN Women shows that across a range of countries and regions, the pandemic has increased women's experiences of violence and eroded their feelings of safety. It decreased their engagement with paid employment (Wang & Inoue, 2020). The current situation has put women at greater risk of job loss, poverty, food insecurity, loss of housing, and domestic violence (UN Women, 2022). The pandemic's disproportionate impacts could have long-term and far-reaching consequences for gender equality (Canadian Human Rights Commission, April 30, 2020).

Since the start of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, education unions have been pragmatic and quick to respond to the rapid changes brought about by the global health crisis. Thus, it is important for education unions to review the work done to engage with members since the onset of the pandemic through an intersectional gender lens and, from these experiences, to harvest learning that will inform building on progress to increase gender equality within unions.

Purpose of the research

There are important lessons for education unions to document and learn from, as countries move forward into a (post) Covid-19 'new normal'. This research considered the lessons learned over the last two years (2020-



2022), and how they can be applied to further increase and strengthen women's participation, voice, and leadership within education unions, especially in a 'post-pandemic' world.

The purpose of the research was to investigate and analyse:

- Women's lived experiences of union engagement, participation and leadership 2020-2022);
- The effectiveness of education unions' efforts and strategies to organize and engage members; recruit new members; and to advance women's union engagement, participation, and leadership through the use of online technologies 2020-2022.

Specifically, the following six research questions were addressed:

1. What kinds of stories do women members – in all their diversity - in education unions have to tell about their engagement in their unions' activities, events and/or meetings in this time of Covid-19?
2. Who has been participating in online union events, activities and/or meetings since the onset of the pandemic (women members, leaders; young members, leaders; non-members)?
3. Are women union members (in all their diversity) participating in online union activities, events and/or meetings in equal numbers or in proportion to their membership numbers in the union, vis-à-vis male union members?
4. Has there been an increase in the number of women who have not participated in union activities, events and/or meetings before, and are now more actively engaged? If so, why?
5. What can we learn from any changes (or lack of change) in gendered participation in online union activities, events and/or meetings over the last two years, and how can that be reflected in the work done to implement the EI Gender Equality Action Plan, especially priority #1 on 'promoting women's participation and leadership within education unions'?
6. If it is true that this moment of crisis, which has directly impacted on so many people's lives over the last two years, has caused more women to engage, participate in and/or lead online union activities, events and/or meetings, how do we replicate that desire for engagement when the crisis has passed?

Research methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach through the collection of stories and narrative fragments that combine the varied lived experiences and perspectives about women's participation in education union activities during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022). Opening up the spaces for women to share these experiences through a narrative and storytelling approach has helped in shaping the understanding of these experiences, which are interwoven throughout this report.

The research deployed document review, key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FDGs). The KIIs and FDGs were carried out between March and June 2022.

Document Review

A review was conducted of the relevant literature that provides insights on how diverse women in education unions and other unions engaged in union activities during the pandemic. The literature review included internal EI documents and publications, relevant EI policies, the [EI Gender Equality Action Plan](#) and other relevant reports that have been published by education unions, the International Labour Organization and other international and national unions.

Key informant interviews

A total of ten key informant interviews were conducted via Zoom (in French, Hindi, English, Spanish). The research used the snowball method to select the KII sample starting with interviews from union members who indicated to the EI Secretariat either a shift in gender participation in union activities during the pandemic and/or who expressed interest in participating in the research. Seven of those interviews were participants from EI member organisations and three were participants from other Global Unions. Participants from the other Global Unions were selected based on their interest in participating in this research.

The profile of KIIs from EI member unions tended to be women working in national or regional union secretariats or members of their union's executive structure, including General Secretaries and heads of the women's affairs or gender equality units.



Open ended and semi-structured interview questions were developed (Annex 1). Interviews were designed for a one-hour open approach of narrating experiences or providing observations and perspectives. The interviews were conducted in the language chosen by participants and interpretation services were used as needed.

Focus group discussions

A total of nine Focus Group Discussions were conducted with EI union members (FGDs were offered in French, Arabic, Spanish and English). A total of 42 participants joined these nine FGDs. Focus groups were designed for two hours and conducted via Zoom as well. Each FGD included at least two and up to seven people in each. FGDs were designed in a way to create safe spaces for participants to share their stories, experiences and observations.

The FGDs included a wider range of participants than the key informant interviews, for example, from heads of national gender equality units to union members who had participated in union activities during the pandemic.

Overall, a total of 10 EI member organisations participated in this research covering the five EI regions: Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America, and North America and the Caribbean, along with MENA (Middle East and North Africa) sub-region. The sample reflected both a desire for regional representation as well as interest expressed by these national unions to participate in the research.

Data analysis

Guided by each research question, a content/ thematic analysis was performed for both key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Key informant interviews and focus group discussion narratives were transcribed and recorded. The research followed an inductive thematic analysis approach to the analysis of the stories, observations, information and any other narrative data provided in the KIIs and FGDs. The interviews were transcribed, data was coded, and emerging themes were extracted and grouped to form the findings of the research. The research focused also on collecting significant stories, quotes, or other observations that speak directly to the research questions.

Limitations of the research

The qualitative research design was appropriate for the research questions posed. Nonetheless, it would have strengthened the research findings if there had been supplementary quantitative data that tracked changes in union participation in meetings, training and other activities during the period of the pandemic.

The qualitative information has provided rich illustrations of women union members' lived realities across the EI member regions; however, it was beyond the scope of the research to do a full comparative analysis. Some overall trends have been noted where they seemed relevant to the overall purpose of the research.

Additionally, the research did not seek to disaggregate experiences across different roles and positions within the national unions. This would be an interesting future research project with 'deeper dive' case studies to understand the specific experiences of women with different profiles in education unions.

What Does the Patchwork of Women's Stories Reveal about their Union Participation During the Pandemic?

Women educators and members of EI member organisations from various regions shared their stories about how Covid-19 has affected their daily lives as well as their participation in their union activities. Although they noted that the virus spread indiscriminately across the globe, the impact was different and discriminatory, on diverse groups of women and particularly women from the Global South. They described how the pandemic influenced and impacted their lives and work and that it had far-reaching disruptions, unsettling almost all of their activities including those within their unions.

This section weaves together participants' stories to surface shared experiences as well as regional differences, where relevant, affecting women's union engagement between 2020 and 2022. The stories provide a stark reminder of the inter-relationship between the personal and the professional, bound up in contextually grounded gender norms and the gender division of labour. At the same time, the stories revealed the tremendous support offered by unions, specifically women's or gender and equality committees, acts of solidarity and sisterhood, and strategic actions taken by unions to support women's participation despite the pandemic.

Before turning to the stories and experiences, it is important to acknowledge that despite anecdotal information suggesting that the participation of women in union activities has in some cases increased during the pandemic, the research has not been able to confirm this with any degree of certainty given the paucity of quantitative data available. In some cases, the evidence is to the contrary; that is, women's union membership and engagement decreased in some unions. Very few unions appear to be tracking and aggregating participation in union meetings, training or other activities or the changes in levels of participation from pre-pandemic periods, across gender and other social determinants.

The picture painted by research participants indicates that on average, women's union membership rate overall remains higher than men's membership (i.e., the majority of educators and education support staff

are women); however, there is a clear imbalance in the distribution of leadership roles. While women continue to take on most of the responsibilities and their overall participation was higher than their male counterparts in most union activities, they still had disproportionately fewer decision-making positions in their unions. This did not change during the pandemic. Participants expressed in no uncertain terms that their representation in leadership positions is still far from equal in managerial and leadership positions within their unions.

What is clear, however, is that the situation of women union members has changed significantly since the start of the pandemic and that this, in turn, has shaped how they engage in union activities as well as the kinds of support that unions have provided diverse women members. If anything, the pandemic and the way unions, particularly the women's committees/leaders stepped up to support the women members, can be said to have made union membership more relevant to some women union members. What is more, some unions, particularly those in the Global North, have bolstered efforts to highlight the way different groups of women union members have experienced the pandemic differently (single mothers, Black, Indigenous, women of colour, disabled, LGBTQ+ women) and to take steps to making unions more accessible and welcoming to them.

Challenges and barriers to women's engagement

Increased time burden, unpaid care work, loss of income

Women union members from countries in Africa, Asia Pacific, and Latin America shared stories about their stress, fear, and the pressures added to their already often precarious socio-economic situations. These women were facing various difficulties on a daily basis. They were overwhelmed with the excessive workload, which put them at risk of burnout and chronic fatigue. There was limited sharing of household chores and responsibilities with male adults in the household. Women had the lion's share in terms of childcare, household chores, making meals, helping their children with their schoolwork and educational learning from home.

"We, the working class, are not used to staying at home the whole day, however, during the pandemic we were staying at home and doing the housework from morning to evening. We had to look after the children, the husbands, the family members, the elderly, and prepare the food and do other home chores". FGD-Africa



“We had to work a lot more than we used to. In our country, in our realities, women are supposed to do everything related to the household chores and the majority of men wouldn’t think about helping or about doing anything in the house.” FGD - Latin America

According to the stories shared, the increased burden was not very different for women from countries in North America and Europe although perhaps to a lesser degree. Women members explained that during the pandemic they were overloaded with more responsibilities and chores at home, shouldering the bulk of the childcare, children’s education, caring for sick family members, and generally taking care of their families in addition to having to deal with the stress of the health crisis, which also had a big impact on everyone in their families.

“The version of COVID was shouldered by women predominantly. Men played their part, but most key workers during the pandemic were women, the majority of people home-schooling their children were women caring for neighbours, for elderly people, for anyone else in the community who was vulnerable, were predominantly women.” KII - Europe

Women members from countries in Africa, Asia Pacific, and Latin America explained that the pandemic not only increased their burden but also forced a number of them to take hard decisions about (dis)continuing their engagement in their union activities and in teaching altogether. This appeared to affect teachers in both the public and private sectors.

The research participants described examples of women union members in some regions who were forced to leave teaching because of the uncertainty of loss of income, not to mention those who left due to stress cause by the shift to online teaching modalities. Moreover, in some countries, teachers in the public sector were not receiving the minimum wages as stipulated by the government and they also had to bear the burden of wage cuts and job losses. Some shifted to creating small businesses to help them survive during a very difficult economic period. Research participants also noted that the gender pay gap was widened because women were the first to lose their jobs, before men.

Women union members from countries in Europe and North America were more likely to benefit from regular incomes despite the lock down and school closures or shifts to on-line learning. The challenges they faced related more to coping with the new demands of their jobs, mental and physical health issues and fighting for their financial rights during the lockdown, including pay negotiations.

“Single parents are drowning in tasks constantly, no time for anything but childcare, work and housework. Out of hours working, lack of prep time, precarious work, having to cover classes, all of these things existed from before, so women's lack of equality, but what we saw during the pandemic was that this really impacted members' mental health.” KII - Europe

The digital divide and other technical barriers

One of the main changes that education unions made during the pandemic was to shift to online or virtual activities. The stories and experiences shared by women union members highlighted that in addition to the time and caring burdens that limited their engagement in union activities, women - particularly rural women - tended to face additional technology and knowledge barriers to accessing online union activities.

“Women and teachers in general were not comfortable during the lockdown and they all feared having any face-to-face activities, which also increased the pressure on them. Unions' activities did not stop and most of the activities shifted to an online mode using Zoom, messenger, phone calls, and other media platforms.” FGD - MENA

Geographic, economic, and social factors played a big role in the degree of access to technology and the internet as well as use of the technology by women union members to engage in their union activities. While women union members from countries in Europe and North America tended to have fewer problems in using the technology, this has been an area that elevated the levels of anxiety and stress for women members located in countries in Africa, Asia Pacific, and Latin America and hindered their engagement in union activities. In some cases, particularly in Latin America, the technological networks are simply not in place to allow easy access to reliable internet services. To adapt to the situation, members reported that their unions had to use other tools of communication like the television, postal services, and phone calls to keep union members informed of any news or updates that they needed to know about their unions and the situation of the pandemic in general.

The lack of digital literacy was one of the main barriers for women union members in the Global South. Many of the women did not have the skills to fully use these digital tools. Without these skills, women felt that they did not have the confidence to participate in union activities.



Even women who wanted to participate and attempted to do so, faced many challenges and difficulties in coping with the technology being used by their unions. Learning to deal with the new technology and understanding how to participate in platforms like Zoom and Teams was stressful and challenging at times for them and so it hindered them from being effective participants in their unions' online activities, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.

Research participants across regions referenced the uneven access to broadband/IT networks faced by women union members, particularly in remote rural areas, while at the same time noting opportunities technology provided for keeping some of them connected, as we explore further below. Even where unions could provide some training on the use of new technology, those women who could not access digital networks, devices and data were left out.

Stories were shared about the empowering effect of having a smartphone during the pandemic, and conversely, how disempowering the lack of smartphone ownership could have on women union members. Research participants noted that there is still a strong gender disparity in terms of owning a mobile phone, which also translates into fewer women than men having access to the internet. This clearly had an impact on some women's ability to access their unions' activities and to keep their engagement with topics and information that they needed during the pandemic. Even those who owned a smartphone and had the resources to purchase data sometimes faced the barrier of digital literacy in terms of understanding how platforms such as Zoom work.

Though some unions offered special subsidies for women members to purchase data in order to stay connected with their unions (described below in the section on effective strategies), this did not eliminate the context specific, gendered power dynamics, which influenced how far women could effectively use opportunities provided by their unions. In some cases, women had to seek permission from their partners to use their smartphones whenever they wanted to participate in any of their unions' activities. Also, gendered expectations in family roles and responsibilities, as well as other pressures on their time, complicated some women members' attempts to develop the digital skills required for engaging in the Union activities or to even find the time and space in their homes to participate in activities online.

"I have seen women union members sitting with their laptop on a pillow in their bedroom, trying to stay engaged in union activity since it's shifted online." KII-Europe

Overall, the use of online and virtual modes of activities created some barriers, especially with women members from rural areas who had limited access to technology and broadband.

Increase in domestic violence and mental health challenges

Across regions, women union members described the impact of the lockdown on the incidence of gender based violence, particularly intimate partner violence. This was especially emphasized in regions with strongly entrenched gender social norms that normalize gender-based violence. Women shared stories of their comrades or women community members who were effectively locked down with their abusers. They were trapped in their homes and isolated from the people and the resources that could help them. This increased the risk of violence multiple times.

“We witnessed some of our union comrades experiencing violence in various forms. Some common abuse tools included restrictions from access to the union activities, and/or friends”. FGD-Africa

“We were listening to women victims, they were making phone calls hiding in a toilet, and we were counselling them. We were contacting the police to also help these women”. KII-Asia and Pacific

In some cases, women members explained that they were forced by their partners to withdraw from their activities because their partners did not want any interruptions to the women's day. Those conditions were aggravated by the rising violence against women workers in many other sectors. Research participants recounted examples of women stuck in their homes, socially isolated and living in fear. These stories are consistent with the evidence of increased domestic violence experienced by women across the globe during the pandemic¹.

Women union members recounted how many of their comrades were facing difficult social and mental health challenges: coping with stress, fear, anxiety, and isolation. They explained that the long experience of stress that they and many of their comrades experienced during the pandemic left them exhausted - physically and emotionally - and simply burnt out. Also, the uncertainty unleashed by the pandemic created a huge need for psychological support and counselling.

“The work-life balance was totally disrupted, and remote working had its negative effects and disadvantages. Women were working

¹ See UN Women's reporting on 'The Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During Covid-19' - <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>



much longer hours than they used to in the real work environment and their responsibilities at home were doubled. So, we were seeing women that were working from seven until 11 with no breaks in between which had a big negative impact on their emotional and psychological well-being. The impact was very big, it was very deep".
KII-Africa

Some unions were able to provide support for counselling and in one country, the union's executive negotiated new positions within their unions for staff Health and Wellness.

Limitations of online spaces

The perspectives shared during the research process also highlighted the need to pay close attention to the limits of online platforms, while still acknowledging the benefits for women's engagement, solidarity and support.

"Online spaces don't facilitate the spaces for relationship building and networking women union members really need... This is a more general problem with online approaches as regards really building up women and women as leaders in the union". **KII - Latin America**

Several participants observed that online spaces may not necessarily be the most effective means for identifying and nurturing diverse women leaders.

"We know that within unions, there's also some informal activity. So, we see that the participation can be different whether you are on site or online. Some new activists will never be seen on site, and this is an issue as well". **FGD - Europe**

Others suggested that the online spaces for solidarity and support probably worked better when women already had an established relationship with the union from previous in-person engagements. Or that women were more likely to take leadership in online meetings when they were already reasonably confident and comfortable in the in-person union spaces.

A strong message shared during the research was that going forward, there should be a balance between in-person and online options to allow women and other union members to choose whatever best suits their preferences. Even as the research was being conducted (May - June 2022), some participants described their first experiments with using hybrid approaches for union meetings or other activities.²

² We heard about a software being tested to support this: The Meeting Owl was a fairly low cost tool that was being piloted by one national union.

"We are just in the process of arranging for an in-person meeting to take place. For some of our members, they have said that they would find that difficult and that it's inaccessible for them to meet in-person. We also got feedback recently when we were thinking about doing a series of workshops with different groups of members around different equality topics in a residential setting, that none of the participants wanted that in-person. We're hearing from people who feel more comfortable now saying the reason is, I have a child, or I have caring responsibilities, or even I have a dog, I have a life outside of this...to explain that is the reason why this is inaccessible, and in particular, for our disabled members". KII - Europe

This story is an encouraging sign that union members are feeling more comfortable expressing their needs and preferences. Unions were strongly encouraged by their member to continue to build on the convenience and flexibility of online meetings to ensure that women can continue to participate.

"Most Union members prefer to be engaged in union activities, which are offered in a hybrid mode. Some members prefer the use of online modes and others prefer in-person activities. Unions should try to address their interest and provide the training needed for the use of those digital technologies". FGD - MENA

Opportunities and positive impacts of the shift to online activities

"Having meetings online, regardless of whether you were locked in with your family, or you're a key worker in a school during lockdown or post lockdown, having digital access to a meeting space is incredibly important". KII - Latin America

The women who participated in the research, particularly those in women's committees or leadership, described their unions as being overwhelmed at the beginning of the pandemic but said they were able to adapt and respond to union members' needs quickly. Communication with women union members, especially teachers who were working in classrooms, became critical in the early part of the pandemic, so activities and communication intensified as unions responded to members' questions and sought to alleviate their concerns. Union activities did not stop and most of those activities shifted online using various platforms



like Zoom, Google Meet, WhatsApp and Messenger. In this section, some of the positive impacts of this shift online for women union members that were shared by research participants are described. These examples provide insights into the strategies that EI and member unions can amplify and fund going forward.

Increased engagement in meetings, events and activities

“We were blown away by the response to the first town hall meeting and the sheer numbers of people wanting to attend them. So, we had to create a software in order to facilitate that...” KII-Europe

“More women were coming to meetings and getting involved because they were scared and they wanted answers, they wanted to know what the union was doing, who was in charge, what was going on. They started attending when they never attended before because they wanted to have some security”. FGD-North America

Participants in the research noted that at the beginning of the lockdown, women union members tended not to be not very active in union meetings. There were fewer women in the meetings and their active participation was also less, though this depended on country context and access. However, after union members received some training and became used to the digital platforms and applications, women gradually started participating actively in the union’s activities. Research participants also added that the use of digital technology for meetings and other activities allowed flexibility for women to participate at times and in places that were convenient to them.

“When we opened up training and conversation spaces for women activists, we realized that they were engaged because the space is available online, that they can do it in any room in their home. They can feed their kids and still take part in that conversation and there’s no judgment. They can do bath time and just listen to what’s going on and use the chat function to participate. This was important to them and more importantly, they no longer had to travel after a full day’s work”. KII-Europe

This sentiment was shared by many of the KIIs and FGD participants.

Notwithstanding the challenges related to access to networks and smart phones, especially for rural women in countries in Africa, Asia Pacific, and Latin America, the stories recounted by research participants described the shift to online platforms as expanding

opportunities for women union members to engage more meaningfully in meetings. Union meetings and activities offered through the virtual online mode provided a vehicle for women union members to speak up and express their concerns.

“Having my camera turned off during union activities or meetings made me feel more comfortable speaking about my fears, concerns, and needs. It was completely different than when we used to have face-to-face meetings. Also, knowing how to use this technology made me feel strong and more independent in terms of getting the information I needed”. FGD-Latin America

“The hand raising function on Zoom or Teams or other... being able to raise your hand and not being passed over or not being jumped in the queue to speak is a very powerful thing. This has encouraged people as they don't feel ignored or absent or invisible in these spaces”. KII-Europe

Stories were also shared about some women union members stepping up to become union reps and union activists, thus intensifying their activism during the pandemic.

“...the pandemic has made me more of a union activist and more of a union participant, because I could see where I was able to make changes and the power of the collective, which was supported by the union, how that was important and how I could use that to make the changes or keep those [BAME/gender equality] conversations on the table”. FDG - Europe

Creating spaces for more diverse women to engage

The use of digital platforms and offering training, activities, or meetings virtually have shown positive changes in terms of reach and participation of diverse women union members in most regions. One woman observed:

“Thanks to the pandemic, I think we've benefited in terms of reaching out to more people and saving time and costs and spreading knowledge. This is what helps us as women to move forward within the organization”. KII-North America

Women members from North America and countries in Europe explained that the move to online platforms gave them an opportunity to connect with members who would usually struggle to attend face-to-face meetings as well as members who previously may have felt isolated.



“For technology, we realized our virtual PDs [professional development sessions] have significantly increased in terms of participation and numbers, and more specifically for members who have never participated before or were never involved before... In everything now we’re seeing that we’re being able to reach a lot of our members and so we’re going to continue both in person and also virtual”. FGD - North America

Digital platforms, like Zoom for example, became a very creative means for connecting with a large number of members without worry about commute time, leaving children at home and arranging childcare, and also reduced travel costs and physical effort.

“Digital technologies have allowed us to reach more women in harder to reach places because many of them don’t live in the capital cities where it’s easier to carry out a workshop, but they live more in rural areas or in areas that it’s harder to reach. And it allows us also to fix different timeframes and we can accommodate their needs much better”. KII - Africa

Participants from all regions described activities offered to union members through Teams, Zoom, or other platforms to address needs that originated from the pandemic uncertainty, alongside the more typical topics such as gender equality, labour rights and social justice issues. This helped in leveraging the voices of the diverse groups participating in union activities.

Young members became more involved in the online activities especially in unions from North America, countries in Europe, Asia Pacific, and the MENA region. They indicated that women under the age of 30 years were more active and participating in the union’s activities, especially when the topics presented were of interest to them such as legislation on women’s safety, women’s rights, or teachers’ working conditions, among others.

“There has been a difference in who is showing up in meetings and activities. Not only women were showing up, but also young women, young members, mothers, mothers with children below 12 years old were also showing up”. KII-Asia Pacific

“During COVID, seminars became more open not only to officers, not only to active members, but also for new mums on maternity leave to attend seminars on topics provided to us by our union. So, we need this to continue happening.” FGD - Asia and Pacific

Moving to online activities enabled some unions to create online networks including for members with disabilities. In one European EI member union, a new network was created among disabled people who had never spoken to another disabled educator, which opened a space to share experiences. Virtual activities also appear to have provided an opportunity for some disabled members to participate and engage more actively in meetings and other events, without having to address physical and other barriers to participation that are often experienced during in person meetings.

“It’s been an important move, which wasn’t possible before. We’ve seen that when people are joining from home, they are able to bring their life or their full selves to work and to their professional identity in a way that is positive for their mental health”. KII-Europe

Effective Union Strategies to Enhance Women's Voice, Participation and Leadership

"Everything evolves and everything changes and the way that Education International has supported our organization is innovative. It is an innovative way, which has allowed us to reach more people through technology and be able to help and support more people." FGD - LAC

Research participants were asked about effective strategies used by EI or their own unions between 2020 and 2022 to organize and enhance voice, participation and leadership of women members. These are summarized below as a basis for planning future activities.

Strengthening digital skills and access to online platforms

"The thing that makes the key difference in terms of participation is access." KII, Europe

Almost all research participants described the critical effect of training on Zoom and other digital platforms played in their ability to stay connected to union activities during the pandemic. In many cases, their unions stepped up to provide support for this training, often through the initiative of the women's committees.

The role EI played in providing Zoom training³ was also acknowledged and appreciated both for the impact on skills development, as well as for creating opportunities for bridging and linking across member organisations.

"I appreciated the opportunities EI training has given for connecting with other union organizations in the region." FGD - Africa

3 With support from EI member organisations in Canada (CTF/FCE), Norway (UEN) and Sweden (Lärarförbundet), the EI Africa regional women's network was able to organise training on the use of Zoom and other online platforms to over one hundred women from member organisations in countries all over Africa during 2020 and 2021. However, lack of access to stable internet connection made it difficult for a number of participants to remain well connected for the full duration of the training sessions.

Specifically, the Zoom training support offered to members of the EI Central Africa Women's Network was celebrated as a turning point for women union members' engagement. This training motivated some participants to become trainers in their own national unions, to build the confidence and skills of women in their union to engage in virtual spaces.

"Thanks to the Zoom training offered by the EI regional network, there are more women signing up to activities." KII - Africa

Others noted that social media tools (WhatsApp, Facebook, Google Meet), which some unions' women's committees had used before the pandemic became lifelines for women union members, especially during the uncertainty of the first year of the pandemic. In other cases, women were supported to build their capacity to collaborate online via these social media platforms in addition to Zoom.

Access to online spaces for diverse women union members was also profoundly influenced by access to the technology needed to join online platforms. For many, specifically in countries in Africa and Latin America, networks are patchy and electricity intermittent, while computers, smartphones and data are expensive and often out of reach for some women union members.

"We still have issues regarding the internet connectivity and cost. We have members that are also from far areas. So, to address issues of accessibility and to reduce the impact of some limitations (internet connectivity, cost of travel, and other), we give allowances every time we have a meeting for members to load their cell phones with data or to travel." FGD - Asia and Pacific

Many research participants described similar strategies being used by their unions, often initiated by the union's women's committees. Again, the role of EI in supporting a Zoom license for at least one of the regional women's networks was acknowledged, with the hope that this could be extended to national groups.

"I asked the national union Board for money to buy data for women to join because megabits are expensive. When I can give them the data packages, they come forward and participate." KII - Africa

Other strategies related to access included staggered Zoom training for women, which could start with local women leaders and creates a cascade effect in terms of building the skills and momentum for online collaboration among ordinary women members.



One union in Europe undertook an analysis of women's experiences online during the pandemic. They found that prior to joining online meetings, many of the union members did not participate in the in-person meetings because they felt it was not for them and they also felt that they were not being heard; there was no space for them to speak. This prompted the union to develop guidance for membership on running local union meetings online.

Other research participants noted informal efforts by union officials and online meeting hosts to use Zoom platform functions and tools to moderate how union members engage in meetings, and to ensure that diverse voices are being heard and that no one person/group dominates.

“Though women members felt it [online] was difficult at the beginning, they got used to it after and started seeing it as their preferred mode of communication with the union instead of the in-person one.” FGD - Asia and Pacific

The pandemic also provided momentum to build or consolidate using social media platforms to engage union members. Research participants described this as ‘hybrid’ communications or ‘modernizing’ the ways that unions communicate with members. For some, particularly those with poor access to the internet, there was clearly an appreciation of the flexibility of continued use of landlines (phone and fax) and paper communications. In some contexts, countries in Africa in particular, WhatsApp and Facebook have become key tools for communicating with women union members and sharing updates and news about activities.

As one interviewee noted, going forward, union members “would like a way to keep in touch online when they have a particular issue, and to access short videos and shortcuts, bits of information directly relevant to them”. KII – Europe

Providing new types of support in response to new challenges

“It is very clear to us that today we cannot reject technology, but we say that it should be supported as a tool, as a resource for pedagogical support, and also its use serves us so that even if we were distant from each other, we could get closer through the connections when we have to do.” KII - Latin America

The interviews and FGDs showed that unions, particularly the national union leads for gender equality and inclusion or training, responded to the additional challenges women members faced during the pandemic by offering new types of support. They designed and offered training sessions on topics like understanding violence and how to address it, mental health and wellness, and information about human and legal rights and remedies relevant to the pandemic context.

“One of the things that the pandemic allowed us to focus on is on issues that perhaps were not considered to be so relevant within the training before. The topic of mental health was not an issue to be focused on before and it was never addressed. So, we are increasingly having more and more workshops and discussion sessions on the topics of mental health, Occupational Health and Safety, LGBTQI Rights, racial discrimination, climate change, the menopause and many other issues related to us as women activists.” FGD - North America

While the pandemic has made it difficult for teachers and other union members to engage in face-to-face activities with peers, there are many examples of women members who were connecting virtually to support each other through peer professional and psychosocial support.

Women union members in the North America region, for example, explained that during the pandemic they were supporting each other through weekly virtual group social gatherings. They expressed how much support they got through those meetings, which were only organised for the women to speak to each other and to share information during the uncertain times of the pandemic. Some also had support groups in which they met weekly just to chat and support each other.

“We had Friday night get-togethers and we would just play music over Zoom and be able to chit chat in the chat. We started gathering our women friends to say let’s have a glass of wine on Wednesday night and we were crying, and then we started calling the invite ‘wining Wednesday’.” FGD - North America

“During the pandemic our annual face-to face roundtable activity stopped and so teachers stayed connected only through the social media like WhatsApp groups, posting issues, sharing news, supporting each other emotionally and psychologically, sharing our experiences with each other. This was like a support network where there was mutual support and solidarity.” FGD - Africa



Another member shared about the type of support women members received from the union, which positively impacted women's engagement and increased the number of women's participation.

“The types of professional development that was provided included practical advice on dealing with COVID and related stress and wellness... such as reflective practice and journalling. We offered book talks and opportunities to meet with psychologists and wellness people and that really did help, and it showed value to membership and there were more opportunities to reach out to the current members.” FGD - North America

Women union members expressed their gratitude to their unions, particularly women union leaders and gender equality leads, and mentioned that the presence and support of their unions during the pandemic has had a significant effect on their coping strategies. Research participants said they would have been a lot more vulnerable to the problems and challenges if they had not had the union's support, especially when some were facing unfair treatment from their employers.

The global data on the increase in domestic violence during the pandemic was starkly supported by stories shared by research participants and described above.⁴ Several union representatives described their work to provide support specifically for domestic violence experienced by women union members or that women members observed in their communities. For example, several unions decided to give training and share additional information on how women could deal with gender based violence.

“Having female-only meetings was important for women's engagement, the fact that they could have a space that is dedicated to women's issues in the activism sphere was very positive and we also talked about violence including violence within unions.” FGD - Europe

While the issue of gender-based violence has long been on the agenda of EI and member unions, dating back to the first resolution on violence against women and girls adopted by the EI Congress in 1995, the pandemic reinforced the importance of union awareness raising and training on GBV and on related issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

“We want to work very hard on training for feminists...to defend women in the areas where we have a high incidence of violation

4 COVID-19 and violence against women: What the data tells us | UN Women – Headquarters

of human rights as well as on sexual and reproductive rights and training, unfortunately we have to do this because the data that we've gathered is discouraging, and it's frightening. We need to fight back, and we need to make sure that the girls are receiving the training on their rights." FGD - Latin America

The shift to online platforms for training and capacity building has also inspired experimentation in new approaches to learning. Hybrid approaches to training with a mix of real-time and recorded modules are being tested by some unions. There is greater interest in recording training and making that available for members online so they can access the information in their own time. Some unions are also developing short, practical videos to help union members strategize and mobilise around key issues, for example, anti-racism in the workplace.

"We're rethinking our learning models from the equalities perspective to provide asynchronous learning opportunities that are very directly related to the practical problem that the individual groups are trying to solve." KII - Europe

Building the Evidence Base

Another effective strategy shared by one of the unions in Europe was investment in research on the impact of the pandemic on educators and other education union members.⁵ It is worth pointing out the value of the research in building a strong evidence base of how diverse women educators were experiencing the pandemic, and the importance of this information for determining union policy and strategic inventions. Some other unions described smaller pieces of research, for example, the impact of the pandemic on labour rights and on gender-based violence, while many others shared the kind of anecdotal information that forms the basis of this report.

At the same time, there was a call for unions to be more proactive in undertaking regular needs assessment with their membership, in order to better address key issues affecting diverse women union members.

"We need to take time in our organization to find out more about how women live and feel. We are still in the crisis. So, it is impossible to get perspective of it yet". KII - Europe



“We have seen members creating and doing several types of activities, but we also do not know all their needs, so we suggest having a needs assessment to know what types of activities union members need during this time and also after the pandemic is over.” FGD - Asia and Pacific

This theme was repeated during key informant interviews and focus group discussions, along with the need to continue the conversation with union members on the strategies most needed to keep them engaged - both the needs of the majority of members as well as those minorities whose needs have become more visible in recent years. There was also a sentiment shared that the pandemic is not yet over, and that the impact will continue to be felt for years.

Summary of Main Findings and Lessons

The main questions guiding this EI commissioned research appeared at first quite straightforward. As the research progressed it became clear that the diverse experiences of women members of the education union during the (first) two years of the pandemic did not provide the material for weaving a simple narrative. In an effort to distill lessons learned from the research findings, the following key observations emerge.

Experiences of women union members strongly shaped by context

Overall, there appears to have been an increase in women union members' participation in union meetings and union training activities since they were shifted online. Yet this is not true across all the unions taking part in the research – experiences have been profoundly shaped by context. As evidenced in the findings sections access to technology, rural/urban divide, culture (including the hold of patriarchy, including in some contexts culture of “machismo”), legal status of the LGBTQI community, to name just a few, have influenced how diverse women have been able to engage in online spaces during the pandemic.

Unions have effectively stepped up with new strategies to respond to women's union members experiences and needs during pandemic

Unions -- usually through the auspices of equality and inclusion reps, women's committees and training teams -- stepped up and pivoted to online meetings, training and workshops. This was not easy. They often needed first to provide training on Zoom, as well as stipends or credit for data and internet connection. In addition, new types of training and support were offered to respond to needs expressed by women union members including more training and workshops on mental health, wellbeing and self care, racial equality, along with an increased focus on regular training on GBV / VAWG and women's labour rights.



Shift online brought some benefits in terms of diverse women's ability to participate

As shown by the stories and examples shared by research participants, online spaces have brought some benefits in terms of diverse women union members' ability to participate in union meetings and to engage in various training offered by their unions. In addition, online platforms and tools, including WhatsApp and Facebook, have enhanced real time sharing of information and support. This was critical in the early months of the pandemic and during lockdown periods for keeping women union members connected with their union and with each other in contexts of extreme uncertainty and stress.

The research participation described an uptick in women's engagement, for example, of younger women with young children who found it easier to engage online around their responsibilities. Online spaces were also created in some national unions for BAME and disabled women. The shift online provided opportunities for new connections to be made.

Increase in (quantity of) participation in activities has not automatically translated into (quality of) engagement

Overall, it appears that the reported increases in women's participation, that is, showing up in greater numbers for online meetings, connecting more regularly through social media, and in online training, did not necessarily translate into sustained engagement or an increase in leadership roles for women union members. Any gains made in levels of participation in union activities need to be considered in light of patterns of increased burden on women based on the gender division of labour and is sometimes referred to as "women's triple roles".⁶ The stories of women resolutely showing up in online union activities while also doing their housework, caring for their children and families, and managing their work responsibilities, speaks volumes as regards their commitment to unionism, but is a stark reminder of how much gender relations and division of labour, rooted in patriarchal systems, continues to profoundly influence the terms of their engagement.

Related to this, even as hybrid approaches are likely to become the norm for union meetings and events, it will be critical to ensure that

6 The triple burden faced by women as a result of their triple role in society is a major barrier to women's economic empowerment. Women's work includes reproductive work (domestic work, child caring and rearing, adult care, caring for the sick, water and fuel related work, health related work), productive work (work for income and subsistence, including work in informal sector enterprises, formal employment) and community managing work (includes activities primarily undertaken by women at the community level to support collective needs). This gender division of labour perpetuates women's subordination and prevents them from realizing their full potential and enjoying their human rights, adapted from [Empower Women - The Triple burden and triple role of women](#)

how union members engage is not reinforcing power relations and gender norms, with men going to national and international face-to-face meetings and women “listening in” while doing the care work.

The pandemic and the shift online increased visibility and relevance of unions for women union members

As the stories shared above attest, during the pandemic the value of union membership for women members was unscored as they struggled to make sense of uncertainty and the rapidly changing situation regarding lockdowns, school closures, and health and safety, not to mention implications for their job security and pay. The union meetings, groups and training became solidarity and support networks with other women.

In conclusion, this report provides a glimpse into the complexity of women's lived experiences of union engagement during the pandemic. The shift to online union activities has clearly created new opportunities for women's participation and engagement in most of the countries involved in the study. This is exciting and significant. Yet as one of the KII interviewees put it, “once you start peeling back the layers you discover that it is not so straightforward”. We need to ask questions such as: “what does this really mean for women union members in the longer term? How are gender norms being perpetuated? How do we address the underlying causes of gender and other inequality that continue to present barriers to diverse women's full participation?”



Recommendations

The mere fact that women are given the opportunity to choose what would be more convenient for them to be able to participate is what would make the most of women wanting to participate in meetings or activities. FGD - Asia and Pacific

There were many positive changes either experienced or observed by women union members who participated in the research. They were specifically asked what could be done by EI and their unions to sustain positive changes in women's engagement. In light of their feedback and the main research findings and lessons described above, 8 recommendations have been formulated for EI's consideration. Most of these recommendations are also relevant to national level Education Unions.⁷

Recommendation # 1

Make provisions for hybrid approaches in the design and hosting of all regular EI meetings

Recommendation # 2

Introduce mixed media approaches for regular communications with other unions / diverse women union members

Recommendation # 3

Integrate hybrid approaches wherever possible in training and capacity building carried out among diverse women union members

Recommendation # 4

Develop or build on themes / modules for training and capacity building of diverse women union members based on findings of the research (i.e. Zoom and other IT training, inclusion and diversity training, GBV/VAWG, mental health and well-being)

⁷ There were also many recommendations, especially those shared during FGDs that went beyond the research focus on virtual spaces and online engagement. A few commonly shared recommendations to union included: continue offering training, coaching and mentoring, especially for young women union members, as a key strategy for building new leaders; creating intergenerational spaces for dialogue between "seniors" and new members; building awareness of male union members (and sometimes women leaders, too) that it was time to step aside and offer up space to a new generation of women leaders.

Recommendation # 5

Take advantage of options provided by technologies to facilitate cross country and cross regional linking and networking opportunities

Recommendation # 6

Integrate budgetary allocations for diverse women union members to access IT (data, software, hardware) to facilitate their participation in virtual EI and other Education Union spaces

Recommendation # 7

Create a forum or use an existing forum to share ideas and good practices among unions about effective use of hybrid options for building diverse women union members voices, leadership and engagement in union activities

Recommendation # 8

Continue to monitor the ongoing impact of the pandemic on diverse women's participation, voice, and leadership within education unions



Annex 1: Interview Questions

[Education International Member Organisations]

1. Please describe your role within your Union.
2. Have you observed any changes in the participation of women in your Union's activities, events and/or meetings since the start of the pandemic? Probing questions....
 - a. Have women's membership, participation, or engagement in your Union increased? Decreased? Stayed the same?
 - b. Among diverse groups of women? Members/non members? Women leadership? Young women? LGBTQI women? Minority groups? Disabled women?
 - c. Any regional/national differences noted?
3. Have you observed any differences in women union members' participation in online activities, events and/or meetings compared to male union members? Who is more active and engaged?
4. Has your own participation in union events, activities and/or meetings changed during the pandemic? If so, what has changed? What do you think has contributed to this change(s)?
5. What factors do you think may be contributing to any changes in diverse women's participation in online union events, activities and/or meetings since the start of the pandemic?
6. Is there anything that EI/national union has done to overcome any barriers to diverse women's participation in the online union events, activities and/or meetings since the start of the pandemic? Please explain.
7. If women's engagement and participation in online union activities has increased over the past two years, what might be some strategies that EI Unions can use to sustain and build on this?
8. What lessons can EI learn from the changes (or lack of change) in gendered participation in online union activities, events and/or meetings over the last two years?
9. Finally, do you have any further examples or data (research, union monitoring information if available) that you would be willing to share or to summarize for us?

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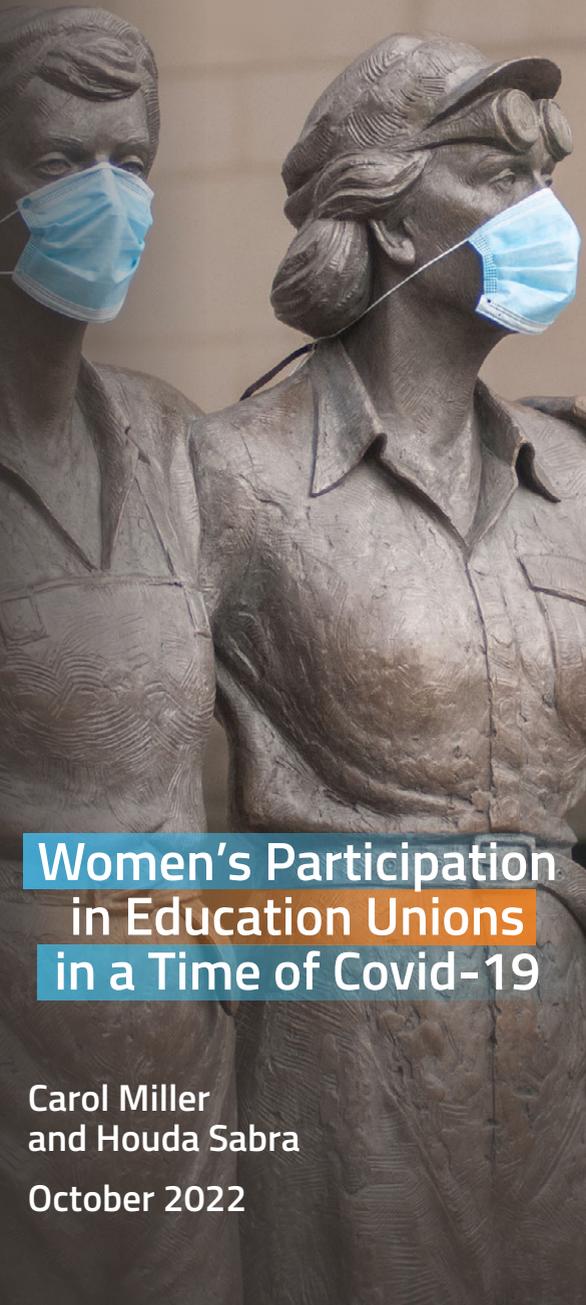
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Women's Participation in Education Unions in a Time of Covid-19

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