

**Transformations:
changing careers,
meanings and experiences
of women's political
activism**

**A report commissioned from The
University of Liverpool by
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The “Transformations” research project explored the experiences of women who are and have been politically active in UNISON. Women make up a growing proportion of the work-force and are increasingly likely to join trade unions, currently accounting for over 70 per cent of the membership of UNISON. It is still the case, however, that women are under represented at executive and branch levels in the majority of British trade unions. The objectives of the research were to explore the factors and issues that motivate women to take on positions within UNISON structures, and the opportunities and difficulties which might arise in that process.

Part One

Gender and UNISON: re-shaping UNISON cultures

Questioning the relationship between gender and trade unionism is about more than asking whether women become involved in the union. It involves exploring how certain ways of constructing gender set limits on the participation of women in trade unions, and on the ability of trade unions to appeal effectively to a broad constituency of workers. The legacies of stereotypes of trade union activity as male-dominated, militant, and conflictual are significant in this respect. At times these representations of trade union activity are a barrier to women becoming fully involved.

Women’s growing involvement in trade unionism is currently acting to re-shape trade union activities and cultures. This is not to suggest that trade unionism has been completely changed by the enhanced presence of women activists, but rather that women activists are challenging and opening up new questions about trade union practice.

There is considerable variety between branches within UNISON, with some enabling and encouraging participation by women, and others presenting a much more exclusionary environment. Engaging with the variability in branch culture, and addressing the continued problem of unsupportive branches, are key issues to be considered in facilitating the further involvement of women in UNISON.

Although part-time workers now have a significant role in UNISON, they face significant pressures on their activity in the union.

Part Two

Motivations and meanings: women’s navigations through UNISON

Women have many and varied motivations for becoming active in UNISON. For some this was a result of a family history of engagement in trade union activities. For

many, it was expressed in a deep commitment to fairness and equality, not just as a result of collective disputes but as a consequence of recognising the injustice of the treatment of individuals in the workplace.

There were many different ways in which activism within UNISON drew strength from, and helped to support, a broad range of informal activities. Many spoke specifically about the significance of friendship networks, both as a reason for becoming active in the first place and as a means of sustaining that role. Attendance at conference was particularly important in that respect. Some became active in an incremental fashion, gradually building upon “small” (that is, under-recognised) tasks such as branch administration. Others spoke about taking on the role of “counsellor” within the workplace as part of their trade union position, and questioned whether they would be advised to seek further training in this capacity.

Women who had stood back from an activist role did so for a range of reasons. For some it was a reaction to an unsupportive branch environment, against which they had grown tired of fighting. For others it was a result of a combination of work, family and union pressures which meant that something had to give. These ex-activists were however still committed to the cause, and felt they had much to offer, often in the capacity of mentor to a new generation.

Part Three

Women and the community in UNISON

Many women activists in UNISON were also engaged in expressing their sense of political justice in other ways. For some, these other channels had been opened up as a consequence of becoming active in UNISON; for others, a wider political community had already existed.

The role of the self-organised groups within UNISON was a particularly sensitive issue that generated a very wide range of views. It is clear that there are potential tensions between self-organisation, participation within UNISON politics, and political activity more generally. On occasion though these tensions can be creative, enabling UNISON to speak with and for a wider and more diverse set of communities than would otherwise be the case.

INTRODUCTION

The “Transformations” research project explored the experience of women who are and have been politically active in UNISON. It was commissioned from the University of Liverpool by the North West Region of UNISON. The objectives were to explore the factors and issues that motivate women to take on positions within the union’s structures, and the issues, opportunities and difficulties which might arise in that process. We also investigated the ways in which increasing women’s involvement, in turn, changes the culture and nature of branches and other parts of the organisation. The remit of the work was broad and aimed to capture the experience of women activists in the widest sense. Along with work-place roles, working relationships and the political dimensions of trade union activism, the research set out to examine the impact that activism has upon family life, friendship, and personal identity.

The background to the research was the question of evolving trade union practice to encourage and enable active participation by women. Women make up an increasing proportion of the work-force and are increasingly likely to join trade unions, currently accounting for over 70 per cent of the membership of UNISON. It is still the case, however, that women are under represented at executive and branch levels in the majority of British trade unions. UNISON is directly addressing this issue in a variety of imaginative ways. The “Pathways into UNISON” programme first pioneered in Northern Ireland, for example, seeks to raise the participation of women in the organisation through training courses that unpack the nature of the union and explain its organisational forms and processes. A commitment to proportionality informs the ways in which union officer positions are filled and by which delegates are elected to policy conferences. It is acknowledged that more remains to be done, however, and this report has been produced as one contribution to a wider debate about how such reforms might be achieved.

The research was designed to engage with a broad cross-section of women members of UNISON within the North West region. We interviewed thirty women in depth, drawn equally from the sub-regions of Lancashire/Cumbria, Greater Manchester and Merseyside, at a range of venues and locations. The interviews were tape recorded

and transcribed, and the transcripts analysed to produce the findings reported below. Interviewees were asked to speak freely and in confidence, and we have preserved the anonymity of their voices and experiences. The group of interviewees included an even spread in each sub-region of women who had only recently taken on a position of responsibility, those who had been so active for some time, and those who had for one reason or another recently stood down from a position of responsibility. We also interviewed members representative of each of UNISON's diverse self-organised groups within the region. The research was thus not designed to produce findings of statistical significance, but rather to address as many as possible of the different perspectives into the issue of women's activism within trade unionism; to open up questions for further consideration and review.

The report is structured as follows. In Part One, we explore how the process of re-defining women's roles in UNISON also raises questions about the evolving culture of the organisation itself. In this part of the report we suggest that women's involvement in trade unionism can act to re-shape existing trade union cultures and activities. In Part Two, we look at some of the different meanings and motivations behind women's activism in UNISON, and some of the reasons why some women stand down from positions of responsibility. Here, we suggest that there are many lessons that could be learned from exploring the full diversity of these experiences. In Part Three, we investigate the ways in which women activists in UNISON draw from and contribute to a multiple and overlapping set of wider communities. We begin to situate the findings of our interviews within the context of evolving debates about the future of trade unionism more generally. Finally, we make a set of recommendations drawn from the research, that are aimed both at UNISON in particular and trade unions concerned about these issues more generally.

PART ONE

GENDER AND UNISON: RESHAPING UNION CULTURES

Introduction

This part of the report addresses some of the relationships between gender and trade unionism. It outlines how these key themes have been explored through our research. The history of the relationships between gender and trade unionism includes the ways in which trade unionism emerged historically from male-dominated artisan craft-combinations, which often explicitly excluded women (see Clark, 1996, Featherstone, 2005). Trade unionism has often been seen as synonymous with hegemonic masculine working class culture (Davis, 1993). This does not mean, however, that these relationships are uncontested. Women have always had a significant presence in trade unions and set up rival structures to craft based combinations which had excluded them.

This suggests that women have never been passive victims of masculine trade union cultures, but that they have engaged with them and in doing so they have both re-worked and challenged what trade unionism signifies. Through so doing, they have re-worked existing notions of gender relations and constructions of gendered identity. In this part of the report we argue that women's growing involvement in trade unionism can further re-shape existing trade union activities and cultures. While not wishing to argue that trade unionism has been completely or even decisively changed by the growing significance and presence of women activists, we do want to suggest that there are important ways in which the challenge to existing gender relations in trade unions is a broader challenge to trade union organising practices and cultures, which opens up possibilities for new kinds of present and future trade unionism.

The relationship between gender and trade unionism is about more than whether women become involved in the union, though this is clearly an important question. It is also more than a question of whether women who become involved in the union progress through union structures, achieving proportionality, or are held back or discouraged from doing so. It is also about the broader relationships between gender and trade unionism, and how certain ways of constructing gender exert pressure and

set limits on the participation of women and the ability of trade unions to appeal effectively to a broad constituency of workers. It is about challenging branch cultures, for example, where certain issues such as child care are seen as ‘women’s issues’ and thus not taken seriously. It is about the re-working of existing constructions of trade union roles, challenging ‘macho’ styles of negotiation and recognising other forms of trade union work as important.

In this Part we first engage with the ways in which women are positioned in relation to existing trade union cultures. This situates women’s involvement in relation to stereotypes of trade union activity as ‘male’ dominated. We also explore how exclusionary branch cultures have exerted considerable pressure on women’s involvement in UNISON. We examine some of the ways in which the women interviewed have challenged these branch cultures, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Finally, we situate women's involvement in UNISON in relation to the gendered character of the labour market.

Gender and defining trade union activism

Despite UNISON now having its one millionth woman member and being an active union in engaging with the changing constituencies of trade union activism, popular stereotypes of trade union activity as male-dominated still persist and shape existing trade union identities. While most of those interviewed were still active members, and had a broad view of what and who constituted trade unionism, these stereotypes and masculine constructions of trade union identities have important effects and legacies. One of these legacies has been in the way that the women activists interviewed were often uncomfortable with some of the language used to define and construct trade unionism. UNISON has been involved in some high profile attempts to challenge these stereotypes of who is involved and active in trade unionism. These legacies persist and exert pressure on the relations between women and trade unionism, though women are active in reshaping and challenging these constructions of trade union activity.

A particular issue that emerged from the research was a sense of uneasiness with some of the language used to define and label trade union work. Some of the women

who were interviewed expressed unhappiness with the language used to designate trade union roles. The terms ‘steward’ and ‘activist’ for example were seen by some as having an aggressive, ‘macho’ or ‘militant’ connotation that they did not identify with. As one interviewee argued:

‘activist’ sounds like, marching, militant, placard bearing, you know. I suppose I am active in the union, so I suppose I am an activist, but when you say it like that it strikes a strange chord.

This suggests that ways of constructing trade union activity were sometimes perceived as barriers to women’s involvement in UNISON. They did not feel encouraged to become active as part of the organisation by these kinds of terms and labels. The way in which trade union activity is constructed and defined still has a hangover of ‘militant’, ‘macho’ cultures which are reinforced by popular constructions of trade unionism.

The legacies of these labels clearly relate to important histories of trade union activity, both in terms of the broader movement, but also the more specific histories of UNISON's organising cultures. The 1980s saw a very conflictual period for trade unionism in the UK in contrast to other European countries where trade unions are seen more generally as ‘social partners’. In terms of UNISON a common route for activist involvement in the union in the 1980s was through industrial disputes that they had assumed some level of leadership through. This, often gendered and ‘macho’, construction of trade union activity in terms of conflict and militancy clearly does not accurately reflect the character of most UNISON activity today. The level of industrial action within the public sector has been at a low ebb for much of the 1990s and 2000s. This militant and conflictual construction of trade union activity is not at present then a major focus of activity within UNISON and therefore not a major source of activists. This suggests that there is a space for activists to be identified in ways which reflect more clearly the changing character of UNISON's work.

The changes in trade union roles can be illustrated by the ways that a common source of activism that was revealed through the interviews was the experience of workplace restructuring. Important examples of workplace restructuring have been moves to

Unitary Authorities within the local government sector, the establishment of Single Status schools within education, and the major regrading work represented by Agenda for Change within the National Health Service. Where such restructuring has been the initial reason for someone getting involved, the abilities deployed were less those of direct confrontation with employers or membership mobilisation, but rather those that are knowledge-based and require a technical understanding of organisational processes. This has consequences for how those coming into positions of responsibility like to be seen and identified.

For some women, even identifying themselves as 'trade unionists' outside of the work-place and in their communities, was something that they were cautious about. The increasingly complex demographic profile of trade unions that has been created by changing labour force composition, union merger and shifts in internal political culture across much of the industrialised world is well documented. This literature has focussed on the changing composition of trade union membership (Hyman 1996, Waddington and Hoffman 2000) and issues of recruitment and representation (Ebbinghaus 2002). One consequence of these shifts is that the contemporary trade unionist lives and works in a much more mixed cultural milieu that brings together many different sorts of identification and self-identification to do with gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. This means that trade unionism itself – the meaning of being a trade unionist and ways in which an individual trade unionist presents herself - is also more complex and, in some circumstances, more difficult.

One issue here was that of how to present oneself outside of the workplace and outside of the union. One perception that was described was that to identify as a trade unionist to people who had little contact with the world of trade unions might be misconstrued. The feeling expressed was that others would see that individual as being a personality type who exhibited qualities of stridency and combativeness rather than those of knowledge-based expertise and service to others.

I don't advertise the fact that I am a union branch officer in terms of my neighbours. They know because they see me walking with a UNISON brief case. I live in a very middle class estate, the sort of place where middle

managers - that sort of level of people – live. So when my neighbours talk to me - and we have only been there for a couple of years - when you first introduce yourself to people I am always a bit wary of saying what I do.

This comment is interesting in that it suggests for some women there is still some uneasiness about fully embracing the role of a UNISON activist. Gendered constructions of trade union activity still affect people's perceptions of themselves and their sense of how others see them. This activist feels that those around her will not react positively when they know that she is a union branch officer. This suggests that trade union cultures still suffer from negative images which put off some potential activists and members.

Our research suggests that the legacies of stereotypes of trade union activity as male-dominated, as militant, conflictual and 'macho' are significant. These constructions of trade union activity are at times a barrier to women becoming fully involved in trade union activity. There is thus space for trade union organising cultures to re-define trade union roles in ways which perhaps more accurately reflect the kinds of work that UNISON activists do. This would challenge barriers to participation in the union, through challenging the legacies of these gendered constructions of trade union activity.

This section has explored how particular constructions of trade union activity have been a barrier to women's participation in UNISON. The next section focuses more explicitly on the organisational cultures of UNISON itself. We argue that branch cultures have often functioned in ways which exert pressure on women's involvement in UNISON.

Gender and trade union cultures

A key theme we examined in the research was the relationship between the organisational cultures of UNISON and women's participation and involvement in the union. The national and regional levels of the organisation are clearly very important in shaping the experiences of women's involvement in the union, particularly through experiences at conference. However, the main contact many of the activists had with

the union was through their own branch. Women's experiences of UNISON branches were very mixed. Some felt that their branch was extremely supportive and that it was something that really backed them up in their work. Others, however, had much more negative experiences of branches. In this section, we argue that very different 'branch cultures' exist in the union and that some are supportive of the broad constituency of UNISON's membership. Some branches, however, were experienced in profoundly negative and exclusionary ways by the women we interviewed. In this section we conclude that engaging with the variability between branch cultures, and challenging exclusionary branch cultures, are key issues to be addressed in facilitating the involvement of women in UNISON.

The interviews we conducted gave a marked sense of the very different experiences of women in relation to their branches. Some found that the culture of their branch was extremely supportive. One steward argued that:

Yes, I can go to the Branch Secretary for everything, anything at all, I can talk to him, he's excellent, not got a problem, not at all. If I had any issues and I needed to go to him, I wouldn't have any problem with that, not at all, he's excellent, very helpful. And the other stewards, yes. Very supportive.

For other activists though, the experiences of their branch were much less positive. The stories they told about their involvement in the union spoke to their ongoing commitment to issues of justice in the face of ongoing struggles against branch cultures which were dismissive of their involvement in trade union work. One interviewee described the atmosphere in her branch as follows:

For women I think there is still the male culture stuff that is a big problem, it is a very macho organisation. I'm talking about the branch not the union. So actually being active in the branch itself is difficult. In this particular branch they have always had the male branch secretary, the male branch chair, though things have changed since I have been here... they all live locally and they all belong to the local labour party, there is a lot of interaction with councillors and that macho type of thing that goes on. For ages people used to

think I was Fred's secretary, we have joked about it but I have gone in and said we have an equal footing here...but there are still things that go on behind the bike sheds that I don't get involved with.

The 'sexist' cultures and attitudes that some women activists fought against can be underlined by the following comments from a branch officer who argued that male dismissiveness towards women in trade union work was linked to broader attitudes towards women and particularly women's work:

The problem is getting taken seriously. You know you're seen as a woman, there are still some men who consider women working doing it for pin money. Which is really really galling, because all the women I know do it to support a family. God knows, I don't know anybody that works for pin money, I really don't, and I find it insulting for people to think that they do. And so they wouldn't take you seriously.

Here the interviewee suggests that the dismissive attitude of male branch officials was related to broader sexist attitudes to women's work. These attitudes also structured the ways in which particular issues were constructed in branch meetings and the weight or importance given to different issues. For example, the same activist argued that she had had to fight hard to get issues such as child care taken seriously as these were often seen as women's issues. She contested this and argued that:

Well we do all sorts, I mean obviously things that we feel strongly about, but I think some that we've supported have been things like childcare, I mean I know these sound like women's issues, but they're not, they're family issues.

These kinds of experiences of being involved in UNISON suggest that exclusionary branch cultures are perhaps one of the most significant barriers to women's participation in UNISON. They also suggest that sexist and dismissive attitudes to women remain something which structures trade union activity, in a way which could be said to be institutionalised in some branches. The women interviewed adopted

different strategies to negotiate these exclusionary practices and branch cultures. For some this meant that their involvement with UNISON was an ongoing struggle of finding the resources to keep going, to keep involved and to challenge existing organisational cultures in the branch. One activist argued that there was a determination of networks of women in the branch to keep going as trades unionists despite the attitude of some male officials. She suggested that:

for those that feel like me [...] because we feel that eventually we will make a difference, it will change. If we are seen to be around for long enough, the effects will help, because in the meantime what do we do, we either throw the towel in and say "I'm not doing this anymore" or we stay there and try to change it, which is what we do.

This gives a sense that in this UNISON branch for women to be involved, to remain active and to keep a presence in the branch was a product of ongoing tenacity and resistance. For these women activists their involvement was oriented towards a hope that their continued involvement in the union would change the culture of the branch, so that their agendas and activity might be seen as integral to the branch and not dismissed by it.

Other women we interviewed talked of adopting more proactive strategies to change the male-dominated character of their branches and to engage with union officials who were reluctant to change or let go of their power and influence in the branch. One interviewee commented that:

our branch is quite female dominated and has been for couple of years, there are a lot of branches that are very male dominated and unfortunately some of the males who are on those committees are quite stuck in the mud. Unless you are in a branch where you can actually shove them out side ways, saying 'hang on you have been here for fifteen years, don't you think you should give somebody else a chance'... that's where a lot of branches have problems, if you are lucky and you have a female dominated one like we do, you have got a good chance.

Her comments suggest that in this branch having a women-dominated committee enabled the branch to deal with some of the tensions and problems associated with long-term activists who were resistant to change. Increasing women's involvement in branch culture can have a broader impact than merely increasing women's participation, but can also have some significant impacts on the broader culture of the branch. This underlines the complex relationships between gender and organisational culture in UNISON. It suggests that women's struggles to rework and challenge existing gender relations in branches can also have broader impacts on the culture of the branch that go far beyond just issues around proportionality.

In this section we have argued that the cultures of particular union branches have a significant impact on women's experiences of activity in UNISON. We found that many women had positive experiences of their branches, found them supportive, and felt it was easy to contribute to the branch. Other women suggested that they had far more negative experiences of their branch and experienced their activity in the union as an ongoing struggle against sexist and exclusionary branch cultures. Such activists, however, also spoke of their attempts to challenge and re-shape such branch cultures. One of the issues that came up as having marginalised women within such branches was a legacy of discriminatory attitudes towards part-time workers. Below, we consider how women's relationship to the labour market impacts on their involvement in UNISON.

Gender, union activity and the labour market

One of the key themes in recent research around the relations between trade unions and different women workers has been a focus on the ways in which recruiting women often challenges the constituencies of workers active in unions. Thus recent work on organising garment workers has focused on how garment workers are often poorly unionised because of the character of their work. Their work is often home-based and conducted in spaces which have traditionally not been seen as important for organising by trade unions (Hale and Wills, 2005). This suggests that women's relationships to the labour market need to be explored when thinking about women's involvement in UNISON. In this section we consider how women's disproportionate tendency to be employed in low status, part-time work such as catering or cleaning

impacts on their involvement in UNISON. The first part of the section briefly explores some of the key themes in women's relationship to the labour market. The next part then considers the relationships of part-time workers to union activity, drawing on the experiences of women interviewed who argued that the involvement of part-time workers in the union had been a key shift. The section concludes by considering some of the pressures part-time work places on women who are active in UNISON.

Part-time working continues to be an increasingly significant factor in the UK economy and labour market. Part-time work also continues to be predominantly associated with women and with younger workers. This has some advantages for these groups in terms of labour market entry and flexibility. It also creates a less secure working environment and reinforces structural inequalities such as those to do with pay (Manning and Robinson 2004). Nonetheless studies have shown that workers in the public sector who work part-time are no less serious about their working lives in terms of their investment in training for qualifications, career plans and overall commitment (Lane 2004).

Traditionally, trade unions have often seen male, full-time workers as the key constituency that they organise and represent. Thus some interviewees commented on the experiences of being excluded from trade unions because they were part-time workers. A number of older activists, however, commented on the radical change in trade union attitudes towards female recruitment. So, for example, one area where things do seem to be changing for women in UNISON is in being included within UNISON irrespective of occupational location within the workplace. Some women recalled past experience of being excluded because they were part-time workers. This sort of exclusion might be described as 'institutional' in that premising trade union membership on being a full-time worker would necessarily exclude many working class women who were only able to take up part-time work because of child care commitments.

One of the main things [was] that they actually let women in because I mean most women at the time were part-time. A lot of women still worked part-time. If you worked part-time they didn't want to know you. You weren't allowed in

the union. And since then I mean Unison have progressed claims, haven't they, for people's pension rights, for - I don't know how many years now - but going back so many years. You were working but you weren't allowed into the union. I mean obviously it was discrimination. But I mean now they have more pension rights for these woman. That was a terrific issue at the time.

These forms of discrimination around part-time work also fed into the kinds of broader discriminatory attitudes towards women discussed above. They have also, however, been challenged both by the union nationally and regionally, and also by the growing involvement of women in shaping the forms of union activity and organisation.

Although part-time workers now have a significant role in UNISON (and other trade unions) our interviews suggested that part-time workers still face significant pressures on their activity in the union. Several interviewees pointed to issues of gendered occupational structure within work-places that also had implications for the experience of being active within the union. One described how the fact that she was the only full-time employee in her work-place meant that she was able to provide a continuity of contact and support for people. Most of the other workers in her section, who were all part-time or shift workers, were women:

Because I was a full-time staff member, I'd always been the sort of office Marjorie Proops. Everybody would come in, you know, have a weep, tell their story and go - men as well. Mainly because I was a stable person in their work-place. They all work shifts and part-time hours, whereas I was full-time. So they always knew I was going to be there.

The testimony of this activist shows she felt that her privileged position as a full-time staff member facilitated her trade union work in ways which might have been much more difficult for part-time workers. She saw a sense of permanence and knowing that she was around and was available, as being key to union members consulting with her and telling her their stories.

The experiences of women who were working part-time and involved in UNISON

seem to bear out this argument. The problem here was that being employed on a part-time basis did not mean that union duties were also, therefore, necessarily part-time. Often individuals in this situation felt under pressure to come in to the work-place or into the union office during their own free time. This was a cause of some resentment and for some had led to a stepping down from their responsibilities. This tended to be particularly true in circumstances where the branch was quite passive and other stewards shied away from taking on case workload and sectional and branch issues. This interviewee explained how she had become less active as follows:

It was a combination really of pressures of work – because I’m part-time. It’s very difficult to take time out of my working hours. I’ve got my job to do, and I’m only in two and a half days a week anyway. So there was that. And then there was the pressure of work from UNISON. And although we’ve got quite a lot of reps, a lot of them are not all that active really. So I was finding that I was constantly coming in on my days off. I said ‘this is ridiculous’. I’m part-time because I want to spend more time at home, not because I want to spend more time doing the UNISON work. And then it was sort of family commitments as well. I’ve got a little boy, and I’ve also got a young granddaughter who I have to look after quite a bit. So it just got very difficult.

This account suggests some of the ways in which the pressures of part-time work and the pressures of UNISON work could become linked in clearly unsustainable ways. It also underlines the pressures that women face in combining work, union activity and unpaid domestic labour, such as caring for children and relatives.

Other work-related issues, such as being short staffed, also affected the union activity of part-time workers. When asked what the downsides of being a UNISON steward were one steward commented:

The only downside to it is because at the end of the day we have a job to do, people ring you and you can’t always manage to be there for them [...] and it’s very hard because no matter what, I mean I don’t know if you know anything about the catering department here, it’s always short staffed, never ever enough staff, and so it’s not always convenient, and like I say we have a duty to the employer as well, it’s awkward.

Her experiences of juggling a role as a UNISON steward with part-time work in a hospital catering department which was always short-staffed speak to some of the difficulties of combining part-time work with union activity. There might be some possibility for UNISON to think further about the kinds of support it gives to part-time workers who are also acting as stewards and in other trade-union roles.

Conclusion

In this Part we have examined some of the barriers and tensions the women we interviewed with talked about when discussing their involvement in UNISON. We have explored three key themes. We have argued that even those women actively involved in UNISON sometimes feel the legacies of a male dominated construction of trade union activity, and that this is expressed in not feeling as comfortable with an identity as a “trade union activist” as they might otherwise do. Secondly, we have explored the relationships of women to trade union organising structures, focusing particularly on branch cultures. We have argued that women have hugely varying experiences, some branches being supportive, some being exclusionary. Finally, we have considered the relationships between women’s involvement in trade union activity and women’s position in the labour market. We have argued that issues such as part-time work place considerable stresses on women’s involvement in UNISON, and that these relationships need to be addressed in organising strategies. In the next Part, we go on to address the different paths and experiences women have through their involvement in UNISON.

PART TWO

MOTIVATIONS AND MEANINGS: WOMEN'S NAVIGATIONS THROUGH UNISON

Introduction

This Part of the report addresses the ways in which women have entered into, participated in, and in some instances subsequently reduced their involvement in, union activities. This involves considering the motivations behind women joining UNISON, the meanings and significance women place upon their involvement, and finally the multiple reasons which contributed to women leaving. The previous Part of the report outlined the connections between gender and trade unionism and the means through which women negotiate the barriers and tensions of being a 'female activist'. In this Part of the report, we extend our analysis to encompass the diversity of women's experiences of union activity to those roles and relationships which are not necessarily formally recognised within union structures. For example, we consider the role of friendship and 'helping others' both as a motivating factor for joining UNISON and as an informal structure of organisation which builds on and maintains women's involvement.

To ask the question 'why do women become involved in union activity?' involves thinking through a range of complex personal journeys, influenced as much by family and friends as by a workplace dispute or as 'something you just do'. UNISON is committed to promoting itself to new female members and to achieve proportionality and fair representation for women at all levels of the organisation. It has been suggested that this can be facilitated by strategies such as fair election processes for regional committees and the National Executive Committee, women-only training, and through the provision of adequate childcare so that women can attend meetings and conferences (Unison Women's Committee AGM 2003/4). In order for this to be successful it is important to recognise the barriers and tensions women experience, as mentioned in the previous Part of this report. However, this Part also highlights the need to think through ways of encouraging and building upon women's initial motivations and inspirations to become members. Central to this is acknowledging and supporting the informal union activities that women engage in but often go

unrecognised. For example, recent commentaries on women and social movements (Taylor and Whittier 1999) note the need to take identity, culture and emotions seriously when understanding how social movements function. Within the context of this research, many women talked about the ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 2003) of union activity. This includes taking on the role of a ‘counsellor’ to whom people confide their workplace and personal problems, and also recognising the effects of union activity on women’s personal lives and relationships. Sometimes, it is this informal activity that can also lead women to leave UNISON or reduce their union activity.

The first section examines the different motivations that women have expressed as to why they become involved in union activities. This involves considering the role of a family history of union involvement, a commitment to fairness and equality, and the specific investment in supporting other women, through child care or in cases of sexual harassment. The second section focuses more on the ways that women attach meaning to their union experiences, often through informal activities. This involves the everyday practices of helping people and listening to their problems. The final section presents the experiences of two particular women who, for different reasons, have left UNISON and reduced their activity. This brings to light the difficulties women face when internal support structures are not in place and the impact that union activity has on personal lives within the context of trying to achieve a work/life balance. We present these narratives as a means to recognise the work and commitment of women in UNISON and also to highlight some of the difficulties women are faced with. These are issues that UNISON can act upon in order firstly, to increase and maintain female membership and secondly, to challenge problematic structures within UNISON that women themselves are already active in reshaping.

Motivations

The women we interviewed gave very many different reasons for being involved in UNISON. They had also become involved in the union through different routes and had different experiences of the union. There were, however, some key commonalities in the reasons that participants in the research gave for being involved in UNISON. In this section we explore and address some of these key motivations which suggest how

women's involvement in the union is not just about fitting into a blueprint of what union activity is about. Rather it suggests that their activity has re-shaped the nature of women's roles in UNISON and what trade union roles are about.

Family Histories Some women were able to link their involvement to a wider family commitment and engagement in union activities. For these women it was important to chart their journey to and through UNISON within the context of how they had been brought up in a culture of political engagement. For example the quotes below document the political histories of two women's families:

(1) My dad was a docker and he was involved in the union and he was one of the ones which formed the breakaway on the docks, so he was on strike permanently. My mum worked at the cleaners and it was kind of in-bred in you, you know you didn't break the strike. My dad would tell you about stuff like that, so for me it has always been in my family. My sister is a teacher and she was in the trade union of teachers. I then married and my husband's family have got nothing to do with, or don't have a view on, trade unions

(2) Three of my brothers went to sea. They were heavily involved in the miners' strike, all the other different strikes and being very active within the union, fighting for redundancy pay. So it made me a little bit different. As we got older my mum used to tell us stories about her brothers as well being active in the Labour Party. I started making my own mind up. I have three brothers, all very strong politically and we do all have a lot of arguments when we don't agree and we do have disagreements when we meet up. I became a member of UNISON and became more active.

These extracts are interesting because they highlight that from an early age, these women were made aware of what constitutes union activities predominantly through the experience of male members of their families. For these women, having a family member engaged in union activity served as an inspiration for their future involvement. The first talks about unionism as 'in-bred' in her family and the second discusses learning about her brothers' activities and developing her own arguments in light of her interactions with them. This interaction is highly influential in shaping

women's routes into union activity. Indeed it also suggests that if women are 'used' to union activities and encouraged to be involved in political debate, they are more likely to stay involved. As another woman put it:

My family were somewhere to the right of Hitler...we may not agree with them but they were not really bothered about which side of the fence I was on as long as I had opinions and didn't just sort of be passive and not do anything.

This has particular significance for how women who have been brought up outside of this type of family culture of activism and political debate could be encouraged and supported through the structures of UNISON. If UNISON wants women to join and develop through the organisation it seems appropriate to demystify what union activity involves, as experienced through the observations of family members, as well as helping women to develop skills such as debating and negotiating.

A commitment to fairness and equality Whilst a family history of union involvement was central to some women's motivations for joining UNISON, there was a broader commitment to 'fairness and equality' that was expressed by many women. This may have been activated by past experiences of strike action, for example, but is more easily understood as a general ethical engagement by women in what was 'right' and 'just'. The form in which this commitment was justified is interesting to note because it reveals the diversity of women's motivations to engage in union activity. Firstly we wish to highlight that, just as family histories reveal, women made sense of their commitment to fairness and equality within the wider context of their lives. For example, this woman viewed her commitments to fairness and equality within the wider context of political activism.

Oh absolutely. And you do it outside of the trade union movement. You do it out on the streets with your friends. People in the movement feel like I do. But friends on the outside still buy designer clothes without researching who's actually making them. So you'll go out for a night out and someone will have something nice on and I go 'so you've bought that from such and such - do you know who makes it?'

It is important to note how union activities blurred with other political activities and commitments. The sense of social justice that motivated her workplace activity was important for her commitment to the promotion of principles of ethical and fair trade. This complements themes that have been explored in the literature on new models of community unionism. These include unions reaching out to new community constituencies (Wills 2001), unions transforming themselves into ‘citizenship movements’ (Johnston 2000), and the reorientation of union strategies towards coalition-building within post-industrial social environments (Tufts 1998). These issues are significant in their own right, and we return to them in the third Part of the report below.

Secondly, we highlight here how a commitment to fairness and equality often arose as a reaction to a specific workplace situation where women felt compelled to act in the best interest of their colleagues. One event can be the catalyst for women’s increased activity or indeed new membership within UNISON, as the following two examples show:

(1) Interviewer: So I'll start by asking, how did you get involved in UNISON? Interviewee: Well I think I became a member when I started working here in 1993 and I just joined up and money went out of my wages every month, and then when it came to the Agenda for Change I actually went and got banded and I got a Band 2. But I wasn't very happy with the banding and there wasn't anybody really who helped me, as such, and so I felt I thought it would be nice to help people to make sure that they got, put the right things in and everything. So I went on a course, I went to see the branch secretary and then we got talking and that's how I got involved.

(2) Interviewer: [Are you motivated] by a sense of fair play? Interviewee: Well I got involved partly because the new company took over and we're really not happy with the way things are going, and it's basically for the girls, because there was a lot of things happening on site that we really weren't happy with. So I thought by getting involved would be better, plus we didn't have many stewards on this site. A lot of girls swapped over unions because they weren't happy with the one we had before. They swapped to UNISON, and there was

no steward really and I thought "well" an opportunity to go for it and to stick up for the girls really and make sure that they get equal rights.

In the first example, the participant had been a long term member of UNISON but did not become active until she was personally affected by the new NHS pay scales brought in through Agenda for Change. It was her experience of being unsupported when being assessed for her own job that made her to want to train to be a union Agenda for Change representative and to help other people with the banding process. The second example illustrates how a cleaning supervisor experienced problems due to a change in contractor, and frustration with the inadequacy of current union representation led her to become a steward as part of 'doing it for girls'. Here a commitment to fairness and equality emerged from first hand experiences of injustice built upon a personal commitment to helping others. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge that women's involvement in union activities can be facilitated through key events inside and outside of the workplace. We suggest that UNISON could capitalise on these moments by building upon women's passion and commitment to ensure future involvement in the union.

The third and final example of women's commitment to fairness and equality as a motivating factor in union involvement can be more specifically linked to a concern for issues that affect women. This can be related to what Parker (2002) terms 'transformational equality' which recognises the difference in power and experience between members and seeks to build equality in practices and change union identity. For some individuals the experience or the knowledge of management bullying was an important motivating factor in their early decision to become involved in UNISON. Research in this area reveals that a relationship exists between bullying and organisational stress and changes in management structure and style (Agevold and Mikkelsen 2004, Vandekerckhove and Commers 2003).

In the quote below the interviewee makes an explicit link between management bullying and workplace restructuring. During periods of organisational change, abrasive management styles can come to the fore in ways that provoke hitherto quiescent union members to step into more prominent roles either to defend themselves or to defend others.

At a local level I think bullying and harassment was the issue. And it wasn't a personal issue. It was somebody within the admin & clerical department had a go at everybody. And also there was re-grading going on with the admin & clerical at that time. There was talk of the Whitley Council contracts being dissolved and everybody going onto Trust contracts. And I think that's just what persuaded me to join in really.

Some women drew more specific links between a strong opposition to unfair treatment of colleagues and management bullying as well as sexual harassment. This draws attention to the gendered nature of workplace bullying (Lee 2002, Simpson and Cohen 2004, Uggen and Blackstone 2004). One woman told us that:

If you look at numbers there are more women employees than men. But the higher up you go there are more men. So cases of bullying tend to be from male managers and they tend to be against women.

This neatly highlights women's commitment to the fair and equal treatment of other women. For example, other participants highlighted the need for UNISON to provide childcare so that women could attend meetings about conferences, and noted the difficulties women face in cases of sexual harassment.

If there was anything like harassment, they wouldn't go to a man. There again, say with the man, I don't know what they would do if they were getting sexually harassed - which they must do - and there's a lot of bullying that does go on.

The above quote is also interesting for what it suggests about the importance of women becoming union stewards within branches and workplaces in order to support women. In relation to sexual harassment it is likely that where only male stewards have any profile this could serve as an impediment to effective and appropriate representation. The presence of women stewards will be important in such cases and in relation to many other types of issue that touch upon personal life or upon issues

where gendered dynamics play a role. Indeed, the presence of women branch stewards will often be decisive in determining whether such issues actually become cases in the formal sense at all.

The motivations for women's involvement in union activities are thus diverse and complex. This section has shown how women make connections with wider family histories and political interests as well as identifying a specific need in the workplace and participating in a response to it. A general commitment by women to fairness and equality builds upon UNISON's already strong organisational commitments to proportionality and fair representation, for example. However, recognising these motivations can also strengthen the union's capacity to act in the best way in relation to women-specific issues. This is important when thinking about how best to recruit, promote and retain female members, and again highlights women's active role in reshaping what constitutes union activity.

Meanings

In the following section we build on the observations we have made regarding women's motivations for becoming involved in union activities by focusing on the meanings that women place on those activities and practices. This section draws upon examples which exemplify the need to recognise the 'informal' activities that women are engaged in which are not necessarily formally recognised within UNISON structures. We feel it is important to highlight these activities because they provide a deeper sense of what women's union activities involve, and also suggest that these informal activities need more support and recognition.

Friendship All of those interviewed who were asked specifically talked about the importance of friendships with those members who were also active. These relationships were often described as being able to call on others who might have more experience of particular issues or simply having someone to meet up with to 'talk politics down the pub'. In addition, friendship with other activists was often valued as a way of offering moral support in stressful situations and as essential for accessing the structures and processes in UNISON itself. Friendships were also cited as being important in creating a sense of continuity over time from one UNISON

event to the next. This sort of reference to friendships was referred to in relation to episodic events such as campaigns and political events as well as conferences and other routine events in UNISON's annual calendar. Several interviewees talked enthusiastically about the pleasure of meeting up with others they got on with from different branches or different parts of the country. Often these sorts of 'catching up' opportunities also involved swapping notes about branch experiences and exchanging information about UNISON and its internal affairs.

Another interesting finding was that many women had come into activity within the union through friendships, or more usually through a particular friendship, as opposed to other possible routes into activism such as family histories, industrial disputes, work-place issues or additional political involvement outside of UNISON. For example, a friend who had been doing the steward's job was unable to carry on because of job change or maternity leave and would ask that they step into the role. Some interviewees also described the experience of being 'dragged' along to a meeting and then cajoled by their friend into putting up their hand to raise an issue or agreeing to help an overburdened friend with their steward's duties only to find themselves getting 'drawn in'. In such stories helping out with stuffing envelopes could, within a short period of time, mean sitting on the branch committee in some formal capacity. This informal, incremental and sometimes even accidental process of involvement is important to recognise since it is likely to be the case that for every person who becomes active through such experiences, there are many more who might have become active in this manner but did not.

This is exemplified in the words of a participant below:

Seven years ago we got an activist who joined the city council and who got active in the union. She was very strong and very eloquent. She had a good brain - remembered everything. She was very, very active and was Education Officer at the time. We became friendly and we are still very good friends. We used to go to everything together and we became involved in the women's movement in UNISON just as the training developed and I became active for probably about 5 years in the North West Women's Forum and of course once you put your name forward once you become active. I'm very much a yes

person in as much as if anyone says do you fancy doing something I say 'yes' and think about the consequences afterwards. So you get drawn into things.

Here it is interesting that this woman's friendship and union activity intensified simultaneously. The role of friendship, therefore, should not be underestimated but is pivotal in the recruitment and maintenance of women's union activities. In this case, her friendship also provided her with a role model for union involvement and this enabled her to develop a commitment to the North West's Women's Forum. It is also important to recognise the role that friendship plays in blurring the boundaries between formal UNISON responsibilities and 'being one of the girls', as seen in the following quotes:

(1) I wouldn't say I've made any more friends because I know all the girls anyway. I just feel that girls come to you more. I think the girls may feel better because they've got somebody that they can come to and try and maybe sort something out - rather than feel 'well, I've just got to get on with it because there's nobody really to talk to or to share it with'.

(2) What we have is social events in our branch so we all have a dance and that sort of thing, we have a Christmas night out, maybe I shouldn't say this but the branch contributes towards that so if there is someone there with three kids who can't afford to pay for the Christmas night out, then what we do is contribute money, so it kind of gets us, we have a night out where we are not just talking work, work, work.

Both extracts illustrate the multiple roles that a female activist performs, as a friend, as someone to go out with, and as someone who will represent their interests and workplace concerns. However, it is clear that work is not the only factor in creating friendships. Indeed, women develop relationships with each other that are not built upon a rigid set of responsibilities. For example, the second quote talks about the role of the Christmas night out in facilitating friendships and solidarity amongst the branch. Again, women are reshaping the nature of union activities, in this case through the importance placed on friendship between women for recruitment and continued union involvement.

Helping others In this section we want to emphasise women's commitment to helping others through their union activities. This connects to our previous discussions that highlighted women's commitment to fairness and equality as a motivating factor to join UNISON and the importance of friendship between women as central to branch activities and union cultures of involvement. However, the specific nature of helping others enables us to consider the 'emotional work' of union activity; another activity, like friendship, that is not recognised within formal UNISON structures. This is increasingly being recognised through research on workplace cultures that acknowledges the tacit dimensions of work including 'attributes of creativity, sensitivity and emotional intelligence' (Evans and Kersh 2004). Therefore, we want to highlight through examples the different kinds of emotional work that women are engaged in when helping others.

For many interviewees the experience of supporting individuals in difficult or conflictual situations was one that was valued very highly. Often such commitment received only occasional official recognition but was nonetheless cherished. Established activists described the way that, over the years, they had won respect and affection within their workplace because of the accumulated collective memory of how they had helped individuals. Such stories were often associated also with a strong sense of sectional and departmental loyalty amongst those women who saw their priority as representing members rather than ascending the union ladder.

(1) It's the one to one. I mean I know the negotiations are extremely important, and especially now with Agenda for Change, and we need everybody to be involved. But you can't beat that one to one with members, and you've sorted something - a problem - for them, and they've gone away thinking 'oh that was good, I'm really glad they were there'. And we actually get people coming back and saying 'thank you'. Not often, but now and again, I mean they even come in with a little box of chocolates or something like that just to say thanks, so that's really rewarding.

(2) I enjoy it, yes. It's a nice feeling when you know that you've looked after your member and they're happy with the outcome of the case, whatever it may

be. A Monitoring or anything else, a Grievance or Disciplinary. It's nice to see your members happy with the outcome.

These two extracts illustrate that the role of steward is not just concerned with representing members who are experiencing difficulties, but it is also central to the provision of emotional support to colleagues. This recognises the distressing nature of official procedures and suggests that the support required by members is not simply about representation but is about personal and emotional sustenance. We have also noted that emotional support is not only related to workplace issues. Rather members approach stewards who they trust with a very wide range of issues, sometimes having little or nothing to do directly with the workplace. Problems such as those to do with relationship difficulties and personal life, money worries, feelings of depression, were all reported as issues that members would discuss with our interviewees in their roles as union representative. In fact, as the extract below illustrates, in many cases women take on the role of a counsellor or confidante:

I was just out on Sunday with three friends and we were discussing another friend who's having terrible problems at work. But one particular friend ... she started telling me about this other friend, who is actually a member of UNISON and what's been happening in her job. She said 'could you give her a ring?' She needs a bit of support. She's been off on long term sick for six weeks. She doesn't get on with her manager. They've now decided that they're going to re-grade her job and she still has to apply but she knows that she won't get the job because it's 'gone up' she can't do it. It's just another way round of getting rid of her really. So yes it happens all the time on personal issues.

Often, an activist's role as 'counsellor' became integral to the functioning of the workplace as she acted in her official capacity as a union representative and her unofficial capacity as a counsellor. Some women talked about this informal role in some depth and expressed interest in studying at a professional level. From this extract it is also evident that women are approached for advice even outside of their own workplace by people who are not necessarily UNISON members. Issues raised are as diverse as work place rights and entitlements, information about pensions, and

personal problems and relationships. Therefore, the emotional work done by these women is intensified as they are increasingly seen by those around them as being easy to talk to.

In order to fulfil this informal role as counsellor, activists have to employ particular skills, such as listening and offering advice. Some women in fact considered developing these skills by studying in a formal setting:

I think it's opened my eyes and I have already been talking with colleagues that have had problems and I thought well that would be really useful - to do something like a counselling course. It throws up problems that you are very aware that you can't cope with. You have not got the means and you haven't got the knowledge and therefore you think, this isn't just a part of the job. It sounds really interesting and you would be able to do what you are doing so much better if you had that sort of training.

This particular woman, when identifying the nature of her informal role as a counsellor, felt it would be beneficial for her to study in this area. We suggest that this illustrates some of the inherent difficulties that women face when taking on informal roles. It seems that women would benefit from more formal training in this area so that they feel more capable and supported in their roles as counsellors. By not recognising the extent to which women take on a counsellor role in addition to their more formal union activities, UNISON risks putting female activists in vulnerable and stressful positions, so much so that they may feel unable to engage in union activities.

In this section we have highlighted the meanings that women give to their union activities. This has been demonstrated by the extent to which friendship and helping others play a large part in their experiences as female activists. These informal roles are important to consider firstly, because for many women they form the major reason why they become and stay active in UNISON. Secondly, these roles are central to the functioning of workplace and branch cultures but they are not formally recognised as such by the union. By not recognising these roles UNISON may risk wasting an opportunity to build upon valuable tacit skills that women are utilising and in some cases, making members feel unsupported or overloaded in their activities.

Leaving UNISON

In the final section of this Part, we discuss some of the reasons why women left UNISON or reduced the intensity of their union activity. As mentioned in the Introduction, we specifically interviewed ex-activists as part of our sample in order to ascertain the reasons as a means of recognising potential difficulties that need to be addressed in order to maintain women's involvement. The section focuses on two particular incidences when women reduced their activities in UNISON for very different reasons. The first relates to one woman's experiences with a problematic male-dominated branch culture, and the second is an example of a woman who was unable to maintain the commitments demanded of her in her work, union and home life. These examples are presented as a means to suggest practices that may have helped avoid these situations occurring.

Case Study One: Carol Carol became Branch Secretary less than two years after joining UNISON on the recommendation and encouragement of a Branch Organising Officer. However, the departure of this colleague meant an increased workload for Carol. She talked about her continued commitment to her new role in relation to the hours she put in:

I was always at my desk before 8am in the morning, and there were times when I didn't put the phone down at home until nearly midnight.

She viewed her position as symbolic of how she wanted Branch Secretaries to be seen by employees and members alike:

the old fashioned image had gone and I was trying to bring in a new professional image where people, especially senior management would take notice.

Her time as branch secretary was however characterised by conflict within the branch, with one male colleague in particular, but also more generally. She told us:

I had complained about the way these people had behaved and branch were supposedly dealing with it but I think there was a lot of fear about this personality.

The lack of intervention from the branch led Carol to feel more cynical about her appointment as Branch Secretary:

They didn't bring me in because they thought I was going to be competent they brought me in because they thought they'd be able to manoeuvre me.

Reflecting back on the experience, Carol does not feel that she has 'fallen out with Unison'. For Carol, it was a failure at branch level to realise what was going on and their inability to respond to the bullying tactics of one particular member that led to her leaving. Carol is still a member of UNISON but is reluctant to take on an activist's role again. In fact she envisages her future involvement in UNISON within the capacity as a mentor:

I'd like to see a system of mentoring of new branch activists, I'm happy to mentor anyone who wants to be Branch Secretary and who isn't quite sure what to do. I can't be an activist but I'm happy to help... the first disciplinary you go to it is very, very frightening.

This suggestion is significant for understanding what could be done to help prevent situations like Carol's occurring again. Being a mentor would allow Carol to use her experience as Branch Secretary whilst giving advice and support to other members. This is indicative of the kind of support that Carol did not feel was at her disposal during her time as Branch Secretary.

Case Study 2: Sarah Sarah was active in her branch for six years during the 1990s. She attended numerous training courses organised by UNISON and attended several national conferences. However, Sarah stepped out of an active role for her branch around five years ago and talked at great length as to why she had made this decision. Her job was demanding although her employer was supportive. This still meant she

was spending a lot of time catching up on work and having to work on weekends. This is what eventually led to Sarah stepping down. She told us:

It was to do with time, I wasn't having any time to myself. And even when you're representing members, you've an awful lot of research to do, to be able to represent the member, so it's not just a case of saying 'oh well I have to go and meet with Management at half past ten' and you're there for half an hour or an hour, you've got the preparation for it, to meet with the member, to do some background work on what they've told you, and what they're entitled to... I just didn't have enough hours in the day. Especially when you've a home life as well... it just came to a point where there wasn't the hours in the day to do what I wanted to do as a person, and what I wanted to do as a family.

At first Sarah tried to manage the situation by not working on a Sunday but eventually she decided to step down. As the extract above tells us, Sarah was not able to find enough time to fulfil all of her union, work and personal commitments. Sarah is still a member of UNISON however, and now uses her knowledge and experience in a more informal way. She told us:

I still advise people, if they come to me, quite a lot do and say 'oh you're involved with the union'. So I say 'I'm not to such an extent but if I can advise you I will' and quite often you can, by talking to people you can at least put them on the right track or tell them who to contact.

Sarah is now engaged in an informal role as an adviser to other union members although no longer considers herself to be 'active' in the union in an official capacity. She still keeps abreast of UNISON news, but does not attend branch meetings. In a sense she has found it difficult to pull out completely from union involvement. In reflecting back on her experience she told us *'I think you need to let people know where to draw the line because it can get out of hand'*. Sarah feels she would have benefited from more advice and support concerned with managing the balance between her home life and work and union activities

These two case studies have illustrated the experiences of two women and why they reduced the intensity of union activity. In the first case, Carol was keen to fulfil her role as branch secretary but felt unable to do so because of the intimidating nature of a key branch member and the complacency of her branch. Sarah's experience illustrated how the demands of being a union steward meant she did not have enough time to spend at home, which consequently meant she had to choose. It is interesting though that both of these women still remain 'involved' with UNISON. Again, as with the informal counsellor role, their roles as advisers are an unrecognised yet vital part of union support. It begs the question as to whether ex-activists are ever really that.

These case studies are important also for illustrating moments at which it would have been useful for some form of intervention to occur to prevent women from stepping down. For example, providing Carol with support in dealing with the difficult branch member and giving Sarah advice as to how to balance union work and home life or even providing her with an opportunity to share her union role with someone else. In fact, the advice and expertise of these 'ex-activists' could be vital in providing this supportive role - a way of maintaining women's involvement in UNISON on their own terms.

Conclusions

In this Part of the report we have examined the different motivations and meanings that women place on their experiences of joining UNISON, participating in and leaving. We have explored this through three specific themes. Firstly, we considered the different motivations that women have for joining UNISON. This recognised the significance of family histories of union activity and a general ethical commitment to fairness and equality. Women developed this commitment in conjunction with their experience of wider political action, as a response to a specific workplace injustice or highlighting women-specific inequalities within UNISON such as workplace bullying, sexual harassment and childcare.

Secondly we considered the nature of informal union activities by examining the significance of friendship and a commitment to helping others for reshaping more formally recognised union roles. We have argued that friendship between women can

be an important factor for women joining and continuing activity in UNISON, and that female activists often combine friendship and union activity whilst socialising with, and representing the interests of, women in the workplace. In relation to this, we also highlighted the emotional work of being a female activist. This recognised the ways that women take on the role of 'counsellor' for work related and personal problems. We argued that this form of informal activity should be recognised and training put in place for those women who take on these roles.

Finally we presented two case studies of women who reduced their involvement with UNISON in response to particular situations. We considered the difficulties women faced when dealing with difficult branch members and in managing a home/work balance. We highlighted that these women never really 'left' UNISON but took on informal roles as advisers to other union members. We suggested that it is necessary to respond to each of these cases, to improve union practices that could involve a mentoring scheme and recognising the role of informal advisers.

PART THREE

WOMEN AND THE COMMUNITY IN UNISON

Introduction

In this Part of the report we pick up on and develop a theme identified in Part two: the significance to women in UNISON of their relationship to a wider set of social and political communities beyond the workplace, and the implications of these connections for the nature of UNISON itself. As trade unions have begun to recover from years of declining membership and a hostile external political environment, they have increasingly developed new confidence in terms of strategies for increasing membership, and ways of relating to broader social debates. We focus here upon what a developing form of community unionism might mean to women activists on the ground, exploring how some of these women themselves are engaged in, draw support from and contribute to other communities of interest and organisation. We firstly show how for some women, this engagement developed from their work with UNISON, whilst others have always had a tradition of wider political activism; and secondly look briefly at the role of UNISON's self-organised groups.

Communities of activism

It would be an over-statement to suggest that all the women we interviewed were politically active beyond their trade union role. For many women the stresses and strains of union work, and the benefits and personal satisfaction they derived from it, represented the horizons of their political activity at this point in their lives. Some women had developed a strong sense of political justice, which was expressed in ways additional to their work with UNISON. For some of these women, their engagement with other political communities had grown directly as a consequence of union work; for others that wider community had already existed. To illustrate this, we explore below two case studies of women activists in UNISON with differing routes into other communities.

Jane had a long history as an activist, having served for many years as a branch secretary within local government, although she had recently stood down from this

role. Reflecting upon the confidence she had gained through UNISON, Jane explained how workplace issues gradually opened up other areas in her life:

Taking up a position in UNISON made me a different person, more rounded. Without UNISON I think you go to work, that's all you do. You don't realise what's going on in the background to make you work in the office all day, and if necessary get your sick pay, or your maternity leave. All those things going on in the background, you may not realise it. You just accept that you get so many weeks off as a right but you don't really know how you came to get that right.

Having recognised that workplace issues were part of union work, Jane gradually found herself more and more involved in protecting and extending those rights:

It was quite simple things originally, and one person kept saying to me "get involved in the union – you can't do anything unless you get into the union". And I thought, you're right. You've got to be in there before you can begin to change anything. So I tested the water and maybe I did help somebody here and there. Just simple things at first. Then the next problems come along and you think, this is bad, this is a real problem, but you gradually get the confidence to deal with things. I remember people coming to me who were being bullied at work, very badly bullied at that, and you think "I've got to stop this". And I'm doing all that and suddenly one day you wake up and think "at one time I could never have done that".

As part of her developing self-confidence and wider awareness, Jane identified other areas where it might be possible to make a difference, to contribute to the shaping of a wider community:

You take more interest because you know there is a bigger life out there, you take more interest in your own community. Where I live we had a problem of noisy youngsters. You can't just say "go away we don't want to know you", you've got to do something for them, come to some sort of arrangement. I think you just learn how to handle people, and you develop a network of

friends that you can get in touch with and find out what can be done. When you become an activist in UNISON that's one of the things that happens to you. You care about what happens not only to you, but others out there as well. When you're out and about you've got the confidence to go and help.

In this instance then, Jane recognised how she had contributed through her work as a UNISON activist, and at the same time gained a greater self-assuredness that enabled her to participate in other aspects of community life. She became more involved in other ways as a direct result of her participation within the resolution of workplace difficulties.

Some other activists, in contrast, saw their work in UNISON as only one part of a wider, politically-charged attitude that had permeated much of their life from early years. For instance Sally, a long-standing activist, talked about her own political beliefs:

I'm proud to say that I have always been involved in the anti-racist movement, and I think it's very important that UNISON has got a strong position on this. They have done marvellous things against the BNP, with the community groups and the Labour Party, especially in Burnley. I think it is important to give something of yourself outside of your work and outside the union, to me the union is life anyway, and I say everything you do is political. The shoes on your feet are political, the coat on your back is political, the food in your fridge is political.

Reflecting a theme identified in Part two of this report – the significance of emotional values in women's motivations for engaging within UNISON - and supporting the general argument in Part one (that for many women this activism is also changing the culture of the organisation), Sally spoke strongly about the passion that drove her on:

UNISON is predominantly women, but you look where the women are in the hierarchy, we have got a few women at regional level but there are not enough compared to the men. You look at the national level and that is disgusting. The whole point is that if you have women who want to come up from the grass

roots, they feel the pressure from work and from families. We should be saying well hang on, we can do this together, there should be togetherness.

These two women both saw their roles within UNISON as being part of their engagement with wider communities. There were many other instances where the women we interviewed had made similar connections. For some, these were around highly localised issues. For others the awareness generated through being active in UNISON led to participation at a wider scale. For instance one interviewee had only six months previously taken on the role of steward within her local government branch. Her motivations were familiar to many of the women we interviewed: a concern that workloads were becoming intolerable, coupled with frustration at the cramped and unhealthy nature of the working environment. Yet she had rapidly made connections with a number of issues, taking on the role of Union Learning Representative, becoming a source of advice to a number of other branches, and campaigning on the issue of pensions, including participating in a lobby of Members of Parliament in London:

It was strange speaking to a Member of Parliament, he just said 'I haven't been briefed on this issue', but I loved the experience. I wanted to buy a badge saying 'I've been to the House of Commons', but all I could get was a fridge magnet!

Other interviewees commented upon the changing perception of “community” reflected in the relationship between individual and societal responsibilities:

Most people going into the workplace now even in their mid 20s are still 'Thatcher's babies' and I am still really shocked about some of their responses. They have no knowledge of what the miners strike was about. They just don't have a clue. I was thinking 'how can you not know?' but many people of that age group have no idea. We don't teach it in schools do we? It would be an ideal opportunity for "citizenship" to talk about the history of trade unionism and the importance it played in working people's lives. I think it's a generational thing, young people who grew up in Thatcher's era tend to be more selfish than people who were born prior to that time, because there

was a cultural ethos this concept of “community” didn’t exist, it was all about self and people took that as the norm.

In various ways therefore, some women have made connections with wider communities either because of their activism within UNISON, or as part of a political commitment that was already present before they became a UNISON activist. In the second section we look at some of the ways in which UNISON’s self-organised groups have led to incorporation of other perspectives within the organisation, and opened up the potential space for other communities to feel part of the UNISON project.

Communities of self-organisation?

As part of its commitments to diversity, equality of opportunity, and grass roots organisation, UNISON has established self-organised groups that represent particular communities. Our research deliberately set out to interview activists from within each of these groups, not least because one question was whether the self-organised groups really did enable wider participation by women. This proved to be a particularly sensitive issue that generated a wide range of views.

The tensions between self-organisation, participation within the wider stage of UNISON politics, and political activity more generally, were very evident in our interview with an activist within the black members group. She described how she was involved in community politics outside the workplace, but felt that her perception was sometimes at odds with others within the group:

I’ve found myself in a unique position because I think the problems in our communities, particularly the black community, are to do with making the leap between community politics and mainstream politics. There’s a massive difficulty with people who do come to black members meetings at local level and they feel that the union doesn’t take them seriously. I see my job as actually getting them more involved in the mainstream activities of the union because being involved in community politics isn’t enough, you have to close that gap, you have to do the two things in tandem or you’ll always be isolated.

She continued to reflect upon the dynamics that lie at the heart of self-organisation:

I believe in self-organisation as a means to an end and not a means in an end, the irony though is that I've been able to maintain my activism within UNISON through self-organisation. I see it as a learning curve, self-organisation is important in branches who may not be familiar with equality issues, but I don't believe that people should stay there forever and not get involved in the mainstream. I don't think it just applies to black members, I think it applies across the board, although in my view the Gay and Lesbian Members are the most politicised self-organised group within the union. At one time a lot of their national committee members were actually branch secretaries so that tells you that they were doing the day to day negotiations, they were living and working it everyday. But in general I don't think enough people make that jump and take what they've learned about the self-organised forum into the mainstream. I think there's a bit of holding on to power base positions.

Whilst acutely aware of the fact that what she was describing could be levelled as a charge against herself, this interviewee nonetheless articulated some of the very real challenges and difficulties confronting the self-organised groups. These involved tensions between the self-organised groups and the union “mainstream”, and between the self-organised groups and their own, individual, wider constituencies – women, ethnic minorities, disabled people, and the gay and lesbian community. These are very real issues, made all the more acute by what this interviewee perceived as a limited commitment to equality issues by some within UNISON:

The other thing that frustrates me is a lack of honesty from people who do not really believe in self-organisation and don't think that equalities issues should be given the priority that they perceive that UNISON gives them. I would prefer a full blown drawn-out scrap with somebody about the benefits of self-organisation or why equalities are a priority to the union than that they pretend they believe in it but actually undermine it by not making resources available, by talking the talk and going away and not doing anything.

Some of these issues were also evident in our interview with a member of another self-organised group, who described the ways in which it was a campaigning force partly in its own right, making international connections over lesbian and gay rights:

I think people [within the group] recognise that making links is really important, and for a lot of us who are active within the L&G community it's not confined to our little group. It's about a fundamental belief that if you make things right for a particular group, that has a huge benefit for the whole of society, it doesn't just benefit that group, therefore those links need to be really wide around those issues which are about fundamental human rights that involve everybody.

In this case then, there was a perception that the self-organised group was enabling of wider networks of political activism, networks which had benefits not just to their immediate participants but more generally.

Conclusion

Within the context of a developing debate about future union strategies for increasing membership and broadening influence through engagement with other groups in a wider community, our interviews identified a number of significant issues for further investigation. Some women activists had developed a strong sense of political justice, over topics ranging from fair trade through to more local expressions of community awareness. Others saw their work within UNISON only as one part of a wider set of beliefs that they took into their workplace and union roles from the outset. The self-organised groups offered an opportunity for some women to connect different aspects of their identity and political awareness, although there were some tensions when the connections with “mainstream” UNISON politics were more apparent than real. In general terms, it is clear that activists are engaged in a very broad range of goals and projects, and it is important that UNISON recognises the significance of these points of overlap to many women.

Recommendations

Part One

Gender in UNISON: re-shaping union cultures

1. Whilst there have recently been many positive changes within UNISON that have enabled more and more women to step forward into activist positions inside the union, there remain important legacies of the historical construction of trade union activity more generally as a “male” domain. These should be acknowledged and not forgotten, as a means of counteracting ongoing exclusionary practices.
2. The engagement of a growing proportion of women within UNISON is not only changing women’s roles, but also - and in turn - influencing the nature of the organisation. There should be recognition of the interaction between organisational change and greater participation by women.
3. Consideration should be given to some of the language of trade unionism, with some women viewing it as tainted with connotations inappropriate to the 21st century workplace.
4. In the context of ongoing labour market changes, consideration should be given to the continuing need to represent groups within the workplace where women are disproportionately found, particularly part time workers.
5. There are different kinds of branch culture and UNISON could usefully explore how the culture of a branch is constructed, with regards in particular to how women’s participation is given value.

Part Two

Motivations and Meanings

6. There are multiple motivations that encourage women to become active within UNISON. These include family tradition, a commitment to fairness and equality, and a personal investment in supporting other women. Consideration should be given to building upon these individual reasons for women joining the union and becoming active in the first place.

7. Confidence-building is an important part of the process of becoming an activist for many women. Recognition could be given to the different ways in which self-confidence may be undermined, and steps taken to counteract this. Equally, for some women the very act of engaging with UNISON can be confidence-building and they gain a lot in the process; this could usefully be highlighted in union recruitment and campaigning.
8. Greater recognition should be given to the informal support structures and “emotional labour” that sustain women activists, and that these activists in turn provide for others. The role of the union official as counsellor/confidante is particularly problematic in this regard, and consideration should be given to the provision of formal training and support structures for such activity.
9. The informal and incremental process of deeper engagement is a way in which some women become more involved within UNISON. For a small proportion of women activists, union activity comes to dominate their lives. Consideration should be given to giving advice about how to draw boundaries around union activity, so that this association can be sustained over the longer term.
10. Those women who had drawn back from activist roles reported a number of reasons, ranging from work-life balance, personal issues and conflicts with other union members. Many however continued to play an informal support role to their successors. Having invested in their training and development, UNISON could explore ways in which the experience and acquired knowledge of such women activists might be retained, perhaps in a mentoring role.

Part Three

Women and the community in UNISON

11. Friendship networks can be significant in building and sustaining activism. These networks cross over into many other different aspects of individual identity, and recognition could be given to the ways in which activists bring these into their union work.
12. More generally, transforming the role of women in UNISON is bringing the union into engagement with a series of wider communities. Consideration

should be given to the implications of the developing debate on community unionism for women in UNISON in particular.

13. Conference attendance is on balance seen in very positive terms by activists, who welcome the opportunity to participate and the openness of the process. Conference is also about building community in the sense of being connected with other members and activists, both formally and informally. There should be continued attention to this very supportive aspect of union activism.
14. The self-organised groups within UNISON offer significant opportunities for engaging with wider, diverse political communities, but it is important that active connections are maintained between these groups and the mainstream of UNISON policy processes.

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