



English summary  
of Fafo-rapport 2023:11

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## Women's representation in trade unions

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### **A survey of members of the United Federation of Trade Unions (Fellesforbundet) and the Norwegian Union of Commerce and Office Employees (Handel og Kontor i Norge)**

The subject of this report is female trade union reps and their careers in this area. Important questions include what is needed for women to take more senior positions, and whether there are particular challenges linked to women's path into trade union management and senior positions.

The report is based on interviews with female trade union reps at various levels in the United Federation of Trade Unions and the Norwegian Union of Commerce and Office Employees, and a survey of current and former trade union reps of both sexes in the same two organisations.

The survey shows that it is not particularly difficult for union members to secure their first trade union position. There is little indication that the path into trade union work is more challenging for women than for men. The vast majority of trade union reps report that they want to be involved so that they can help safeguard a good workplace and good conditions for colleagues and trade union members. Many also say that they are interested in trade union work, and some also indicate that the experience can be useful in a job context. This applies to both women and men.

The majority of the trade union reps state that they enjoy their role and would agree to continue in their current position if asked. This also applies to women with children and women in male-dominated industries. The survey shows that training levels vary considerably among trade union reps at grassroots level. A significant number had received training in trade union work, but quite a few lack basic training. The interviews confirm that training is important for security and satisfaction in this role.

A key question in the survey relates to the possibilities for recruiting women to positions at a senior level. In the survey, 43 per cent of respondents indicated that they would consider accepting a senior position if they were asked. Trade union reps who thrive in their roles and who have received training are the most positive. We find no gender gap in the tendency to accept a senior post. There is also no indication in the survey that women are more likely than men to cite family commitments as a reason for not wanting a senior position. However, the women appear to be more hesitant about senior positions when interviewed, and several point out that combining different roles is challenging. Good training is highlighted as the most important form of support in senior positions. Almost no

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women indicated that they want a separate network for women, but many believe that a type of mentoring arrangement might be beneficial.

In the report, we ask about the importance of female trade union reps for the trade union movement and its members. Slightly more women than men report having raised questions about equal pay and part-time working with their employer. However, much of this can be explained by the types of industries they work in. In the interviews, the informants emphasise that it is still important to have both male and female trade union reps, but also young people and minorities. Reflecting the diversity of the employees has value in itself.

Based on the report, we highlight some important measures that the unions can take to increase the proportion of women in senior positions. First, ensure that a diverse range of people are asked to take up positions at grassroots level. Second, good training promotes security in the position and interest in trade union work. Other types of follow-up from the union are also important. Third, senior positions will involve travel and attending meetings outside normal working hours. The challenge is thus to find the best possible balance so that members in all phases of life can take up such positions. Fourth, the arguments for good representation in senior positions cannot be limited to women only. Today, it is also important to ensure good representation from younger members and those with a minority background. Finally, it should be noted that equality in the workplace requires both female and male trade union reps to put equality on the agenda. Equality is not solely about women's position as employees and trade union reps.