



UNIVERSITY OF TAMPERE

This document has been downloaded from
TamPub – The Institutional Repository of University of Tampere

Post-print

The permanent address of the publication is
<http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:uta-201404071306>

Author(s):	Heiskanen, Tuula; Lavikka, Riitta
Title:	Flexible production and flexible women: The study of union leader Alice
Main work:	Gendering and Diversifying Trade Union Leadership
Editor(s):	Ledwith, Sue; Hansen, Lise-Lotte
Year:	2012
Pages:	117-137
ISBN:	978-0-415-88485-3
Publisher:	Routledge
Discipline:	Sociology
School /Other Unit:	School of Social Sciences and Humanities
Item Type:	Article in Compiled Work
Language:	en
URN:	URN:NBN:fi:uta-201404071306

All material supplied via TamPub is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorized user.

**Gendering and Diversifying Trade Union Leadership
(eds.) Sue Ledwith and Lise Lotte Hansen
Routledge 2013**

**Tuula Heiskanen
Riitta Lavikka**

**Flexible production and flexible women – The story of union leader
Alice**

Introduction

This chapter presents the story of Alice, a shop steward, with the presumption that the contextual matters and social processes in the company and the union are necessary for understanding Alice's pathway as a union representative but, also more generally, for understanding the gendered conditions of leadership behaviour in unions. Alice was a sewing machinist and shop steward in a clothing company in Finland, and her story mainly takes place in the period when the clothing industry was facing major adaptation pressures due to shrinking bilateral Finnish–Soviet trade during the 1990s.

Alice's story takes place in a setting that is best characterized as a change from the paradigm of Tayloristic scientific management and assembly line work to a new paradigm of flexibility. On the one hand, this paradigm change was about organizing the former line-work into teamwork but, on the other hand, it was also an ideological breakthrough of a new way of thinking about work regimes. Flexibility is not only valued as the competitive asset needed in the global network economy (eg. Castells 1996, Volberda 1998, Chandler *et al.* 1998), but it is also seen as a new era of individualization characterizing the postmodern condition (Sennett 1998, Bauman 2000).

Alice's workplace, the sewing factory, was in a process of transformation triggered by fashion market pressures. The company introduced a flexible production concept marketed by the Japanese in the international fashion fairs as early as in the late 1980s and in the early 1990s. Production teams were introduced in the sewing room of the company as a survival strategy. Actually the company was among the very first pioneering companies to take the flexibility challenge seriously on the practical level. There was little experience available at that time in Finland, or in Europe in general, of how to conduct the change process.

Against this turbulent background, we pose the following questions: How did Alice construct her role as a union leader? How compatible was this role with the challenges presented by the specific context of the company and the union? How compatible was the role definition with the available resources for agency? How were the demands of work reflected in Alice's emotional experience?

Theoretical framework

Union leaders work under the conditions of special kinds of power relations, in which they have to nurture their relationships with union members and simultaneously take care of functioning relationships with both management and union officials. Thus research has to find a theoretical model to embrace these conditions and requirements. Second, the gender issue brings along with it the question how to take into account gendered relations in the special power relations within the union and on the shopfloor.

Union leadership style studies provide one starting point, despite the fact that the gender perspective is included in only few of them. A well-known example of the leadership style studies is Batstone *et al.*'s (1977) study which is based on two case studies in male-dominated fields. They start from identifying three interrelated dimensions of power: "Success in making decisions, the ability to identify, shape and direct issues in the manner required and, finally, the maintenance of a particular ideology and associated set of institutions which served to support and legitimate particular patterns of behaviour" (1977:252) and make a distinction between types of shop stewards identify and shape issues and the ways in which they handle them. The study recognizes two main types of shop stewards: *delegates* who carry out the members' wishes, and *representatives* who adopt a leadership role and take initiatives in addition to fulfilling the wishes of the union members. The authors call "leaders" such shop stewards who display a representative role and manifest a strong commitment to trade union principles. In their view, leaders are those who most likely are able to have an influence on the maintenance and reaffirmation of the ideology and its institutions and who themselves are also strengthened by that same ideology and the powers with which the institutions provide them (*ibid.*:12–13). The influence on the institutions of the trade union by those shop stewards who adopt a delegate role tends to remain lower since they are more concerned with carrying out the wishes of the membership than with stirring the membership into action. Greene *et al.* (2000) assess that the model has stood the test of time, even though some further aspects of union leadership have also been presented, such as the participatory and collectivist styles. According to their description, the participatory style stresses the importance of communications, consultation and the involvement of members in decision-making, whereas the collectivist outlook exists where issues are seen by local leaders as reflecting a shared situation of work rather than being individual grievances (*ibid.*:76). Concerning the orientation among female trade union activists and leaders, Ledwith *et al.* (1990:123) found that strong feelings of service to the members maintained their commitment.

While the above examples start from the union context, another string of studies rely on general leadership style studies and apply them in the unions. For example, the laissez-faire, transactional and transformational leadership styles as defined in the leadership literature have been applied to union leaders (Briskin 2006). The laissez-faire style refers to failure to take responsibility for managing; transactional leadership involves managing in the conventional sense of clarifying subordinates' responsibilities, rewarding them for meeting objectives and correcting them for failing to meet objectives. Transformational leaders are future oriented, develop plans to achieve set goals and innovate even when their organization is generally successful. (Eagly and Carli 2003:815).

As far as gender issues in the above contexts are concerned, there are obvious gaps of knowledge and grounds for criticism. The masculine character of the structural and cultural mechanisms in unions has not gained sufficient attention, as Wajcman (2000) has indicated in her analysis. For example, the lack of support for female shop stewards in the trade union organization and the particular barriers at different levels of union structure (Lawrence 1994:98) deserve more consideration. Ledwith *et al.* (1990) have found that encouragement and support for

women and for men at the different steps of union activism and leadership follow different patterns.

In the sphere of the union organization, overtly sexist opinions about and behaviour towards women members and union representatives can be detected. We are inclined to interpret such incidences rather as expressions of close connection between sexual processes and organizational processes (cf. Hearn and Parkin 2001:13) than as random episodes. Although the chairperson of the Finnish Textile and Clothing Workers Union happened to be a woman during the period of our field research, the key officials of the union office whose task was to deal with emerging questions and problems with the members at the workplaces were male – a situation which is not uncommon in female-dominated branches (cf. Westwood 1984:64–88). They had been recruited from male-dominated workplaces, such as metal industry, or from male-dominated, highly appreciated and well-paid craft jobs in the textile industry. If we look at how David L. Collinson (1992) or Paul Willis (1977) describe the attitudes towards women that working class men tend to have, we can observe a special cultural code in how men relate with women with sexist and seductive features (Collinson 1992:114–115, 194; Willis 1977:43–47). Collinson describes how his informants treat women in a predatory, exploitative way (1992:194). According to his interpretation, this kind of behaviour is a way to form a male sexual identity at the shop-floor level. Personal senses of power and domination over women are features of this shop-floor masculinity.

The observations made by the authors of this chapter at the workplaces of the textile and clothing industry suggest that masculine codes of the male shop-floor culture as described by Collinson follow the ‘lads’ to their adolescence and to their jobs as union officials in female-dominated unions. For example, some forms of seduction could be observed to secure the men’s power positions in union politics (cf. Wajcman 1998:165, on intertwining power with sexuality). Those women union representatives who were not willing to comply with this subordination were excluded in one way or the other in the union. Alice was one of those independent women who did not consent to being a silent and loyal supporter of such practices.

There are studies that have traced differences in leadership styles between men and women and have shown that democratic and participative style is stronger among women (Eagly and Carli 2003:814). Briskin (2006:362–363) shows similar findings on union leaders. The critical question here is whether these gender differences in styles can be interpreted to derive from women’s personal properties or whether we should, in order to understand the meaning of the results, know more about the lived experiences of women ending up in leader positions, about the social processes taking place in specific organizations, and about contextual matters defining the boundary conditions for organizational activities, including power and resources (cf. Kanter 1977:168). In addition, trade unions constitute a context which places heavy demands on those who get involved in its activities. Suzanne Franzway (2000) calls trade unions greedy institutions, pointing to the workload which is typical of trade union work and to the demands of high commitment which is expected from those who become elected to trade union positions. Long working hours required in trade union work coupled with the expectations of commitment and loyalty to union ideals, which often demand emotional energy and may result in extremely heavy workload particularly among women with family responsibilities, may become barriers to active participation in trade unions. Further, for women, power base consolidation (Ledwith *et al.* 1990:113–114) in leadership positions may require extra effort and thus increase their workload. Power base consolidation to achieve and sustain leadership positions in elections, for example, is needed from both men and women, but the forms and processes of the election system in unions

are less stable from women's point of view due to their traditionally lower representation in trade union positions.

Methods

Alice's story is based on in-depth interviews conducted between 1993 and 1998. This research took place in the context of an action research project but as an independent part of it. The significance of the action research project for the study of Alice lay in that it paved the way for access to the company and made possible for the researchers to spend time in the company, to observe and to interview. One of the writers of this chapter (Riitta Lavikka) worked in the late 1980s as a reporter for the paper of the Textile and Clothing Workers' Union. In this role of a union reporter she met with Alice a few years before the research project took place. Alice welcomed the project with open arms. The different context of communication and relationship in a research project on work organizational change was carefully explained to Alice. She accepted her role as an informant and a key actor in this action research project. She also gave her permission to use all the material gathered in her research interviews in publications. The two women were old friends and they had trust in each other. For Alice, research interviews came to be an opportunity to reflect and to make sense of her experiences, thoughts and feelings among all the more chaotic processes that occurred in the company during the time of research. Alice's interest in the project was to create both better jobs for the women workers of the sewing room and a chance for them to make their experiences known and their voices heard in research. She appreciated highly the fact that her workplace was chosen as a research object.

Who is Alice?

Alice is a working-class woman, the eldest sister of 11 siblings, who started to work in a paid job at the age of 14, at the time when their father died, to help her mother to earn the livelihood for the family. Despite being an intelligent girl, she never had an opportunity to gain some kind of formal education. She only completed primary school and, after that, began her "studies at the high school of factory life". Alice always felt that she was like a second mother to her siblings and dutifully saw to that they attained the education that had been denied of her.

At the age of 20 Alice met a man who made her pregnant. After hearing of her pregnancy, the man disappeared. Alice said that she was always too proud to ask financial or any other support to help her with her girl child. As a single mother she took care of her daughter's education by seeing to that she completed the upper secondary school. At the time of the field research, Alice was 43 years old, and her daughter had moved out and started her studies at the University of Helsinki, which meant that Alice lived alone.

Alice was a union member, as all sewing machinists used to be. The rate of organization in the trade unions has traditionally been high in Finland, and presently somewhat higher among women than men (e.g. Ahtiainen 2006; Lehto & Sutela 2009:24–25). In public service sectors and in manufacturing the rates are the highest, exceeding 80 %. Alice's union 'career' started as a recreation organizer in her local union association. She became a very popular person among the workers, actively fulfilling her mates' wishes about trips to see popular plays in theatres and to go to the movies or concerts, for example. In this position she was able to fulfil her own hunger for culture as well.

Then she was asked to nominate herself for the position of shop steward in a ballot in the 1980s. It was in this incident that Alice in all innocence showed her colour as a left-wing person for the first time. Her leftist political orientation was originally the legacy of her parents. Her

personal political view grew stronger after she was elected as shop steward. However, she lacked the experience that is usually gathered in struggles between a union and an employer or in inside politics in the union. At the beginning of her union career she was a well-meaning and popular ‘big sister’, who wanted the best for all people around her. To her own surprise she won the ballot from a social democratic woman, Chris, who had had the position for several years. Chris represented the majority political group of the union and had been backed by ‘the boys’ of the union. She and the social democratic majority group along with her never forgave Alice for conquering the position of shop steward in one of the biggest clothing factories of that time in Finland. Later Alice also was elected a representative on the Municipal Council. As a result of the negotiations between the political groups in the Textile and Clothing Workers’ Union, she was to have the vice-presidency of the Union Council as well. In a very short time Alice was in an influential position and she was faced with the challenge of learning very quickly all the skills and qualifications needed in these tasks. As far as power is concerned on the shop floor, she was powerful enough to set the agenda (cf. Batstone 1977:9). Still, there was a conflict hiding among the shop floor members.

Start of the research

Alice’s employer, a clothing company, provided jobs for nearly 250 employees. In the Finnish context, it can be counted among medium-sized enterprises. It implemented global strategies and organized flexibly its domestic production in its struggle for survival. In shop-floor teams, women workers had to face a conflict between the Tayloristic management traditions and the new realities of the flexibility imperative. Together with six other companies, the clothing company participated in a research project that aimed to support them in their search for flexibility strategies (Heiskanen *et al.* 1998, Lavikka 1997), leaning on the participatory tradition of action research (e.g. Gustavsen 1992, Reason and Bradbury 2001; for links to feminisms, see also Maguire 2001). The project researchers were allowed to enter the company especially because its management had high hopes for academic interest in teamworking to help the company keep their development process going.

Our study belongs to the genre of sociological ethnomethodology that has its origins in Harold Garfinkel’s ideas on using phenomenological concepts in analysing everyday knowledge of average people as well as their understanding and action (Heritage 1996:18, 61). In this study, the life worlds of researchers and researchees overlap to some degree. The trade union context and the female gender are the mutual ground where Alice and Riitta meet and make sense of each other’s life worlds. In the gendered life worlds different things arise as important or problematic. The researchers’ commitment to taking Alice’s experiences and interests seriously make this research a feminist one. Alice had been a shop steward for approximately eight years when the field work stage and the interviews started.

This research is a part of an extensive fieldwork: Alice and her fellow workers were interviewed and observed in the factory and trade union contexts during a three-year period, and Alice was also interviewed a few times after this fieldwork stage. Here we aim at to write out in the form of ethnographical ‘thick description’ what we have understood of Alice’s life, her way of making sense of her experiences and her way of giving meaning. (cf. van Maanen 1988; Geertz 1973:9).

Alice’s workplace: Pressures for organizational rethinking

Pilot teams

To understand Alice's role as a union leader, we need to know something about the company and about the various challenges it was facing in the changed world market situation. Generally rush and pressure seemed to constitute the frames for organizing everyday life. Later on in the research project, the executive manager revealed the company strategy for coping with its production problems.

The more we outsource production, the shorter the delivery times, the smaller the batches and the more model variation, the more we have these messy situations [...] This chaos management is very familiar to us. We have practised it for several years now.

The main organizational challenge was related to teamwork and to how to make the teams work effectively. Through fieldwork among managers it became clear to us that the management in charge of organizing team training had not considered these practical points sufficiently. After all, a move to teams is a fundamental change from the traditional organization (e.g. Manz and Sims 1993:5) or, as Wybrow and Parker (2000:107) put it, "the introduction of teamworking is complex and political, involving disruption to both diverse organisational structures [...] and belief systems". The pay scheme for teams was still based on piecework, but the pay was now arranged on a collective basis. This was a radical change that called for an entirely new orientation, both practical and mental, from sewing machinists who had always had an individual piecework target. The piecework scheme led to both personal and organizational conflicts and contradictions with the new team philosophy.

Bankruptcy and a new start

Six research visits were paid to the company in 1991–1996, each lasting from one day to two weeks. Among the most dramatic and important events during the research period were the bankruptcy of the company and the events that followed it. After a short interlude of uncertainty, three former professional managers of the company managed to inspire confidence at a bank. Very soon they were able to buy the firm and a company producing children's wear in another region that had also gone bankrupt at that time. The two companies were merged, and after a short and tough political struggle between the two regions, most of the activities of the new enterprise were relocated to this small country town.

After a short period of uncertainty, the company re-employed practically all its former workers. However, it took some time for them to recover from the shock. A new and difficult challenge for workers was to start manufacturing very light tricot clothing after heavy sportswear.

Alice's construction of her role as a union leader

The story continues with dialogues between Alice and the researcher. In this part, we want to bring forth how Alice constructs her role as a shop steward and draws strength to fulfil her duties. In addition to her shop steward's tasks, she also had numerous political tasks in the union and in the municipality that offered her special resources: an opportunity for intellectual development as well as an escape from being doomed to remain on the shop floor, by means of which she was able to build her identity as an influential person in society. At work, a great deal of her daily shop steward tasks revolved around the pay scheme for teams, in the creating and developing of which she had participated, making her mark on the outcome.

Riitta: I've learned that there are some problems concerning the piece rate in teams. What do you think is causing this?

Alice: People haven't reached their piece rate but remained on the guaranteed rate level. I'd say that this is rather caused by extra arrangements and such tasks. The girls do much more than they are paid for. [...].

By 'extra arrangements' she refers to some new tasks that earlier did not belong to the sewing machinists. In other industrial contexts it has been found that occupational profiles change remarkably after the change from traditional line-work to teamwork. One essential change is that all team members have to 'manage' to some degree, as Park and Harris (2000:159), for example, define it in their empirical study. At Alice's workplace, the team organization assigned to the sewing machinists some of the planning and organizing tasks that used to belong to the supervisors and foremen, who were paid for doing them. When the same tasks were then performed by the female sewing machinists, they were no longer seen as work that should have been paid for but as work that the 'girls' do outside their piecework target. In addition to being a pay issue, according to our interpretation, this was also an identity issue. With long experience of line-work, the shop-floor people had adopted the Tayloristic construct of competence: the high-pace performance in one operation was their core identity at work. It was not easy to build a new and more functional identity for teamwork.

The new demands of teamwork with their dubious consequences from the workers' viewpoint provided a tension-filled context for Alice's shop steward duties. Nevertheless, she enjoyed her work – the role of shop steward was essential for her identity.

Alice: I, for my part, have experienced it so that, when I've had these union tasks and been involved in bargaining about the teams' agreements, that I've got so much mental capital for myself that I wouldn't give it away.

Riitta: And what about you? From where do you draw strength for these duties?

Alice: I must confess that I enjoy helping people. It gives me strength. I don't measure the amount of time I spend helping people. I'm prepared to come here whenever it is for the workers [...]

Riitta: Am I right when I think that step by step it has come to be the content and meaning of your life?

Alice: Well, yes. My daughter (a grown-up woman) has been angry with me about this. She's said that I don't live for myself at all and told me to leave everything [...] But I'm not able to get rid of these tasks, not yet at least. I've worked so hard to learn these things and I enjoy this work for people so much [...]

At the end of the discussion Alice told the interviewer about her youth to explain why she felt like a "mother figure" in her work collective:

Alice: I come from a large family.[...]. I was a kind of second mother to my ten siblings. I think that this attitude, mothering, has followed me to my workplace. Also here I like to help people that have it worse [...] I'm also a member of the municipal board for social aid. I can help people also in that way [...] But as for myself [...] I think it's characteristic of me never to ask for help. It must be a really big problem that makes me ask somebody for help [...]

Alice demonstrated well-meaning care, and she was also convinced that she knew what was best for the workers. As a union representative, Alice seemed to work **for** the best of her fellow workers, not so much **with** them, which caused problems which are described in the rest of the story.

Resources for agency

The second round of fieldwork in the company took place a few months after its bankruptcy and the start of the new company. During these months, newspapers and other media were interested in the events around the two almost overlapping bankruptcies of big children's wear companies and their planned merger. There was a big dispute between the clothing workers of the two country towns about the location of the new united factory.

Alice threw herself fully into the battle for the jobs. She organized workers' delegations to visit national organizations like ministries, the parliament, financing institutions and whatever came to her mind. As a municipal council member, an active party member and a union representative, she knew the methods and she knew the channels. All at once she could deploy all her experience, knowledge and contacts. She was a popular figure to be interviewed and she also knew how to use the publicity. She did win her battle but was eventually disappointed at the lack of support from the union.

Riitta: Shall we start about your experiences during this bankruptcy [...]?

Alice: It was tough and hard [...] I had no time to think of myself or save my strength or to pay attention to the time I spent [...] I had to be doing something all the time to create some pressure for keeping our jobs [...]

And then there was the paperwork, all these formal arrangements concerning the union membership fees of 270 people. I had to do the same paperwork many times because of the constantly changing situation with our employment. I had to bargain about the arrangement for payroll clearance with our employer and the banks, to inform people about arrangements concerning unemployment benefits, early retirement, adult education possibilities [...] Then there were the contacts with politically influential quarters, the press, radio, television, writing our statements and position papers [...] All these things I had to organize in a short period of time.

It seemed to Alice that the union took the side of the other town in the competition for the jobs. Instead of receiving support, she was blamed by the union board for accepting local agreement during bankruptcy. She felt that the union was perhaps blinded by the internal power struggle going on between political groups and could not identify the almost fatal threat of losing jobs in the branch.

Alice: All these things gave me a rather bad feeling.

Riitta: But what about your fellow workers in the company, didn't they support you? Wasn't there any community spirit concerning the action in the company?

Alice: Well, I'm such a strong person and I have been a shop steward for 12 years now [...] Then I'm a member of the municipal council, and the union council, so perhaps I'm used to taking things up ... but of course I knew that they were with me at least in spirit [...] And then I had so little time to wait [...] I had to act [...] In the end the media was active [...] I even got tired of the reporters in the end.

Riitta: What about the community spirit now that the new employer is in charge of things?

Alice: There's possibly no community spirit any longer [...] And it's only natural. I didn't even expect it [...] You see, we used to have a little better pay than the average in this branch. Then we had all these special benefits. And when the new enterprise started there was a clean slate. At least we managed to keep our former status as old employees. But we went backwards as to our pay, for some time at least. But I believe that in the long run we'll rise again [...] But the personnel don't think that way [...]

This discussion could be interpreted as follows: Alice had fought a battle for others and trusted vaguely that she would get sympathy from the other workers, who possibly had not even known very much about the details of the threatening situation and Alice's actions on their behalf. She had been a general without troops; she had not even counted on the workers' support. She had been more accustomed to acting by herself and to using the media to gain public sympathy for her struggle. All she had won in the eyes of her fellow workers was that she had managed to make herself a public figure with public glory. But now she seemed to be sad and alone at the factory.

Alice: I've got to say that I have a lot of troubles in my hands now. There's envy and conflicts between departments. It's tough. Sometimes I feel that I can't catch the drift of things even if I [...] everything's so [...] everybody thinks only about themselves [...]

Alice had a tired tone in her voice when she talked about the difficulties concerning people's attitudes to their decreasing pay. The situation in the new teams in particular was difficult. After the bankruptcy, the teams started to manufacture very light tricot garments. The workers working with Alice were used to an entirely different material and to a totally different kind of work in sewing heavy coveralls for extreme arctic conditions. In addition, they already felt bitter about the decreasing pay, and learning to sew by using new material, methods and new machines, starting working in teams and recovering from the shock of the bankruptcy were almost too much for them to bear.

Alice: These are some of the things that are now becoming hot topics in the company. We still have to have strength to clear up these problems before the situation becomes normal. But in principle I have trust in the managers of this company, who now also own the firm. But they're very careful and they start with a low profile; it's difficult to get any extra money for the workers out of them. We need to show some outcome at first. I believe that after we're on the positive side, it'll be possible to get something for the workers, too.

It is worth noticing that 'we' in Alice's talk means her together with company management. In the midst of the chaos and hostile reactions by her co-workers she said: "At least I can trust him [the manager]. What he says, he does. He is stern but honest. If he were different, I would not have the strength to struggle through all this on the shop-floor either."

Riitta: I find it very strange that you stand so alone. It seems even dangerous to me. Shouldn't you have a circle of union activists around you to take some of the responsibility as a collective?

Alice: I've thought about it. And I've waited for the union to help me [...] But you see, it's difficult when the situation here is like this. We have a strong person here, Chris, who 12 years ago in a ballot lost her position as the shop steward. It was I who won the post then. She's never forgiven me for it. And she also has loyal friends here, for instance, one of the

union representatives in the new tricots teams is her friend. This friend of hers swears and shouts, she even looks like a cruel person. And she hates me. She's Chris's right hand. You know, these two women govern half the factory. The girls are afraid of them. The girls may support me in spirit, but they dare not talk of it because they know what kind of fight there will then be.

These events coincided with the battle for shop steward positions as it was also time for the 2-yearly ballot for steward positions. To an outsider it seemed very probable that Alice was in danger of losing her union position because of negative passions arising around her. Alice relied in her action on a bond of affection and loyalty between 'sisters'. She expected that kind of a relationship to exist between her and her sewing machinist mates on the shop floor level, for whose benefit she had struggled in the chaotic situation of the company. Her mistake, however, was to take this bond for granted. Her affection was not returned because of the intervening struggle of power in a ballot. In fact, the organizational ballot system and the support that the union 'boys' gave to Alice's rival Chris during the campaign were clear demonstrations of the existence of a masculine organizational code, a collective masculinized trade unionism that had been defeated in Alice's original election.

A lonely struggle

Writers such as Orbach and Eichenbaum (1994) as well as Miner and Longino (1987) write about how women are deeply involved in the struggle for and against their cause emotionally, and the wounds and scars they inflict and suffer from such power games may have a lifelong effect on them. This seemed to be the case for Alice. About three months later Alice called and shared her news. She had lost her post as a union representative in the election by only eight votes. She was deeply depressed and her voice sounded distressed. Seeking some kind of female bonding, she said:

In fact you've been the one who has always understood and helped me. I've got support mostly from you during this mess... and learned a lot about teams. You've understood me and I've been able to talk with you as with a peer. It's been a great help to me [...]

The next meeting took place in Alice's hotel room during a big union meeting three weeks after hearing the sad news. Two other persons present and participating in the discussions were female union activists and experienced shop stewards from big clothing factories. This discussion situation reveals something that usually remains an unnoticed union activity. In the quiet of hotel rooms during union meetings women gather together after lost battles to weep and to comfort each other. In this way they create a female space inside the public sphere of union politics, where the official rules follow the masculine organizational rationality. Here in these female corners of union life are rules with emotional rationality in use. By the term "emotional rationality" we refer to a type of rationality which according to Bolough's (1990:132-133) definition is "based on recognizing, responding to and reflecting on needs and feelings, attachments and relationships that give meaning and value to action and life" (see also Mumby and Putnam 1992; Lavikka 1997:41-43).

Maria and Lena had already met Alice in a union board meeting a week before, and she had talked to them. They were worried about her and felt responsible for helping her, caring for her. In this discussion they tried to focus on Alice's way of handling her battle for jobs when bankruptcy was declared. Their point was that the reason for Alice's losing her post lay there. They tried to make her see her own way of acting.

Alice: The pressure was so hard that I couldn't see anything. In the end I burned out, I became depressed.

Maria: I think that the key question is: Whose battle was this in the first place? Was it your battle? Have you thought about it? Did you have wrong motives? Not from your point of view. I don't doubt it for a moment. But when I look at this battle from the outside, I have to ask this question. I think that you fought for yourself. You have the ambition to be a kind of Mother Theresa. I don't mean to hurt you any more with this.[...].

Alice: Well, girls, I don't know how to tell you how I felt then [...] It was necessary to act very fast. Perhaps you're lucky to have better support than I had... I don't know [...] All I can sincerely say is that I worried terribly about the jobs then. It didn't occur to me to play any Mother Theresa role [...]

Lena: Everybody sees that this was the most important thing for you. I can understand you. One does these things to keep jobs.

Alice: We don't have much choice, we live in such a small town. We haven't had any vocational education, we have families [...] And then I tried to tell people to organize meetings, I asked them to spread the information ... but it never happened.

Riitta: I guess they felt unable to do this. They hadn't learned to organize anything. You had always done everything for them.

Lena: It should've been going on all the time. People should've known that today Alice is meeting people in the parliament for us, and all the time you should've informed other people about your actions. It may be that other workers might have felt like they were outsiders in your battle.

Maria: That's exactly what I meant. The whole picture seems a bit distorted [...]

Lena: I can see it clearly that you, Alice, you couldn't handle it all by yourself, when you couldn't delegate to anyone else any of your activities.

Maria: But a union fight should never be one person's battle [...]

Alice: We were not prepared for this. We live in such a small country town [...] And I have to say that I never really understood you when you told me about the bankruptcies you had experienced ... only now that I've gone through this I'm able to understand.

Maria: What I have to say to you is that when you do this union work in difficult circumstances of course you sometimes make mistakes, too. You have to accept it. You have to allow it to yourself. You mustn't be too critical of yourself.

Alice (starts to cry): But I'm in pain. I can't get rid of the pain. All the nasty things I've faced lately keep repeating in my mind, and multiplying.

Lena: Often people relieve their own agony by saying evil things to somebody else.

Maria: In times like these the weakest people reveal themselves. People's strengths and weaknesses show clearly in difficult times. Then you are able to see who you can really trust. Sometimes you are surprised positively; someone can be so much greater as a human being than you have thought.

Alice: I can see this. But my reaction is emotional [...] I went to see a doctor [...] I was out of energy [...] The doctor told me something about grief work, which I'm going through [...] And I really feel like death had paid a visit to me, when I simply haven't had anything but this union work on behalf of others. This was my family which I fought and lived for [...] It's for the people I cry, I feel like they've been taken away from me ... I've never been this low in my life.

Maria: It's good to cry when you grieve. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I think that you've moved a few steps ahead already [...] You talk in a different way than last week [...] You only have to trust that this will be over soon [...]

Success and its price

For the company, a successful period was about to come. It was one of the most profitable clothing companies in Finland measured by profits and net returns. Its financial turnover grew as much as 40 per cent in one year and it was among the 500 largest companies in Finland for the first time. The chosen flexibility strategy had indeed been successful. The orientation towards flexibility in terms of both organizing domestic production into teams and cost-containment by outsourcing production to countries of cheap labour had turned out to be profitable.

As for the problems of female workers – they were left to struggle with chaotic changes in production and with the pay scheme based on piecework. Management were not willing to develop their pay on an hourly basis. The sewing machinists felt that their outcome was undervalued and their jobs were unsafe. In the end, the workers in the various teams were not able to save their jobs, although they developed their skills and teams in order to be more effective and versatile. It was the company's decision that, in addition to designing and finishing, only the shortest batches with the shortest delivery times were to be assembled in Finland. The managers' opinion was that domestic production would not be competitive at all without outsourcing production and the chance it gives to mixed price-setting. With this view, also the economic value of flexible domestic production seemed less vital for the company.

At the end of 1996, there were again some redundancies in the company. These included Alice, who was no longer protected by her union representative's position. Before getting sacked, Alice had worked for a couple of years as an ordinary shop-floor worker, ordering and sorting accessories. It was a routine job in a lonely and separate corner in the back of the factory hall. She still had some of her union positions left and tried to occupy herself with these tasks as much as she could, but she had a general feeling that her abilities and knowledge were wasted. A year later in a union paper article (Toimikas 9/96), the union congratulated Alice for her 50th birthday and, at the same time, broke the news of her dismissal. She was one of the 20 workers considered redundant to the company at the end of 1996.

A couple of years after her dismissal, Alice recovered and became her former energetic self. She started to work as a leader of a local association organizing activities and help for the unemployed. It was a three-year project, financed from different social sources. During the last call from the researcher, Alice said: 'These past three years have been the best time of my life'.

Discussion

It is evident that women enter unions differently from men. Linda Briskin (2006:361–362) draws attention to women's workplace locations and their household/family responsibilities that affect women's union behaviour: what issues they see salient, how they organize, resist and lead in union positions. Indeed, it would be a distortion to treat Alice's experiences without being fully

aware of her work history in the Tayloristic line work and lately in the team organization of the textile factory. Also, we would be lacking information as regards her leadership style if we did not know what meanings she gives to the relationship between her family and her present work. Given these conditions, her caring orientation towards her fellow workers does not come as a surprise. The explanations provided in the research literature for Alice's leadership style would be very divergent, however.

Studies on union leaders and general leadership literature both repeat the message that women lead differently from men and/or that the perceptions of leadership roles attached to men and women differ (Briskin 2006, Eagly and Carli 2003). The conclusions drawn from these kinds of results have made Briskin (2006) as well as Billing and Alvesson (2000) feel uncomfortable. For example, the findings that women lead in a more democratic or participatory way or exercise power in a more constructive way have often been interpreted in an essentialistic tone. To avoid the essentialism bias, Billing and Alvesson suggest that the gender vocabulary should not be emphasized too much (2000:155). Briskin, for her part, is in favour of a contextual approach which helps illuminate why women may lead differently. Here we follow the latter guideline. We also base our approach on the assumption that leadership has a great deal to do with power – in the sense of the ability to get things done – and with resources for using the power (cf. Kanter 1977:166–168).

Alice clearly had a leadership role. She had visions about better terms and conditions of working and ideas how to reach them, and she took a stand on issues and made initiatives. We can say that she flung herself into the work with doings and emotions, making herself vulnerable to criticism at the same time.

We can claim that the situation in the company needed strong leadership from the shop steward and, in that sense, the role Alice tried to maintain was compatible with the conditions and requirements. On the other hand, her resources for agency did not match with the hard demands that the union representative role required. Lacking support from the union was one side of the mismatch and lacking support from the co-workers was the other and maybe even more important side of the resource deficiency. Although she had only lost by eight votes, clearly she had not been able to muster the collective support needed to re-elect her.

In Finland, the company shop steward is the person who negotiates directly with the union and the management of the company. In comparison to some other countries, there are no conveners present at the shop floor with whom to discuss issues and strategies (cf. Batsone *et al.* 1988). In the company crisis situation Alice defined independently the agenda for saving the jobs and worked vigorously for them. She also negotiated independently a local pay scheme in which the former local benefits were lost. Besides the political struggle between the majority and minority groups within the union, these were the main reasons why Alice was left without the support from the union. Chris was able to utilize in her campaign both the anger aroused among the workers of the loss of the extra benefits and the reprimand the union expressed for Alice's overly independent role during the crisis. Chris represented a kind of quasi-elite (cf. Batstone *et al.* 1977:45) based on her former well-established relationships with the majority-group union 'boys' and could organize active opposition. However, the union would not have had much to offer to Alice in the fast-moving situation of the industrial and company crisis. In fact, the union was not well-informed of the challenges that Alice met. We could say that the union still lived in the era of Tayloristic ideology and could not provide any expertise to treat with the challenges of flexibility.

Instead of union support, Alice relied on sisterhood as a resource. It was rather the willingness to take care of the 'sisters' that was the dominating motive in Alice's action. In this sense, our

results compare well to the study of Ledwith *et al.* (1990), for example, in which the female union leaders emphasized the motive to work for the union members and, more broadly, also to the theoretical discussions concerning emotional rationality among women (e.g. Bologh 1990, Mumby and Putnam 1992).

The story brings forth the silenced side of sisterhood, the negative feelings that grow and form a barrier to support. All in all, however, emotions, and particularly negative emotions, among women in organizations are a subject quite rarely dealt with in research (cf. Orbach and Eichenbaum 1994, Miner and Longine 1987). In Alice's case, the situation in which she was both a fellow worker and a union representative made the consequences of the victimization process exceptionally far-reaching. Alice had great merits in helping people and fighting sincerely for her fellow workers' interests. Despite that she became a target of the negative emotions which her fellow workers had in the messy situation after bankruptcy, and finally lost both her position as a shop steward as well as her job.

We observed that the firm and the workers were in the midst of uncertainties. Changes in the content of work, worries about the wage level and fears about losing jobs are transformations prone to generate strong emotional reactions. Such conditions may also lead to a certain kind of negative mental attitude that in Denzin's (1984:224–225) description, for example, turns against close emotional associates, often the mothering or fathering figures. Even though Alice was successful in saving workplaces at some point of time in the prolonged economic crisis of the firm, she also became powerless in front of the hard challenges. In some respects, Alice was indeed powerful, but she did not have the power to remove the uncertainties, which was what the fellow workers would have desired the most. This situation provided plenty of ammunition for her rival, Chris, in the battle for the position of the shop steward. The men in the union supported fully Chris's campaign against Alice, the minority group figure in the union power relations.

By including the reflective discussion with two other union representatives, the story also mirrors Alice's role. Maria's question "Whose battle was this in the first place?" leads us to think about the essential characteristics of a shop steward's work. It is good to be a *leader* in that position but persons in question should not forget that they are also *delegates* (cf. Batstone *et al.* 1977, terms in italics adopted from the authors). Being a TU leader is also about recognising the solidaristic and conflictual nature of the power relations with the employer as well as within the union. Caring and devotion do not work well without being continuously in touch with the feelings and wishes of those who have given the mandate to represent. Would a transformative leader role, for example, have had space in that kind of situation? Linda Briskin (2006:374) claims that "A historically specific constellation of factors supports the development of transformational leadership among women unionists". By that she refers, in the union context, to a leadership style that relies on politicized and social justice views of empowerment and inclusivity (2006:370). In this, Alice did succeed in a different company context; she was a pioneer. The challenges of flexibility were poorly understood in the union, by management and by her co-workers on the shop floor. When the going got tougher, a different approach was sought. In retrospect, we can see that Chris was not able to meet the challenges of flexibility in her shop steward's role either: jobs were lost, production was moved to cheap labour countries and the majority of workers were made redundant. Not even stronger power by the union and its representatives might have turned the direction of the business.

Conclusions

To fully understand the dynamics of the story, Alice's personal history, her life story, work history and role as an influential citizen need to be taken into account within the context of the union, the company and the workforce in this period of turbulence and change. We interpreted Alice to be a woman leader but also a new type of a union representative who functions in the middle of flexibility challenges.

The company where Alice worked was a pioneer in adopting team work organization in the sewing rooms and Alice was one of the first shop stewards who had to face the challenges of creating new agreements and rules which were needed at the workplaces. Transformation from Taylorism to flexibility is a paradigm change not only in the production but also in the trade union ideology and practice. In the long run, the union has adopted in small steps the requirements resulting from the new era whereby flexible production is characterized by continuous changes in different aspects of work. This transformation requires new ways of negotiation and action also from the trade union. Furthermore, it requires new competences and qualifications from the local union representatives. In these kinds of conditions, the creativeness and initiative required of the local representatives, that Alice also showed as possessing was a key source of power and individual agency. But her inability to transform these into a collective response also led to her defeat. In examining Alice's story, we have opened a view into the gendered spaces and women's way of action within a particular union organization in a period of intense workforce change. Our results suggest that the greediness of the trade union organization (cf. Franzway 2000) has different consequences for women and men. Through her caring orientation, her altruism, Alice invested her whole mental and physical energy in her shop steward tasks in trying to act for the good of her 'sisters'. In a conflict situation such as Alice found herself in, codes of behaviour at the workplace and in the union organization that protect men even in the moments of defeat seem to be missing for women. Gendered masculine and feminine cultures in unions have different spaces. The masculine story is performed on the main organizational scene of formal and informal meetings and negotiations while a lot of the female story is hidden on the backstage, performed in silent corners of corridors of meeting venues and in women's rooms at the hotels where they stay during the meetings. And, as far as we could see, only in those hidden spaces were the women able to reveal their feelings of helplessness and even shed tears as expressions of excessive burdens and disappointments.

References

- Ahtiainen, L. (2006) *Palkansaajien järjestäytyminen Suomessa vuonna 2004* [The rate of organization of wage workers in Finland in 2004], Työpoliittinen tutkimus 298. Helsinki. Työministeriö.
- Batstone, E., Boraston, I. and Frenkel, S. (1977) *Shop Stewards in Action*, Oxford. Basil Blackwell.
- Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge. Polity Press.
- Billing, Y.D. and Alvesson, M. (2000) 'Questioning the notion of feminine leadership: A critical perspective on the gender labelling of leadership', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 7(3): 144–157.
- Bologh, R.W. (1990) *Love or Greatness. Max Weber and Masculine Thinking – A Feminist Inquiry*, London. Unwin Hyman.
- Briskin, L. (2006) 'Victimisation and agency: The social construction of union women's leadership', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37(4): 359–378
- Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*, Volume I, Oxford. Blackwell Publishers.

- Chandler, A.D., Hagström, P. and Sölvell, Ö. (1998) *The Dynamic Firm. The Role of Technology, Strategy, Organization, and Regions*, Oxford and New York. Oxford University Press.
- Collinson, D.L. (1992) *Managing the Shopfloor. Subjectivity, Masculinity and Workplace Culture*, Berlin and New York. De Gruyter.
- Denzin, N.K. (1984) *On Understanding Emotion*, San Francisco, Washington and London. Jossey-Mass Publishers.
- Eagly, A.H. and Carli, L. (2003) 'The female leadership advantage: An evaluation of the evidence', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(6): 807–834.
- Franzway, S. (2000) 'Women working in a greedy institution: Commitment and emotional labour in the union movement', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 7(4): 258–268.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, New York. Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1983) *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology*, New York. Basic Books.
- Greene, A-M., Black, J. & Ackers, P. (2000) 'The union makes us strong? A study of the dynamics of workplace union leadership at two UK manufacturing plants', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 38(1): 75–93.
- Gustavsen, B. (1992) *Dialogue and development. Theory of communication, action research and the restructuring of working life*, Assen. Van Gorcum.
- Hearn, J. and Parkin, W. (2001) *Gender, Sexuality and Violence in Organizations*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi. Sage Publications.
- Heiskanen, T., Lavikka, R., Piispa, L. and Tuuli, P. (1998) *Joustamisen monet muodot* [In Search of Flexibility], Yhteiskuntatieteiden tutkimuslaitos, Työelämän tutkimuskeskus, Sarja T, Tampere. Tampereen yliopisto.
- Heritage, J. (1996) *Harold Garfinkel ja etnometodologia* [Translation from Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology], Jyväskylä. Gaudeamus.
- Kanter, R.M. (1977) *Men and Women of the Corporation*, New York. Basic Books.
- Lavikka, R. (1997) *Big Sisters. Spacing Women Workers in the Clothing Industry. A Study on Flexible Production and Flexible Women*, Research Institute for Social Sciences, Work Research Centre, T Series 16/1997, Tampere. University of Tampere.
- Lawrence, E. (1994) *Gender and Trade Unions*, London and Bristol. Taylor & Francis.
- Ledwith, S., Colgan, F., Joyce, P. and Hayes, M. (1990) 'The making of women trade union leaders', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 21(2): 112–125.
- Lehto, A-M. and Sutela, H. (2009) *Three Decades of Working Conditions. Findings of Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys*, Helsinki. Statistics Finland.
- Maguire, P. (2001) 'Uneven ground: Feminisms and action research' in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds) *Handbook of Action Research. Participative Inquiry & Practice*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi. Sage Publications, 59–69.
- Manz, C.C. and Sims, H.P. (1993) *Business Without Bosses. How Self-Managing Teams Are Building High-Performance Companies*, New York, Chichester, Brisbane, Toronto and Singapore. John Wiley & Sons.
- Miner, V. and Longino, H. (eds) (1987) *Competition. A Feminist Taboo?* New York. The City University of New York.
- Mumby, D.K. and Putnam, L.L. (1992) 'The politics of emotion: A feminist reading of bounded rationality', *Academy of Management Review*, 12(3): 465–486.
- Orbach, S. and Eichenbaum, L. (1994) *Between Women. Love, Envy and Competition in Women's Friendship*, London. Arrow.

- Park, B. and Harris, R. (2000) 'Roles and responsibilities of team leaders and members: A case study of the Australian automotive industry' in Procter, S. and Mueller, F. (eds) *Teamworking*, London. MacMillan Business, 143–161.
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2001) 'Introduction: Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration' in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds) *Handbook of Action Research. Participative Inquiry & Practice*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi. Sage Publications, 1–14.
- Sennett, R. (1998) *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in New Capitalism*, New York and London. W.W Norton & Company.
- Wajcman, J. (1998) *Managing Like a Man. Women and Men in Corporate Management*, Cambridge. Polity Press.
- Wajcman, J. (2000) 'Feminism Facing Industrial Relations in Britain', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 38(2): 183–201.
- van Maanen, J. (1988) *Tales of the Field. On Writing Ethnography*, Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press.
- Westwood, S. (1984) *All Day, Every Day*, London and Sydney. Pluto Press.
- Willis, P.E. (1977) *Learning to Labour. How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Farnborough. Saxon House.
- Whybrow, A.C. and Parker, S.K. (2000) 'Introducing teamworking: Managing the process of change' in Procter, S. and Mueller, F. (eds) *Teamworking*, London. MacMillan Business, 103–124.
- Volberda, H.W. (1998) *Building the Flexible Firm. How to Remain Competitive*, Oxford and New York. Oxford University Press.