

## **“Our Building is Run by Women”: Women’s Success in the Illinois Public Sector**

**Taryn Christy**

University of Illinois Springfield

### **Abstract**

Today, Americans tend to think of public sector jobs as a direct path into the middle class. They assume public sector jobs offer generous pensions, secure benefits, and good pay. This study aims to put those assumptions to test, asking how women access and experience these allegedly stable state jobs. How does gender shape recruitment and retention in state jobs in Illinois? What does this tell us about women’s distinct experiences in the workplace? My analysis of this question is based on eleven semi-structured interviews that I conducted with women working for state agencies in Illinois in white-collar positions. Ultimately, I found that internships and ongoing female mentorship facilitate women’s long-term success in the workplace. These elements, coupled with strong union contracts, create an ideal work environment for women employed by state agencies in Illinois. Internships help women get their foot in the door. Then, female mentorship affirms women’s presence in state agencies while also encouraging women to grow and succeed. Unions are a critical part of state employment. They helped establish the good pay and benefits that make state jobs attractive to workers. Yet my interviews reveal that union leadership often struggles to capture women’s needs at the bargaining table and to gain women’s trust in the workplace. Together, my findings offer new insights into the elements that help women thrive in the workplace.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to  
tarynmaychristy@gmail.com

Pamela has worked for the state government of Illinois for 23 years, moving around from agency to agency. She began her career in the most entry-level position available. Pamela worked her way through the state, starting at “desk 1”, then “desk 2”, into “desk 3”, all the way up to the supervisory position she holds today. Despite a couple of male bosses early on, Pamela says that she has always had mostly female bosses during her time at the state. She has worked at four different state agencies, and consistently found herself surrounded by “powerful, awesome women.” Watching these women work, Pamela says, has been a driving force behind her career in state government. She said, “That’s why I got to where I am. Because I liked what those women had and how they live their life. And I wanted that, too.” She saw how other women experienced success in the state and knew that she could achieve that same success for herself. She took comfort in seeing women in other agencies achieve things she knew she was capable of and decided to follow their lead. Pamela’s story speaks to the greater themes of recruitment and retention in Illinois public sector jobs that will be discussed at length throughout this article. Pamela’s story reflects many women’s experiences working for the state. While Pamela was recruited through an entry-level opportunity, she chose to remain at her state job after experiencing female mentorship first-hand. Now, she says she works in a building that is “run by women.”

Pamela’s experiences working in the public sector are not altogether unique. Her story was consistent with internship and mentorship experiences also expressed by the ten other women interviewed for this study. This study will explore the elements that recruit women into state jobs and retain their employment for decades. It asks, “how does gender shape recruitment and retention in state jobs in Illinois? What does this tell us about women’s distinct experiences in the workplace?” Across the interviews, women detailed their reasons for entering the public sector workforce, how they got their foot in the door, and what made them stay.

This article explores the connections between eleven white women who work in the public sector in Illinois, tracing their decision

to begin and stay in public sector jobs. As explained in the methods section, each woman interviewed in this study self-identified as white. In turn, general assertions throughout this study reflect assumptions surrounding white women's experiences in public sector workplaces. This study shows how white women tend to succeed in public sector jobs because of internship and mentorship opportunities, further supported by union policies. This research would ideally be used in the future for comparative analysis between white women's experiences and women of colors' experiences in the public sector. As follows, this study cannot and does not make claims regarding any women of colors' experiences in the public sector.

This article unfolds in three sections: context, job satisfaction, and unionization. First, this study contextualizes the role of women in the public sector with critical background sections. These sections put my work in conversation with existing research on the public sector, women in the workplace, and unionization. My methods section further explains the snowball recruitment method and the semi-structured interview process. Then, I contextualize the unique and critical role of public sector jobs in the American job market, and how this relates to women. In the second section, I explain that white women in the public sector enjoy their jobs. I dive into internships and mentorships as an essential combination for women's job satisfaction. I then discuss internships as an exploratory and critical entry point to public sector work. Further, I argue that internships only provide a limited degree of opportunity for women without additional mentorship. I found that mentorship provides critical representation and leadership for white women in public sector careers. In the final, third section, I explain how white women's job satisfaction is related to union benefits and comforts. This data is a critical contribution to the greater issue of women's success and needs in all workplaces, even beyond public sector jobs.

Ultimately, I found that white women in the Illinois public sector genuinely enjoy their jobs. I further argue that combining access to entry level employment opportunities and strong female mentorship

are critical to ensuring success for women in the workplace. These elements are coupled with union support and policies to create an ideal work environment for women at state agencies in Illinois. Union policies laid the foundation for state employees to be secure in their benefits and enjoy their jobs. In turn, white women in the Illinois public sector tend to have stable, meaningful jobs that they feel proud of and remain in for decades.

### **Literature Review**

This article enters an ongoing conversation about women's experiences in the public sector. This includes discussions centered on women's unique struggles and considerations when engaging with job satisfaction and unionization. Women have historically had a unique and distinct experiences in professional settings, contrary to the normative experiences of their male co-workers (Artz, 2012; Bender, Donohue, and Heywood, 2005). These experiences require that women look out for one another, and that women must mentor and co-mentor one another to create supportive networks (Godbee and Novotny, 2013). Women utilize tools such as internships to enter such fields that they may otherwise be excluded from (Lapan and Smith, 2022). For example, women in computer science internships described building support networks with other female interns to validate their own existence in male-dominated workplaces (Lapan and Smith, 2022). Such male-dominated environments naturally push women to question their competence, so the women use mentorship to seek confidence and validation (Lapan and Smith, 2022).

Scholars have also demonstrated that unionization plays an important role in supporting women in the workplace (Maclean, 2006). Women have relied on collective action throughout every claim to rights they have pursued, whether it be the Equal Rights Amendment or suing for Equal Employment Opportunity Commission protections (Maclean, 2006). However, the already diminishing presence of unions in the American workplace was accelerated in the public sector by *Janus v. AFSME* in 2018 (*Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and*

*Municipal Employees, Council 31*, 2018; Tang, 2019; Freeman, McKain, and Sewell; 2020). In *Janus v AFSME*, the Supreme Court decided that public employees were no longer legally bound to pay union dues (*Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31*, 2018). Illinois has consistently maintained higher levels of union membership than the average union membership in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Further, Illinois has historically maintained steady levels of union membership throughout the state (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021) Illinois' reputable unionization rates makes it a meaningful case study for researching women's union experiences in the public sector while also considering *Janus's* impact on public sector unionization.

This study will expand on previous scholarship by discussing how women specifically experience allegedly stable public sector jobs. While other scholarship has studied recruitment and retention tactics in isolation, I put both elements in conversation with each other, demonstrating how a combination of tactics are necessary to improvement women's job satisfaction. Public sector jobs in Illinois offer unique environments, combining internship access with women who self-initiate mentorship. These attributes combine to make Illinois public sector jobs particularly attractive to women. A combination of recruitment and retention tactics are essential to create a workplace where women can succeed. Internships recruit women into desirable public sector work environments, while mentorships remain as the solidifying and validating aspect of women's state job experiences. To study internships without mentorship or vice versa would paint an incomplete picture of how women are recruited and retained in public sector workplaces.

Further, I will go beyond existing research and consider whether the decision in *Janus v. AFSCME* drove some women in the public sector away from engaging with unions. While both women and men reap the benefits of union negotiated benefits in the state regardless of whether they pay union dues, unions occasionally lack the agency to fully capture women's desired representation in the

workplace (Berg and Piszczek, 2013). While the women in this study recognized general benefits of unionization, they spoke of unionization as disconnected from their daily lives. My research suggests that white women in the public sector have come to view the union as another bureaucratic arm of a government procedure. A gendered critique of union dynamics is important because women have consistently made up around 50% of the unionized workforce. Therefore, research on unionization is incomplete without considering women's distinct experiences. If women experience unionization differently than men, to what extent do they experience other critical elements of public sector jobs differently than men? What additional measures do women need to succeed in a public sector workplace, or any workplace? These are critical questions that speak to the importance of studying women's experiences in public sector workplaces. Further, this study uses state government job experiences in Illinois to promote women's needs in the workplace even beyond the public sector.

### **Methods**

To be included in this study, participants had to be over 18, identify as a woman, and work for a state agency in Illinois. To narrow the scope of this project, there were no participants who work as teachers, as state healthcare workers, or in the correctional system. These are very niche areas of state work, with many different qualities than administrative state government experiences. This study focused on women working in bureaucratic office settings in state agencies. Over the course of this research project, I interviewed eleven women at six different state agencies. All of these women were based in and around Springfield, Illinois. Springfield is the state capitol of Illinois, making it an ideal location to study state job experiences. All the women will be referred to under pseudonyms. Their state agencies will also remain unnamed to ensure complete anonymity.

To connect with women and set up interviews, I used the snowball sampling method, sometimes referred to as the chain-referral sampling

method (Rubin, 2021, p 140). This recruitment method begins by requesting an interview through a personal connection, in my case, the friend of a friend. Then the first interview participant connects you to your next interviewee, and so forth. The most effective way to use this method is to start with multiple initial contact points to avoid an overly homogenous sample (Rubin, 2021). I found that it was necessary to initiate multiple starting contact relationships to gather enough participants.

As I connected with interview participants gradually, I began conducting interviews. The interview process was “semi-structured,” which means that each interview was based on a standard set of questions, but still flowed organically with side questions and tangents as needed (Rubin, 2021). The first three interviews took place in local coffee shops. The remaining eight interviews took place over Zoom, a video conferencing service. These interviews were moved online because of the Omicron surge of the Coronavirus seen in the winter months of 2021 and early 2022. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed through a digital transcription service. Interviews were typically around 40 minutes long. In analyzing these transcripts, I tracked key words and phrases to deduce similarities in the women’s experiences. All interview data was sorted into tables to track qualities such as the woman’s age, race, position, the number of years she has worked for the state, how she got started, and other measurable attributes.

Notably, each woman included in this study self-identified as white. This is the primary pitfall of having a small sample size. While having a limited number of interviewees allowed for each interview to be up to forty-five minutes long, it also meant that my study risked having an overly homogenous sample size. Further, given that I did not personally know any of the women ahead of time and selected them randomly by word of mouth, there was limited control over who was invited to participate. In future research on this project, a larger, more diverse sample size would provide even greater insight on women’s successes in public sector jobs. This study’s findings currently

only apply to white women in the Illinois public sector. This is important to keep in mind when considering the coming sections on women's experiences in the public sector, in internships, and as mentors.

### **Public Sector Jobs in Illinois**

Public sector jobs are commonly thought of as stable, well-paying, comfortable jobs. While most public sector jobs are not flashy or lucrative, they are often thought of as a direct way to access middle-class salaries and lifestyles. For example, on Indeed, a popular job search engine, the Indeed Editorial Team put together a comprehensive list of government job qualities (*Working in government: Pros and cons*, 2021). Indeed boasts 250 million unique website visitors every year, a testament to its reputation in the job search market (*About Indeed*, 2021). In describing government jobs, the Indeed Editorial Team selected headings such as "retirement", "insurance," "stability," "fair pay," and "work-life balance" as the major enticements for government work. In choosing to draw out these aspects of government work, Indeed's analysis symbolizes the general narrative that job seekers have in mind when considering a government job. State jobs are transparent, have equal opportunity protections, and have high unionization rates. These elements further combine to build the reputation of state jobs over time. The coming section will break down the unique features of state jobs that distinguish them from the private sector job market.

To better understand the unique elements of public sector jobs, first consider the accessibility of those jobs in the first place. State job postings are accessible and transparent because they are in a compiled database that a potential applicant can easily search through. Accessible state job postings are a critical public service because the applicant does not need to rely on word-of-mouth or connections to find job openings. In Illinois, an applicant can access hundreds of job postings at the "Work for Illinois" website (*Find Your Next Career Opportunity with the State of Illinois*, 2022). Job postings in Illinois typically list the



salary, the anticipated salary for a similar non-state position, and a full list of benefits (State of Illinois, 2022). Such benefits typically include health, vision, life, and dental insurance options, pension plans, 10 weeks of paid maternity and paternity leave in many agencies, and deferred compensation program access (State of Illinois, 2022). State employees can earn up to twelve paid sick days annually, more than two full work weeks (State of Illinois, 2022). New state employees earn ten paid vacation days during their first year with the state and can earn up to 25 paid vacation days annually (State of Illinois, 2022). State employees also have paid time off for fourteen honored holidays (State of Illinois, 2022). State employees are often drawn to these benefits, which offer access to a comfortable middle-class lifestyle.

State benefits are the trademark feature of public sector employment. Comprehensive parental leave is an especially coveted aspect of state jobs. The Family and Medical Leave Act provides a baseline of 12 weeks of unpaid leave for employees at workplaces with more than 50 employees, including unpaid leave protections for childbirth and adoption (Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, 2006). The FMLA established the minimum provision for workers in the United States, and employers can offer greater benefits if they choose. Still, part-time workers and small business workers are virtually unprotected by the FMLA. For all other FMLA-qualifying private sector positions, employees must rely on the generosity of an employer in hopes of a more generous parental leave policy. State benefits, on the other hand, far exceed the minimal standard of the FMLA, offering 10 weeks of *paid* maternity and paternity leave (Sample Job Posting). Paid paternity leave is an especially coveted protection, given that “statutory paid leave is not available to fathers in 47 states, and only 17% of companies offer paid paternity leave to some employees” (Petts and Knoester, 2018). Access to such benefits contributes to the image of public sector jobs as stable, middle-class workplaces.

As a critical element of the job search process, state jobs in Illinois are legally mandated as Equal Opportunity Employers. This means that state jobs are required to go out of their way to seek out diverse

candidates during hiring. As part of the Illinois Human Rights Act (775 ILCS), Illinois established that “all State departments, boards, commissions and instrumentalities rigorously take affirmative action to provide equality of opportunity and eliminate the effects of past discrimination in the internal affairs of State government and in their relations with the public” (775 ILCS 5/1-102, 2006). The language of this legislation is critical. While private sector jobs may implement their own, similarly modeled equal opportunity provision, they are not bound to affirmative action like state jobs are. In adapting the Illinois Human Rights Act, Illinois is committed to maintaining a storied legacy of public sector jobs paving the way for equal employment access in the United States.

While the government has minimal control over hiring practices in the private sector, they have historically used government powers to encourage change and inclusion. For example, in 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt enacted Executive Order 8802 (Maclean, 2006). In Executive Order 8802, FDR outlawed discriminatory practices for any war-related companies and unions who held government contracts (Maclean, 2006). This order helped set a precedent for public sector jobs as an example for equitable job access (Maclean, 2006). This legacy continues to be preserved by modern state legislation such as the Illinois Human Rights Act, discussed above. Public sector jobs play an important role as accessible workplaces with a variety of positions. To truly be a public service, public sector jobs have a responsibility to practice inclusive and diverse hiring practices.

Equitable access and affirmative action in public sector jobs is especially important because state jobs are highly unionized. While the overall rate of unionization in Illinois is at 13.8 percent, public sector employees in Illinois are still unionized at 45.8 percent (Manzo et al., 2020). Public sector unionization rates are a testament to the importance of public sector jobs as a trailblazer for workplace rights. Union membership can potentially increase wages, especially in lower paying jobs (Berg and Piszczek, 2014). Unions also engage in collective

bargaining on behalf of member employees, where they advocate for benefits, such as work hours, salary, leave, and benefits (Berg and Piszczek, 2014). Collective bargaining gives employees agency and power to negotiate with employers and advocate for their needs. Yet even though union representation is a critical element of public sector jobs, the coming section will contextualize unionization as a gendered experience in many workplaces.

### **Women’s Job Satisfaction in the Illinois Public Sector**

While the narrative of stable state jobs appears accessible and beneficial on paper, my research digs deeper into whether women experience these benefits in practice. Of the eleven women interviewed in this study across six different state agencies, each of them stated that they enjoy their state jobs. The women in this study showed interest in their jobs beyond basic income necessities. While many of the women mentioned standard elements of public sector jobs such as union-negotiated benefits and stable retirement plans, they were more excited to discuss other enjoyable qualities of their state jobs. This speaks to the stability and comfort of union-negotiated benefits. White women tend to feel respected and valuable in their state jobs in part because of their access to secure benefits. In turn, the women in this study each expressed a deep sense of purpose in their state jobs. One woman said, “you can do so much good in any level in any job in the state. Because typically, every job is so important. Like, I don’t think your everyday Illinoisian understands that just the person that answers the phone is so important” (Susan, Personal Interview, December 10, 2021). This sense of purpose and pride was consistently present across agencies, ages, and positions.

The table below provides even deeper insight into white women’s job satisfaction in the public sector. Throughout each interview, I tracked recurring themes of desirable state job attributes. I found that general themes such as workplace autonomy, feeling competent in their position, finding the work purposeful or

meaningful, and having a good work environment were some of the most desired attributes for white women in the Illinois public sector.

Table 2 reveals two critical insights on white women's positive experiences in the public sector. First, it shows that autonomy and competence are interlinked for white women. The women in this study almost all mentioned that they enjoyed their autonomy at their state jobs, even though none of them were specifically asked about autonomy. Further, I found that conversations about autonomy were almost always immediately followed by assertions that the women felt they had earned that autonomy through competence, or that the autonomy made them feel more competent. Second, multiple women explicitly attributed their positive work environment with their female bosses. One woman said that "this particular agency is run by a woman and I think that has helped, as I, you know, I had two children since I started working there. So, it's very family-oriented" (Gabrielle, Personal Correspondence, 2021). Another woman stated, "I'm blessed because I work for a woman and have the last few years" (Andrea, Personal Correspondence, 2022). The women in these two quotes show a positive association with female leadership and work environment.

Table 1  
*Favorite Attributes of Public Sector Jobs*

| Autonomy  | Competence  | Purpose  | Work Environment   |
|---|---|--|--|
| "Nobody bothers me."  | "I'm there to help them and oftentimes, I do give a lot of guidance because I did the job very well before when I was in it." | "I really like [that] I feel like I have the ability to work on issues that I care about and things I want to work on."                          | "I have a great supervisor and I enjoy working with other people in my unit."                                |
| "I'm my boss, I feel like that gives me a lot of autonomy." | "I really feel confident in the work that I do and the information that I provide"  | "I absolutely love working for state government because I feel like you can have a really huge impact on people's lives and help them."          | "I mean to actually wake up and go, I actually enjoy my coworkers' is something that not everybody can say." |
| "I get to make my own decisions."                           | " <u>being</u> able to work independently, being an expert, it means a lot to me."  | " <u>So</u> I thought [state government] is probably a better fit for me, because I really want to help people and I want to do public service." | "We're like a family here."  |
| "Not micromanaged"  | "I really pride myself on, on you know, doing everything how I should do it"  |  | "a good group of people"   |

Note: Phrases taken from women's responses to the question: "What do you like about your state government job?"

### **Women's Entrance to the Public Sector**

In the preceding sections, this article has established the legacy of public sector jobs as a decent, stable path to the middle class. Yet for women to take advantage of these public sector benefits, they must find a way get employed by the state. One of the strongest recruitment areas for women entering public sector work is through internship programs. Margaret, a state worker in her mid-twenties, said that her time as an intern at a state agency changed the trajectory of her career path. While she had previously worked retail jobs, Margaret said that she took an internship with the state to explore another path. Margaret explained that “when I was an intern, I had no idea what I wanted to do.” Margaret went on to say that “when I was interning, I loved the people that worked there... and I was like, oh, I really like this” (Margaret, Personal Correspondence, 2021). During her internship, Margaret realized that working for the state of Illinois was how she wanted to build her career. She has gone on to work full-time while earning her college degree credit by credit. She stated that “it was encouraging to me because a lot of the people that I had worked with during my intern position went to school for 13 years” (Margaret, Personal Correspondence, 2021). Margaret’s story shows the importance of internships as a transformative and affirmative experience as they develop their career paths.

Margaret’s experience with her internship at a state agency is supported by current scholarship in women’s internship experiences even beyond the public sector. Further, women’s experiences in workplaces tend to be gendered. Since women experience the workplace differently, they also consider different elements when defining their job satisfaction. Men traditionally prioritize “earnings and responsibility” as the most important factors of job satisfaction, which are more tangible elements that can be negotiated during an interview process (Bender et.al., 2005, p 482). Women, however, tend to consider having “good coworkers, a good supervisor, and the significance of the task” as the most principal elements of their job satisfaction (Bender et.al., 2005, p 482). In fields like engineering or

computer science, for example, internships are known to “provide important career socialization experiences, including access to new technical skills, a professional network, and the opportunity to try out an occupation” (Lapan and Smith, 2022, p 2). When women enter the workplace through an internship or a similarly situated entry-level position, they have a chance to explore the work environment fully. This introductory experience is a critical and formative aspect of women’s career building process and job satisfaction needs.

In turn, given that women focus on more environment-based elements of the workplace, internship access is especially critical for women to experience success in the workplace. Table 1 below shows the frequency which women choose to begin their state careers through internships and entry-level positions. Popular internship programs mentioned included the Michael Curry Summer Internship program, the James Dunn Fellowship, the Illinois Legislative Staff Intern Program (ILSIP), or the Graduate Public Service Internship Program (GPSI). ILSIP and GPSI are both run through the University of Illinois- Springfield, a branch of the University of Illinois System. All four of these internship programs offer paid stipends for their interns, another unique benefit of Illinois public sector internships. For the purposes of this study, entry-level positions are classified as any type of administrative job that either does not require a college degree and/or does not assume immediate supervisory responsibilities.

Still, these internship experiences can be particularly gendered for women, and may also represent the first time a woman experiences negative workplace experiences such as gendered harassment or other types of hostile work environments (Lapan and Smith, 2022). Negative internship experiences can be just as formative as positive internship experiences, even in public sector jobs. For one woman named Anna, her summer internship working minimum wage at a state agency was plagued by a couple “creepy” guys who made inappropriate remarks and gestures at her. Anna enjoyed state work but was troubled by her experiences at this agency. It was not until Anna began finding other female mentors that her decision to enter state work really became

worthwhile. The difference between her first position and her current position was her work environment and her co-worker experiences. Therefore, access to internships alone cannot ensure women's success in the workplace. Data shows that "women who had positive internship experiences were more likely to remain in engineering than those who had negative experiences" (Lapan and Smith, 2022, p 3). Yet there is something about the public sector that seems to break away from this observed trend in engineering. Why has Anna continued working for the state of Illinois for the past 19 years? While Anna would have never been able to stay at her first agency long term, she moved into a better position where she met the first woman in her career that prompted her to think, "oh my God, I want to be like you" (Anna, Personal Correspondence, 2022). Now, Anna has worked for the state for almost two decades and says that "basically everyone that I care about and that [I have been] heavily influenced by was a woman in state government" (Anna, Personal Correspondence, 2022). Anna had the opportunity to grow beyond her unfortunate initial internship into a better state environment, surrounded by women that are some of her "best friends" (Anna, Personal Correspondence, 2022).

### **Mentorship and Co-Mentorship**

As seen in women's internship experiences, internships and entry-level positions alone are not enough to ensure women's success in public sector positions. Once women enter state jobs through internship or entry-level opportunities, these women then exhibit strong mentorship and co-mentorship qualities to promote each other's successes. For example, consider Emily's story. Emily has worked for the state of Illinois for just under twelve years and worked her way up from an entry-level position. She moved up from title to title within one agency and has since advanced into a supervisor role that she "loves." She supervises a group of employees doing a job that she held previously for almost five years. Now, Emily takes pride in her supervisory role, stating that "I'm there to help them and oftentimes, I do give a lot of guidance because I did the job very well before when I was in it"



(Emily, Personal Interview, December 3, 2021). Emily's words reflected tones of confidence, self-assuredness, and pride that were echoed across my interviews with all eleven women. This signals that Emily's boss shows her respect, and that Emily feels that she has earned this respect. These women used positive language to describe themselves while also carrying this pride over into positive reflections of their role as a mentor. Further, Emily's words represent the true character of mentorship in women's state job experiences: that mentorship is both given and received.

The idea that mentorship can be both given and received by the same group has been dubbed "co-mentorship," and it is especially prevalent when studying women. While traditional examples of mentoring often take the form of a "master-apprentice model" with distinct power dynamics, women also practice mentorship outside of these formal restraints (Godbee and Novotny, 2013, p 178). Co-mentorship is a powerful feminist tool because it is not rooted in hierarchy (Godbee and Novotny, 2013). Instead, co-mentorship focuses on "working in partnership, co-mentors empower one another, work as pro-active agents, and enter into a more holistic relationship rooted in a common goal" (Godbee and Novotny, 2013, pp 179-180). Co-mentorship is a collaborative, non-egocentric process of growth that maintains traditional mentorship goals of "handing down knowledge, maintaining culture, supporting talent, and securing future leadership" while also cultivating a sense of belonging (Godbee and Novotny, 2013, p 178). This sense of belonging is developed through relationships and friendships, the environmental factors which women so deeply value in their workplace.

Patterns of mentorship and co-mentorship were apparent in the results of my interviews with Illinois public sector women. The women in this study told stories where they personally acted as a mentor, while in the next breath highlighting a moment that they were similarly mentored. When discussing other mentors in their state government careers, the women frequently chose to name the qualities of the women they admired while almost always failing to mention that

individual's title or seniority. These qualities, as listed in Table 2, highlight the words the women interviewed in this study chose as descriptors of their mentors, or in describing their own mentorship actions. The phrase "taught me" is in reference to any kind of phrase where the women indicate that another woman taught them something or when the woman interviewed gives an example of teaching another woman something, which is a form of co-mentoring. The search words used for this phrase include taught, teach, and learn. The phrase "move up" refers to the idea that these women actively try to help other women in the office "move up" (i.e.: typically, in the context of asking for raises or promotions). The term "responsibility" refers to instances where women were encouraged by a female coworker or encouraged other female coworkers to take on more responsibility.

When asked about any female mentors they have had over their public sector careers, the women would immediately adopt warmer, more relaxed and casual tones. It was immediately apparent that discussing these relationships was a comfortable and positive element of their public sector positions. By far, the most frequent word used to describe female mentors was "support/ supportive." This phrase would arise in the context of statements such as, "she was incredibly supportive, (Anna, Personal Correspondence, 2022)" or "she's got a great support [system] with me" (Margaret, Personal Correspondence, 2021). Other phrases were often used in conjunction with "supportive," such as "encourage" or "move up." The women also used casual and affectionate language to describe their mentors, using phrases such as "love," "amazing," and "graceful." In using these kind words of admiration to describe their peers and mentors, the women in this study also showed respect for themselves and their own presence in the workplace. In referring to other women as "amazing," or "strong" they validate that woman's presence in their workplace. In turn, the women in this study have a strong grip of ownership over their public sector work environments. This sense of belonging is continually built and demonstrated by the cycle of female mentorship in Illinois public sector jobs.

Table 2

*Admired Qualities in Female Mentors*

| Supportive              | Self-Assured                                 | Capable         |
|-------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Support/ Supportive (8) | "Family oriented" (4)                        | Amazing (4)     |
| Love (6)                | "Work-life balance" (3)                      | Smart (3)       |
| "Taught me" (4)         | "Does not care what you think about her" (2) | Independent (2) |
| Look up to (4)          | Responsibility (2)                           | Strong (2)      |
| Encourage (3)           | Not afraid (1)                               | Intelligent (2) |
| "Move up" (3)           | Confident (1)                                | Graceful (1)    |

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses refer to the number of women who used that exact word or phrase to describe female mentorship activity in their state office. This table demonstrates repeated mentions of qualities that participants admired in female leaders in their offices, or qualities that they mention about themselves when acting as a mentor. Phrases or words were only included in this table when used in direct reference to female mentorship. Instances where the word was used otherwise were not included.

### **Unionization and Women in the Public Sector**

Though women all take immense pride in their work and enjoy their jobs, unionization's role in this remains to be discussed. Union membership has historically proven to be relatively gendered. Nationally, women made up 40% of the unionized labor force in the early 1980s, increasing to 45% by the early 21st century (Artz, 2012). Further, 81% of union leadership positions were male as of 2010 (Artz, 2012). Women also have different experiences with unions than men do when leadership is consistently male. According to Benjamin Artz, a Professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, "only 27% of females said their concerns were accurately represented by male union leaders, while fully 62% of males claimed their concerns were represented (Artz, 2012)." This data confirms that unions should not take women's unique needs and experiences in the workplace for granted or assume that the current union structure can fully fill women's needs in the workplace as is.

In the future, public sector unions may face imminent organizational changes to accommodate a recent Supreme Court decision. The 2018 Supreme Court Decision, *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31* further impeded public sector unions' ability to represent their members. Before *Janus v. AFSCME*, public sector unions in many states including Illinois had a union funding tool called "agency fees," where non-union members were still required to pay union dues (*Janus v. AFSCME*, 2018). In *Janus*, the court ruled that Illinois' agency fee was unconstitutional because it essentially violated the First Amendment's free speech clause by forcing non-union members to support union speech with their money. The court stated that financial contributions are a form of speech, and public employees have a right to refrain from supporting a cause that they do not agree with (*Janus v. AFSCME*, 2018). This decision created a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the future of public sector unions. One law-review, ominously titled "Life After Janus," cites estimates that "anywhere from 20 to 71% of public-sector workers will choose to stop paying if given the choice" (Tang,

2019, p 3). Only time will tell how significant the *Janus* decision will be on union financing in the public sector.

In the case of the women interviewed for this study, a few women noted that they did not feel fully served by their union representation. In her interview, a woman named Jessica remarked that she used to pay her \$25 to the union every two weeks just fine, but she stopped the moment she no longer had to after *Janus*. Jessica explained that she did not feel like she needed the union. She said that she does not get in trouble, she does her job well, and she feels that they do not do much for her. In fact, she told her union to “impress me, and I’ll pay you again.” Jessica’s words resonate with the sentiment of dissatisfaction and disconnection from union representation. While the decision in *Janus* enabled Jessica to take this stand and withhold her dues, there are many other employees who can just as easily stop paying regardless of their opinion on unions.

Still, the gap between union representation and women’s needs demonstrated by Jessica’s story is more of an issue of union presence and connection than of union effectiveness. Women’s current experiences with public sector unions does not discount the massive strides that unions have made for women in the past, such as union bargaining for Title VII legislation that later developed into modern sexual harassment law (Maclean, 2006). Further, women certainly stand to benefit from other forms of collective action movements beyond unions alone, such as the grassroots organizing seen during the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment (Maclean, 2006). Many of the women commented that they are grateful to have their union representation as a security, and they acknowledge that many of their benefits were negotiated by union leaders. Still, there is a lapse in connecting these policies to their everyday lives and how this representation takes place on the ground instead of in the bargaining room. Women have become comfortable in their public sector jobs because of previous union achievements, but do not always feel a need for union representation in the present.

## **Conclusion**

Moving forward, more research needs to be conducted regarding women's distinct needs in the workplace, especially in allegedly stable government jobs. I recommend that union leadership initiates workplace campaign across state agencies where union leadership act as observers and listeners in women dominated workspaces. Further, union representatives need to do more to engage with female union members or former union members actively and deliberately. Unions must represent women thoughtfully in collective bargaining spaces, so that women feel that collective bargaining is a place where they belong and have ownership over. Future studies should also prioritize gathering a larger and diverse sample size to supplement my initial findings. With a broader sample size, future studies can make distinct separations between women's union experiences based on race and class. Further, additional interview participants would allow for future studies to make more substantiative suggestions on how workplaces can continue to support internship and mentorship experiences for women. As a preliminary recommendation, workplaces should consider implementing formal, paid internship programs as seen in Illinois public sector jobs. Then, Illinois public sector jobs and private sector workplaces should both continue to work toward mentorship facilitation for women in the workplace.

Overall, internships and mentorships in the public sector represent strong recruitment and retention tactics for women in the workplace. Women use internships and entry-level opportunities to get a feel for work environments and to get involved with a state agency. Without internships and entry-level opportunities, women struggle to get a feel for the workplace environment. Without mentorship, women lose out on validating support and ownership over their work environment. Women's needs and opportunities in the workplace should not be structured under a male status-quo. Instead, we must look to women directly, and learn how to support them based on their own lived experiences.

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