

The gendered nature of union careers: the touchstone of equality policies?

Comparing France and the UK

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The paradox between the continuous feminization of the workforce and the constant under-representation of women in the structures, cultures and agendas of unions has been confirmed by recent national (Briskin, 2002; Contrepois, 2006; Kirton, 2006) and comparative studies (Colgan, Ledwith, 2002; Silvera, 2006). Although women contribute to the stabilization of union membership, they remain under-represented among branch officials and paid national union officers.¹ Among the classic putative causes of the under-representation of women in the labour movement, research papers refer to different structural analyses that could explain women's lesser propensity to participate, such as the historical under-organisation of female workplaces and male trade unionists' unwillingness to represent women's interests (Frader, 1996; Kirton, 2006; Silvera, 2006), work-life balance issues (Le Quentrec, Rieu, 2003; Munro, 1999), or women's specific working pattern - part-time and temporary contracts - (Walters, 2002). Following recent developments in sociology of gender and organisation (Halford, Leonard, 2000), other articles have focused their analysis on the interrelated norms, processes and actions that result in and maintain gender inequalities within unions (Colgan, Ledwith, 2002; Guillaume, 2007; Kirton, 2006). This theoretical approach acknowledges the embeddedness of gendered inequalities in organisational structures, cultures and practices, providing new understanding for the permanence of the gendered nature of union careers.

Several studies on the making of women trade unionists have convinced us of the heuristic interest in drawing on « *life stories* » (Bertaux, 1997) in order to understand how women can sometimes manage « *to move up the union job ladder* ». These biographical interviews allow us to retrace the different sequences of a « union career », the necessary steps, main track, atypical routes and turning points, following the legacy of the Chicago school of sociology. In the 1980's, a typical « rank-and-file » career route had to go through three stages: entry into positions of union responsibilities at local level (rep., shop steward); consolidation of a power base outside the workplace (branch level); development of a directing role (paid-official at regional or national level).² This activist background is still distinctive today as 95% of British trade union officers have been a rep. and 75% have been a branch officer (Heery, 2006). In 2007, we asked two major English trade unions, UNISON well known for its high commitment to equality and diversity, and GMB that has supported this agenda more recently, to allow us to interview visible activists (20 each).³ These 40 trade unionists with national, regional and local responsibilities, 28 women and 12 men, are almost all working

¹ According to the Labour Force Surveys, in 2005, women accounted for 46% of those in employment in the two countries. In the UK union density for women is 30% and 27% for men; in France union density for women is 7% and 9% for men.

² In doing so, we have chosen to focus our analysis on formal activism, knowing that the implicit assumption of continuity and linearity of this career pattern is a masculine construction. Besides, these stages can overlap and only a small number of trade unionists reach the last two.

³ This survey has been financially supported by the European Social Fund, as an academic research included in an equality project lead by the French trade union CFDT (2005-2008).

full-time for the trade union movement, and are paid by their union or are on time release (main features presented below, table 1). To understand equality policies within each union, we also attended women’s conferences and two women-only trainings.⁴

Although union density is not at the same level (28% in England and only 8% in France) and the industrial relations regime differs strongly within each country (Crouch, 1993; Hyman, 2001), we have identified similar mechanisms but also differences in women’s difficulties in attaining union responsibilities in France (Guillaume, 2007). Even though the content and division of union work is not similar in France, since the bargaining structures are centralized and union recognition is secured by a protective labour legislation here, we have defined functional equivalents in terms of union roles to import this « union career » analysis into the French context. We can distinguish between entry into positions of union responsibilities (*‘délégué du personnel’*, elected or *‘délégué syndical’*, nominated); consolidation of a power base (*‘syndicat’* level⁵ or *‘Union Départementale’* or *‘Union Régionale Interprofessionnelle’*); and development of a directing role (office holders and paid-officials at national level, *‘fédération’* or *‘confédération’*). We asked the CFDT, the second major representative French trade union, with a pioneer commitment for internal equality (*‘mixité’*), to allow us to interview 40 highly visible trade unionists, with national, regional and local responsibilities. These 24 women and 16 men range from a female member of the national executive committee (3 women out of 8) to *‘délégués syndicaux’*. We have completed these interviews with in situ observations of trainings, meetings and conferences. These two samples are as varied as possible in order to encompass similar processes and atypical cases (Bertaux, 1997), even if they are not statistically representative.

Table 1. Profiles of trade unionists sample

	France		UK	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Total	16	24	12	28
Responsibility level				
National level (political) (*)	5	6	6	14
National level (technical)	2	8	1	4
Intermediary level (branch, <i>union départementale</i> , <i>syndicat</i>)	7	8	5	9
Local level (entreprise or administration)	2	2	0	1
Age category				
Young (less than 35)	2	5	0	7
Middle (35-49)	7	14	6	8
Senior (more than 50)	7	5	6	13
Membership seniority				
New members (less than 10 years)	7	8	0	9
Middle-range members (10 to 19 years)	4	11	2	4
Senior members (more than 20 years)	5	5	10	15
Education level				

⁴ We attended in 2007-2008 two ‘women’s conferences’ (UNISON et TUC) and two trainings for women union officers, TUC Women’s officers summer school and Ruskin College’s Leadership seminar.

⁵ A *‘syndicat’* in France is a local general union, affiliated to an industrial federation. In the CFDT, the “*syndicats*” have a strong political role, as their representatives are the ones who have a mandate to vote during the confederation congress, every four years.

Graduates (degree or <i>bac</i> +2)	9	20	3	11
A level or under (A-level / <i>bac</i> max.)	7	4	9	17
Family configuration				
Children (**)	11	16	8	16
No child	5	8	4	12

(*) For France, national level = *confédération* and *fédération*

(**) This information is not available for two men in France.

This cross-national comparison based on trade unionist biographies allows us to embed these objective and subjective trajectories of women and men in complex and evolutionary organisations; trajectories that would be difficult to analyse through questionnaires. All these interviews have been entirely analysed using biographical tables articulating occupational life, family/residential life and union/political life, with particular attention to dating individual events in order to make a link with the corresponding trade union history. These biographies allow us to discover institutions « at the bottom » and to analyse the practical effects of employment regimes, education systems and family policies on individual career patterns. This approach could be then classified as a « societal » qualitative cross-national comparison, which integrates class, gender and ethnicity (O'Reilly, 2006). But between the micro-level of individual life experience and the macro-level of employment regimes and equal opportunity policies (following Crompton, Lefevre, 2000), we have also included the meso-level of each trade union, paying attention to period and generational variations (Miller, 2005). Becoming an activist in the 1970's in NALGO or by contrast in the 1990's in UNISON implies different work experience and employment conditions in the public sector, but also a different trade union context in terms of equality policies and structures. Compared to other types of organisations, trade unions are described as “contested political organisations”, with conflicting views about their priorities and appropriate forms of action (Hyman, 2001). It can explain why contrasting views on the issue of gender equality can be found within one union, although unions have taken far more equity initiatives than any other social institutions (Briskin, 2006).

In this article, we want to address the selective and unequal representation of women within the labour movement from a comparative perspective. Our aims are twofold. First, to focus on the ongoing creation of gendered inequalities in union organizations (Acker, 2006; Cockburn, 1991), pointing out similarities and variations between unions and across countries. Secondly, we wish to look at the effects of equality policies on women union participation. As with other comparative studies, we will try to establish the contribution of each particular policy to promote women and their interests, and its relative costs and benefits (Colgan, Ledwith, 2002; Frege, Kelly, 2004). Have equal opportunities policies and the switch to a progressive managerial unionism (Heery, 2006) modified career patterns and opened new routes for women in the 2000's?

Forms and dynamics of union equality policies in each country

To understand the selective and unequal representation of women in the structure and agenda of unions, formal equality policies first need to be considered. Over the years, unions in Europe, and especially in the UK, have tried to develop new forms of a more inclusive trade unionism, with the idea of a circular relationship between internal and external gender equality strategies.

UK: an early recognition of the “democratic deficit” for women

In the UK, the issue of delivering union equality was identified more than twenty years ago, pushed by second wave feminism movements and vanguard equality activists (Colgan, Ledwith, 1996; Heery, Kelly, 1988). In a changing political and social environment, it seemed untenable for unions to fail to properly represent the interests of a large and increasing proportion of their members while at the same time claiming to be democratic organisations. However, the drive to diminish this democratic deficit for women (and other minority groups) has also been analysed as “an instrumental rather than a moral or ethical concern” (Dorgan, Grieco, 1993), in the context of a huge membership decline (union density has fallen from 54% in 1979 to 29% in 2005), especially among male blue-collar workers, and of a growing level in the employment rate for women (73% in 2005). In 1979, the equality agenda was translated into recommendations by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in its charter for Equality for Women within Trade Unions. This leading role of the TUC, also encouraged by key unions (UNISON, MSF, CWU), has never ceased. The TUC also made constitutional changes to increase diversity in its own structures. Following this example, most large unions have switched from liberal (women-only courses⁶, equality officers, women’s conference) to radical measures (proportionality, fair representation for elections and conference delegations within the union and self-organised equality groups) to encourage the representation of varied constituencies within trade unions. Following the introduction of a new range of specific legal obligations against discrimination⁷ (gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability) since 1997 and the obvious commitment of the Labour government to gender-mainstreaming and family-friendly rights⁸, unions have been actively working towards improving gender equality through the setting of national priorities for collective bargaining and the implementation of equal opportunity policies for their own employees. More recently, the decentralisation of decision-making and collective bargaining arrangements (Parker, 2009) and the increase in equal pay litigation against employers⁹ (but also against unions¹⁰) has contributed to give higher priority to equality and diversity issues.

However, progress in the unions affiliated to the TUC has been described as “uneven, piecemeal and incremental” (Kirton, Healy, 1999), very dependent on the level of activism of women, black, lesbian and gay, disabled and young trade unionists, the action of feminist senior activists, and the recognition by the existing leadership of the importance, to the revitalization of the union, of emerging activists/leaders representing particular social groups (Healy, Kirton, 2000). In our study, UNISON and GMB give a good illustration of this variety. UNISON is always cited as an example because of its long-established equality policy, not only in terms of the amount of resources made available, but also in the actual representation of women in the governing body members and the executive team. After years

⁶ Depending on union context, women-only trainings can play a liberal or a more radical role - with the aim of changing unions rather than women - (Kirton, 2006).

⁷ For example, The Employment Equality (Sex Discrimination) Regulations 2003 make amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (SDA) and the Equal Pay Act 1970 (EPA) in order to implement the amended Equal Treatment Directive.

⁸ Linked to the ending of the opt-out from the EU Social chapter, but also to a business-friendly policy in an individual legal system.

⁹ See UNISON’s campaign to enforce the single status agreement and to avoid Councils paying out large amounts of money defending equal pay cases rather than carrying out systematic pay and grading reviews, in a twin-track approach combining unequal pay and low pay issues, litigation and collective bargaining (Thornley, 2006).

¹⁰ Allan versus GMB was brought as a sex discrimination case in 2006 by an employee of Middlesbrough council, and not as an equal pay case. The tribunal held that the GMB did indirectly discriminate against its female members by placing more attention on pay protection for men than on rightful back pay for women.

of limited resources being allocated to the existing equality structures, the GMB has recently conducted an equality review, under the supervision of its first female deputy general secretary, recognising that major steps towards making the GMB a more inclusive union were needed to be taken (cf : CEC Report to congress 2007. Progressing equality issues in the GMB). Overall, the 2007 TUC Equality audit points out a relative stagnation in the progress of equality policies and women representation, even in large unions. The frequent extension of equality structures to race, disability and LGBT issues coincides with fewer actions that target only women.

France: a moderate interest pushed by legal incentives

In the 70's, the two major French confederations - CFDT and CGT - were pushed by strong feminist movements, vanguard female equality officers and numerous women's strikes to look into gender equality issues (Maruani, 1979). The CFDT took a leading role in the adoption of an agenda dealing with the condition of women (1976 Congress) that included a wide range of women's issues (free abortion, contraception, working time, domestic work). This policy was supported by the introduction of a new range of legislation in favour of women's liberation in the 70's, and the first gender equality law promoted by the newly elected socialist government in 1983 (Roudy law). However, because it relied on collective bargaining agreements with no real incentives or sanctions and because positive actions seem alien to the French (Crompton, Lefeuvre, 2000), this 'symbolic reform' has had very mediocre results. From the mid-80's until 2000, the equality agenda within unions was weakened by the emergence of "State feminism" (Mc Bride, Mazur, 1995). Many women activists who had pushed this issue inside their union were tempted to work for other new governmental structures or institutionalised family/women movements (Le Brouster, 2006). The rising unemployment rate and the continuous decline of union density (28% in 1950 and 8% in 2006) have also pressed unions to opt for a more pragmatic and work-related agenda. Since 2000 and following the "parity" law for political elections, collective bargaining on equal opportunities and pay has once more been pushed by new legislation (2001 Génisson law), with a compulsory dimension that had never existed before. One hundred agreements were signed between 2001 and 2006, mostly by big companies (groups of more than 10,000 employees). In most cases, employers have initiated the negotiation in order to respect the legislation and match up with social responsibility criteria (Laufer, Silvera, 2006). Since the promulgation of a new equal pay law in 2006, employers also fear possible litigation. Overall, unions have rarely taken the lead on equality bargaining and very few cases of tribunal action have been reported. Unions suffer both from the weakness of their equality agenda and from the very low union density which prevents them from being able to negotiate in many unorganised workplaces (especially small firms). As an employer, the CFDT has never signed an equal opportunity agreement for its own employees.

Despite the fact that equality has been quite secondary in the agenda of French unions for more than twenty years, some unions have implemented equality structures and have modified their rulebook to encourage women's participation. Since its 1982 congress, the CFDT has adopted a mix of liberal measures (dedicated financial resources, specific training courses, equality officers, equality conference) and radical measures (reserved seats for the national executive committee and minimum representation for congress delegations). The CFDT was the first confederation to have a woman general secretary, Nicole Notat, who served for more than 10 years (1992-2002). However, this equality policy has had mitigated results. The CFDT is caught in between the determination to achieve better female representation at all levels and the difficulty in taking compelling actions. Because the *confédération* was afraid of not being able to fill more reserved seats, complete parity for the *Bureau National* (equivalent of the NEC) was not decided at the last 2006 congress.

Similarly, the CFDT seems to hesitate between promoting mainstreaming actions and maintaining separate structures and actions. Obviously, the principle of self-organisation for women or any other type of minority group is not easy to implement within a general union tradition in a country with a gender-neutral “universal” definition of citizenship. Moreover, equality issues are overshadowed by generational renewal questions.

Table 2. Female representation and union equality policies in the two countries

	% of women	Main aspects of equality policies
<p>CFDT¹¹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 600,000 members - women comprise 44% in 2004 (42% in 2002) - General secretary: François Chérèque (male) 	<p>Local and regional levels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 24% of local union secretaries (<i>'syndicat'</i>) in 2004 (22% in 2001) - 27% of regional executives in 2004 (24% in 2001) <p>National level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 32 % of federation executives in 2004 (29% in 2001) - 40 % of Conseil National Confédéral (CNC) in 2004 - 35% for the Bureau National (BN) in 2004 - 33% of the Commission Executive (CE) in 2006 (same in 2002) 	<p>Radical measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - quotas : minimum of 10 female members out of 28 for the BN; minimum of 29% of women for the CNC; minimum 3 women for the CE <p>Liberal measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - equality policies for each federation/region - national, regional and federal equality officers - equality training, annual women’s conference
<p>UNISON</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1,390,000 members - women comprise 77% in 2008 (77% in 2005) - General secretary: Dave Prentis (male) 	<p>Local and regional levels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 50% of stewards/ reps in 2007 - 49% of branch officers in 2007 - 43% of full-time regional officers in 2008 (36% in 2005) <p>National level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 65% of NEC in 2008 (idem in 2005) - 40% of full-time national officers in 2008 (same as 2004) 	<p>Radical measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 42 reserved seats for women on the 66 member NEC - 13 reserved seats for low paid women, 4 seats for black members, 1 seat for young members - 4 Self-Organised Groups (SOG) at all levels, with reserved seats for national delegates (disabled, LGBT, black members, women) and national self-organised group conferences - women-only trainings (<i>Pathways into UNISON</i>) to encourage new activists <p>Liberal measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - branch, regional and national equality officers - regional and national women’s committees and conferences - support for members/activists with caring responsibilities (childcare facilities or reimbursement) - equality trainings - annual women’s conference and other equality conferences
<p>GMB</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 600,100 members - women comprise 45% in 2008 (42% in 2005) 	<p>Local and regional levels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 20% of full-time regional officers in 2005 - no female regional secretary in 2008 	<p>Radical measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 9 reserved seats for women, 5 for race <p>Liberal measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - single equality body: GMB National Equalities

¹¹ For the CFDT, access to statistics remains quite difficult, apart from the confederation level. Most of the figures we have do not give details for each federation/region. Since 2004, there has been an unusually high turnover of national equality officers, leading to the lack of equality audits.

- General secretary: Paul Keany (male)	<p style="text-align: center;">National level</p> - 41% of CEC in 2008 (36% in 2005) - 23% of full-time national officers (14% in 2005)	Forum with two representatives specialising in each of the following areas/groups: gender, race, LGBT, young, disability and migrant workers - national officer for equality and diversity - annual national conferences for each of the equalities
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Source: internal documents and SERTUC, 2007.

This comparison shows that union equality policies are very diverse from one country to another, but also within the same country depending on the level of feminisation of the union (UNISON is obviously more favourable to women representation than the GMB). The choice for liberal or radical measures within unions is also very dependent on the equality legislation, the political understanding of “equal opportunities” issues and the definition of “minority groups”. Although positive action and self-organisation are acceptable in Anglo-Saxon countries, it seems quite controversial in France, both in terms of welfare state philosophy and of union orientation. Overall, these differences lead to a continuum of practices - from demarcation to inclusion and transformation (Colgan, Ledwith, 2003) - where the UK and especially UNISON is far “in advance” compared to France, employing a mix of liberal and radical measures and obtaining visible results in terms of feminisation at all levels of the union hierarchy. However, more masculine unions, like the GMB, are still behind in terms of fair representation. The other interesting result of this comparison lies in the periodisation of the analysis. Although the CFDT was rather ahead of the equality agenda in the 70’s and 80’s, the conversion of women trade unionists into “femocrates” (Watson, 1990) and the growing gap between feminist movements and institutionalised actions, has led to a de-politicization of the equality policy. Although the implementation of a “parity law” in the political field (Bereni, 2007) in 2000 has pushed a male-dominated union such as the CGT to adopt internal equality measures, the conversion of the CFDT to a managerial unionism since the late 1980’s has led the union to concentrate on other priorities (collective bargaining and social partnership). Finally, although women’s representation is progressing, there is obviously a risk of stagnation or regression if continuous attention is not given to this equality issue. Even in a highly feminized union like UNISON, particular vigilance is required to ensure that women continue to take responsibility at the workplace and branch levels, particularly part-time and low-paid women.

Barriers to women’s activism: the irreducible glass ceiling

Even in favourable organisational contexts with supportive policies and a high rate of membership feminization, women seem to have difficulties in accessing union leadership positions, especially at the local and regional levels where no radical measures are provided. To understand the recurrence of these difficulties from one generation of women to another, we have analysed the careers of women and men at four stages of their union career development.

The entry: becoming a member

In each country, unions have tried to reduce the decline of their membership by a strategy of “field enlargement” (Heery, 2005; Kelly, 2000), targeting new sectors (services, unorganised firms, small firms) and accommodating a more diverse workforce. These strategies have attracted women. Even if very few actions are gender-orientated (as revealed by the 2007 TUC Equality Audit) and a high turn-over is reported among new members, at least in France, when UNISON took the offensive with actions targeted at attracting black members, these were quite successful. Particularly in the private sector, the rising level of union density for women can be explained by their over-exposure to injustice or organizational change in the

workplace and the interactions with activists who help/convince them to join. More than an inherited propensity to participate (working class family background in the UK or Catholic socialisation in France) or political activism (left wing parties in the 70's), this negative working experience has become the main determinant of participation for new members who seek protection and want to fight for their rights (Guillaume, Pochic, 2009a; Watson, 1988). Because of their employment structure, women are especially confronted by direct or indirect discrimination concerning many aspects (unfair dismissal, low wages, hard working conditions, lack of promotion...), which can account for their propensity to join a union. In the UK, a few women have also entered the labour movement and become a member (and sometimes a rep.) through administrative roles. Unions are indeed considered as good employers by low-qualified women, providing childcare, allowances and maternity leave. More recently, a few graduates and qualified employees with working experience in the NGO field have also been appointed by the union headquarters, in both countries.

However, because of vertical job segregation, women are more often atypical employees (on part-time or temporary contracts), particularly in low-qualified and low-paid jobs. As the interests of these part-timers remain less represented by existing trade unions and sometimes are in fact more adequately addressed by family-friendly firm policies (Tomlinson, 2005), union membership is lacking usefulness. Because of their job insecurity and mobility, young women (and men) are also less integrated into a stable working environment and are more fearful of being fired. In the UK, the discontinuous pattern of women's employment (especially for low-paid women) does not help the retention of female members. Membership development or at least stabilization seems easier in the public sector, a primary reservoir for female employment in the two countries (education, health, local government) and a relatively high unionised sector.¹² Thanks to their over-representation in the public sector, women's membership has even managed to resist the general decline more successfully, and women count for almost 50% of total members in the two countries.

The involvement: becoming an activist

The general context of participation shortage at the workplace level offers objective opportunities for women to be elected. Many young representatives explained that they have been '*sucked into the labour movement*', becoming member and rep. almost at once. Following very quickly, union officers have approached them and offered them a role at the local or even at the branch level. However, this co-option remains easier for women in female-dominated areas or when there is a vacancy (particularly in new sectors). As it depends on the sponsoring by existing union officers, this selection has a gendered bias linked to the fact that officers are mostly male and women often work in low status and mainly female areas (Kirton, 2005). Unionists' life-stories reveal that this sponsorship can take different forms, from a quick detection to a long recognition process, from mentoring (by men or women officers), to rivalry (as women are also often younger). This nomination also depends on trade union peers' support (advice, information, building confidence), sometimes with competing gender interests at the workplace. Because of the high degree of job segregation, there can be a concern that the improvement of the terms and conditions for women will in return depreciate men's work.

This opposition between gender interests in the same company is particularly evoked by low-qualified women who entered labour movement during the 1970s, sometimes with a feminist background or consciousness, as exemplified by Annick. At 58, she is an assistant national officer of the steel and mining '*fédération*' of the CFDT (FGMM), commuting from Monday

¹² In the public sector, trade union density is three times as much as in the private sector: 59% compared to 17% in the UK, 15% compared to 5% in France (Amossé, 2004; SERTUC, 2007).

to Friday from her village, 180 miles away from Paris. She had political responsibilities as national officer for six years, but has now been demoted to a technical position. Because she left school at 16, she has always felt that she was not capable of getting promotion within the union. At 19, she entered a steel tube company as a non-qualified white-collar worker in the personnel department (punch card operator). Two years later, she joined the CFDT because they produced a leaflet about a migrant worker's case. She had empathy with that campaign as she was giving literacy courses to migrant workers with her friends from a Catholic youth movement. During a big strike on pay issues (8 weeks in 1975), she became visible by being on the picket line at night *'as the other men'*. Afterwards the regional officer offered her the opportunity to go to a French-German unionists' exchange; *'it gave me the desire to evolve'*. Within three years, she was nominated *"déléguée syndicale"* (shop steward). In this union dominated by qualified blue-collar workers, she had difficulty in making a niche for herself, particularly as she imposed a fairer fee grid for low-qualified women. Throughout her career, she was sponsored by the union treasurer, who said to her when she was asked to become the secretary of her union in 1986: *'Little girl, if they ask you, you have to trust them; they judged that you are capable, so you have to go.'* She thought she wasn't capable, but she felt relaxed as her union peers said that they will help her, and did so.

Even though more women can now access these first levels of lay activism, especially for elected-positions, they are over-represented in certain types of union roles, responsible for social activities or daily representation (rep. in UK, *'délégué du personnel'* in France). The development of new roles, such as learning or equality or health and safety rep., has allowed women to take side roads (and maybe dead-end careers), leaving the most prestigious roles (negotiation) to men. The gender job segregation is then reproduced within the union practices, sometimes justified by female "abilities" (proximity, altruism, empathy...). Besides, women find it more difficult than men to maintain a high level of lay activism. First, it is quite dependent on time-off agreements that are very different depending on countries, sectors and employers. The French legislation is obviously more generous than the English one, but time-release is also linked to local bargaining. Union repression can be quite strong in the private sector but also in the public sector in the context of privatisation, as in the UK. Because of participation shortage and limited resources, activists generally hold several mandates at once (in the UK: shop steward, convenor, chair of a branch; in France: *Délégué du Personnel, Délégué Syndical, élu au Comité d'Entreprise* or *élu CHSCT*). They have to organize members, to attend branch or women's meetings, to respond to individual cases (particularly in the UK), to organise/participate in demonstrations (particularly in France), to organise/participate in self-organising groups (in the case of UNISON), and also spend time with lay members and activists outside work. Even though some unions have modified their schedules to accommodate work/life balance and offer childcare during trainings or conferences, this progressive involvement in union activities can create work/life balance problems for mothers of young children. In both countries, women trade unionists said they needed a supportive partner and a strong family network, when they had children, to be available for volunteer union activities (Le Quentrec, Rieu, 2003), even allowing for the fact that childcare provisions are much more supportive for women unionists in France (Daune-Richard, 1998).

The consolidation: entering the intermediary union structures

In both countries, intermediary responsibilities (regional officers and branch secretary¹³) are key positions required to build a union career. They are often seen as 'boys-type jobs' and are less feminized than the national level. Across countries, the union employment market is

¹³ And also local union secretary (*'secrétaire de syndicat'*) in France.

more or less open to new entrants, with strong competition to access the occasional full-time positions available in the UK and a slightly more open situation in France with a higher turnover. These positions are always dependant on detection/co-option processes under the control of actual regional or local officials. Because of the decentralisation of structures and policies in each country, the equality agenda remains very dependent on the political will of the local executive team. In France, the absence of external publication of job vacancy increases the weight of co-option and social networks. In the UK, each union has its own HR practices, more or less structured. In the GMB, regional secretaries are responsible for the dissemination of internal adverts with selection bias, whereas in UNISON the use of external job publication through national newspapers (and reserved seats at regional level) has increased the number of applicants and has also allowed a change in the candidates' profiles (external women from the volunteering sector or women coming from the administrative/secretarial union staff). But even in this context, internal applicants with an activist background are preferred. They often know in advance that there will be a vacancy. In France, this co-option is also based on a close political control – to be or not be in favour of the reformist orientation chosen by the CFDT – that can boost the career of young activists.

However, in male-dominated unions, at local and regional level, women face obvious sexism from their colleagues but also from their “partners” (employers, other unionists...), reinforced by age discrimination against young women, who don't *fit* with the role. Obviously, unions seem to have difficulties in valuing other experiences than “pure” union activism, except maybe for the Labour Party in the UK or student activism in France. To counter the reluctance of male officers to promote junior women with a different background, senior women officers with feminist convictions (especially in the UK) sometimes opt for active mentoring, with activists or with their own assistants (even in administrative roles). Women-only training and self-organisation structures in the UK (and especially in UNISON) also have the intention of helping women to build their confidence. Union education also exists in France, but it is less structured and less gender-conscious than in the UK.

The evolution of the union movement in the two countries has also opened up new career routes for young activists, especially women. In the UK and to a certain extent in France, the switch from a servicing model to an organising model (Heery, 2006) has allowed the development of specialised positions (“organiser” in the UK and “*développeur*” in France) that have been offered to young officers, especially women and ethnic minorities, to fit with the ‘like recruiting like’ principle. Because of their qualities (gender and/or race and/or youth), women are identified as being able to recruit and build active members originating from a more diverse workforce. Thanks to participation shortage and radical measures, many young activists are put on fast-track paths. Dedicated trainings (such as the Organising Academy in the UK), together with special attention, are provided to retain these would-be senior officers. They face the risk of being identified as specialists in organising or equal rights, but some of them use it as a first step for more general positions. These new entrants need to have strong personal resources (activist background, qualifications and personality) to continue to progress at national level, as Adishri exemplifies.

At 32, Adishri is very proud to be “*the first Asian women national officer*” and considers that “*the GMB has given me a lot in terms of my own confidence and skills*” through support and intense training. She became an activist for equality rights at 18 when she refused to get married to the husband chosen by her family. As a blue-collar worker in a female-dominated textile factory, she started as a shop steward for the GMB, particularly active in race equality and in youth campaigns. Very quickly, she got involved in the Northern region black workers' committee, where she met her husband, an activist who returned to university and became a teacher afterwards. At 26 she was offered the position of a six months' placement as a recruiter and she continued afterwards in a permanent position for four years. “*Very*

committed and determined”, she became the specialist on race equality, both for the GMB and the TUC, and also for the Labour Party in the Northern region, and felt “*very empowered*” by the international campaigns she pursued through the Commonwealth TUC. When a national equalities officer job was advertised, she felt she “*had nothing to lose and everything to gain*”. She had to move to London the first year but then decided to commute from the Northern region to London the following year. She is now on maternity leave. Very conscious of work/life balance issues, Adishri is convinced that her partner will be supportive, and she wants to negotiate time-off for equality reps, to encourage more women to become active: “*we need to ensure that people feel inclusive*”.

Beside this membership dimension, several ‘expertise routes’ (legal action and advice, health & safety, economic analysis, social policy, international and European action) have been encouraged both by the evolution of union political action and by employer-union relations. Because of their present moderate leadership, the unions studied have been involved as a negotiating partner or advisor on pension issues, unemployment benefits, working time, minimum wages, health and safety, equality or redundancy. In both countries, this growing union participation in socio-economic regulation at the national or local level has led to the promotion of officers and activists with new types of qualifications. This need for more qualified officers has offered new opportunities for women with professional expertise or high qualification yet no activist background, but these narrow career paths are generally limited to that consolidation stage.

The directing stage: accessing national offices or mandates

Although the effect of equality policies is more visible at national level, women officers are still concentrated in recruitment/organising, equality or expertise areas, and have greater difficulty in penetrating “prestigious” domains such as negotiation (often adversarial), management and political action (strategy, campaigning, lobbying). The exercise of power continues to be male-dominated, particularly in France and/or in less feminised unions such as the GMB. In UNISON, the introduction of management methods (targets, annual appraisals, equality audits) has opened up new routes for experienced and graduated women. But this progressive policy is actually facing a practical limit: experienced male officers don’t want to give up their seats to others. In the UK and in France, the policy of reserved seats at national level has offered growing opportunities for women, but with side effects: suspicion of lack of skills, risk of being labelled as ‘feminists’, and ‘tokenism’ syndrome (Kanter, 1977). Many women have stayed in those reserved seats, finding it difficult to be elected onto a general seat. In both countries, the oligarchic nature of trade union leadership limits the possibility of changing the profile of union leaders radically and rapidly (in terms of gender, race or class). Union officers who access senior national officer positions still “complied with the male model of senior trade union official, that is, a long, unbroken record of active experience and offices held” (Ledwith, Colgan, Joyce, Hayes, 1990, p. 121), and have managed to impress male dominated, rather conservative panels, especially in the GMB. At that level, there is fierce competition among a small pool of long-serving loyal officers (mostly men), with repeated applications and numerous lateral moves, in order to stay in the union movement and to increase one’s visibility and networks inside the organisation. Unspecified hours and geographical mobility are key factors for climbing within the union organization, as they are in corporate careers (Guillaume, Pochic, 2007). For national positions, officers need to live in London or Paris, sometimes leaving their family during the week, as Clara exemplifies.

At 42, Clara is a senior officer in charge of working conditions for the Heath and Social Work *fédération* of the CFDT. As a nurse, she became a member in 1995, because she liked the opinion of the CFDT in favour of the reform of the social security and pensions system proposed by the right-wing government, in the context of a huge national strike (3 weeks).

Following a restructuring project in her hospital in which the CFDT was involved, she then agreed to become full-time convenor and took a couple of union courses. Soon after, she was also offered an organizing role and was elected to the executive committee of the region, mainly to prevent another dissident candidate from being elected; but at that time she “*was not aware of that political issue*”. She managed to have good results in terms of recruitment. She was then selected and offered a part-time job in Paris, in charge of the organizing section. She commuted everyday from her home (2h30 each day) becoming very tired, having also to look after her three young children. In 2001, she obtained a full-time position in Paris, leaving her family in the countryside during the week. She finds that she is “*more available for my children during the week-end and less stressed*”. She took some training to become a union tutor because she has a feeling for routine. In 2005, surprisingly for her because she is not part of the “rumours” inside the federation, she was elected senior national officer. However she is not very satisfied with her situation. She has been away from home, from Monday to Friday, for 7 years, and one of her teenagers is having problems at school. His teacher has told her that it is her fault. She has a great sense of loneliness and a lack of confidence in her job. She is obviously very frustrated by her union environment. She will not finish her mandate and wants to think about her next move. She does not want to return to her nursing job, for fear of appearing incompetent and also because of her new organizing skills. But she has no firm ideas about her possible career outside the union movement.

In the UK, the constant movement of mergers between unions has an ambivalent effect on the structure of opportunity for women. It generally contributes to the reduction of the number of available senior positions, but it can sometimes create new opportunities for women. For example, the merger of NUPE, COHSE and NALGO (the creation of UNISON) in 1993 has been followed in 1996 by the introduction of a new grade in order to guarantee promotion for senior women. However, the career path always needs to include some negotiating experience, at regional or national level (from officer to secretary), where those moving up have made a name for themselves and have developed their political and leadership skills. Officials have rarely leapfrogged over this position. The absence of a regional power base is particularly detrimental to the careers of experts, even if some of them have built their national visibility through innovative projects or media exposure. In each country, as the officials are indirectly elected by the union members (through union/branch/region representatives at the congress - with low participation rate), the result of elections depends less on objective skills than on ‘factionalism groupings’ (Ledwith, Colgan, Joyce, Hayes, 1990). As the nominees are not allowed to canvass for themselves, factions fight to place their candidate in official positions. These informal networks, ‘clans’, are traditionally based on political orientations but also on shared experiences inside the union. Sometimes new entrants can benefit from internal political struggles, appearing as “neutral” candidates, especially within the CFDT. External political networks appear to be a less defined resource, dependent on political elections and on the historical link between unions and political parties. For example, being a member of the Labour Party can help a regional secretary to build coalitions in a campaign, as a vehicle to open the door, but a too close/visible link can be a handicap for a would-be deputy general secretary when lay members are critical towards Labour government policies.

More recently, formal networks based on a specific generation (youth sections in France) or on gender (women’s committees in both countries, or self-organised groups in UNISON) have tried to campaign for their candidates, generally defending a different strategic orientation for the union. This networking by women within and across unions, ‘gendered factionalism’ (Healy, Kirton, 2000), has a real impact from below when there is a critical mass, in female-dominated unions in the UK (Parker, 2009), and sometimes when there is an unexpected vacancy. However, the development of other networks, based on specific

constituencies (race, disability, sexual orientation, age...), can reveal different types of competing interests among equity-seeking groups and even among women according to their social class. The election of women officials may also be supported from the top, depending on critical actions from senior executives with political will and feminist values. But in this case, these women have to deal with a 'token' stigma (Kanter, 1977) and have to fight to build their legitimacy 'on the job'. Besides, even though the introduction of low-paid seats in 1998 tried to address the class gap in the governing bodies of UNISON, it has been more difficult in the face of such fierce competition to develop trade union careers for working-class background women. This selective union recruitment is really striking, albeit not really acknowledged by the unions investigated (Guillaume, Pochic, 2009b). Most of the senior female unionists interviewed have a degree, sometimes obtained through continuous education. In the UK, when they access national positions, working-class women tend to become and stay senior lay members, avoiding the "management" route (an option that is not possible in France).

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Because of their presence in the public sector and in new sectors (services, small firms) targeted by union recruitment policies, women are now well represented among new members and activists. In the UK, the characteristics of women's employment are more detrimental to union membership than in France, but the pro-active and targeted actions led by unions to recruit low-paid, black women have succeeded in attracting new types of female members. However, even in very feminised and advanced unions, women remain under-represented in union leadership positions, notably at the intermediary level of the union hierarchy, where the effects of equality policies are less tangible. Impressively, we found that national contexts have a lesser influence on the under-representation of women at this level, except for childcare provisions and family policies. Despite new opportunities being given to women through reserved seats at the national level and the opening of renewed career paths in both countries, the barriers to a lasting promotion process for women obviously lie in the resistance put up by a masculine organisational culture, both in terms of career norms (age, type of experience required, working time and location, household configuration), and informal networks and also in terms of gendered occupational hierarchy. If radical measures such as reserved seats and self-organisation have partly managed to overcome some of these informal barriers, they have been unable to tackle issues such as work-life balance, internal job segregation and class differences, and they have created their own side effects. However, if we look at the results of this study, it seems quite impossible to achieve fair representation without resorting to radical policies, at least as a first step toward a more inclusive trade unionism. The situation in France clearly shows the limits of mainstreaming and equal opportunities policies.

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