

The social construction of women's trade union participation: the
role of women-only courses in MSF and TGWU
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Dedication

**In loving memory of my dad,
Bill Carey
1933-1985**

Acknowledgements

Completing a PhD thesis is never going to be an easy task, but the support and encouragement of supervisors undoubtedly eases the pain. Geraldine (Healy) and Al (Rainnie) have always given freely of their time and encouragement and without their undying enthusiasm there would have been times when it would have been difficult to carry on. I thank them enormously for their superb supervision and look forward to working with them both in the future.

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Women have struggled for more than a century for equality within trade unions and various forms of separate organising have played a central role in achieving incremental gendered transformation of internal structures and hierarchies. Despite huge advances, the goal of gender equality or democracy has not been fully realised in 2003; hence women's separate organising remains an important strategic vehicle through which union women are able to access the necessary power resources to continue their struggle.

This thesis provides an original, in-depth exploration of the impact and influence on union women of one form of separate organising, namely women-only courses, in two large, male-dominated trade unions. It contributes to the growing body of feminist industrial relations literature concerned with women's under-representation in union structures. The thesis establishes the link between a significant, but under-researched area of union activity – union education – with the debates surrounding gender democracy, by showing the enormous impact women-only courses have on participants, their gender and union identities and their union careers. With its primary focus on a group of union women, rather than on a union structure, the study also produces important methodological insights for industrial relations research.

By taking a qualitative, multi-method, case study approach within a feminist paradigm, the thesis investigates the women's routes to participation and involvement, their perceptions and experiences of women-only courses and the unfolding of their union careers over time. In so doing it engages with contemporary debates surrounding women's lesser participation in the structures and processes of union democracy, the gendered barriers to union involvement, the role and utility of women's separate organising. Importantly, it also offers insights into the myriad ways in which women use their personal agency to surmount such barriers and navigate a union career.

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The Social Construction of Women's Trade Union Participation: the Role of Women-only Courses in MSF and TGWU

Introduction

Women comprise a greater proportion of union members and members of union executive bodies than ever before, and women's separate organising is now widespread. However, women continue to struggle for power and influence inside the decision-making structures of the union movement, which overall remain male-dominated. Therefore studies investigating the gendered power dynamics that sustain and reproduce male domination against this context of enablement and constraint are necessary to further knowledge. It is also necessary to deepen understanding of the ways in which women individually and collectively resist and challenge the gender order within trade unions.

This thesis explores the social construction of women's trade union participation in two male-dominated trade unions – MSF and TGWU¹. It relates the stories of the union participation of a group of 29 trade union women 'captured' at women-only schools in MSF and TGWU. The qualitative methodology employed allows their union careers² to unfold over time, with a life history approach to first interviews taking us back to their initial experiences of union membership and involvement; and with second interviews allowing us to 'catch up' with the women's stories approximately two years later. The stories of four women are given particular prominence in the narrative and analysis. These women's stories serve to illustrate the major themes of the thesis and they also give the reader a greater appreciation of the richness of the data gathered. Significantly, the second interviews cast light on the dynamics of workplace trade unionism from the perspective of the individual women. With this novel methodological approach and analytical focus, the thesis makes an original contribution to the literature on women and trade unions, with the conclusions highlighting three major themes: women's separate organising, women's union and gender identities and women's union careers.

¹MSF is the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union, now known as MSF Section, Amicus, following the merger on 1st January 2002 with AEEU (see also Postscript). TGWU is the Transport and General Workers' Union.

²As explained more fully in Chapter Four following Layder (1993:76) the thesis utilises the concept of 'career' to analyse women's participation in unions.

Aims of the thesis

The broad aim of the thesis is to explore women's trade union careers over time within the empirical context of women's lesser participation in the democratic processes and structures, that is within the context of the existing gender democracy deficit (Cockburn 1995). The thesis has the particular objective of seeking to understand how women's trade union participation is socially constructed by women's experiences of three interlocking social institutions - family, work and unions - and in particular by their engagement with one form of women's separate organising - women-only courses. The study reaches beyond the central research site to the women's family, work and local union contexts. The research seeks to explore the social processes of women-only courses, investigating the ways in which women's gender and union identities are shaped by engagement with the gendered discourses and processes of these courses and the influence this then has on the trajectory of their union careers. The thesis also follows the women's union careers over time both retrospectively and contemporaneously. In this respect it seeks to understand how and why the women first embarked on union participation and to explore how post-course the women utilise their agency in the union and the workplace. This analysis is situated within the broader union setting, focusing on how the women sought to navigate an evolving context, to overcome the structural barriers to participation and to act on that context to advance, either consciously or unconsciously, the gender democracy project.

Trade union education

With regard to the central research site, education is a significant area of trade union activity, but one that is under-researched (recent exceptions include Holford 1993; Bridgford and Stirling 2000; Munro and Rainbird 2000; 2000a; Greene and Kirton 2002; Kirton and Greene 2002; Kirton and Healy Forthcoming). Bridgford and Stirling suggest that trade union education is a 'key resource for the construction of trade unionism' (2000:5), whilst Holford sees union education as a 'vital catalyst as the movement tries to come to terms with new realities' (1993:12). Similarly, Munro and Rainbird (2000) argue that trade union education encourages a greater identification with the union and can lead to active participation in union activities, thus having the potential to strengthen workplace activism. Recent research agrees on the general importance of trade union education, but thus far there have been few attempts to marry this area of importance with the (largely

feminist) debates surrounding gender democracy and the mainstream industrial relations focus on union renewal (Greene and Kirton, 2002 is one exception). Thus, the study is set within a broad empirical and conceptual context, which is now briefly summarised.

Women and trade unions

The thesis draws on a large body of industrial relations and feminist literature. The former is generally preoccupied with union decline and prospects for union renewal (e.g. Hyman 1997; Kelly 1998; Waddington and Kerr 2002). The background to this discussion is the long period of membership decline (1979-1997) and the union movement's focus at the start of the twenty-first century on strategies for survival and renewal. With the trend of the last two to three decades of labour market feminisation predicted to continue and this combined with overall restructuring of the labour market, commentators suggest that trade unions need to develop strategies to reach workers beyond their traditional public sector and male-dominated manufacturing bases. This has prompted both greater policy and academic attention to women, who are now an undeniably important source of members for most British unions (Howell 1996; Sinclair 1996). The industrial relations literature also explores ways in which unions might revitalise themselves by becoming more democratic and encouraging greater membership participation (e.g. Flood et al 1996; Terry 1996; Heery et al 2000; Morris and Fosh 2000).

These themes have been adopted by the feminist literature, but self-evidently with a focus on what all this means for women and for gendered analysis. Thus, the feminist literature is at pains to point out that women are under-represented in union decision-making structures from the local level of workplace representatives, to paid officials, to executive bodies (e.g. Cunnison and Stageman 1995; McBride 2001), adding to the evidence of what Cockburn (1995) has termed a 'democracy deficit'. The literature on women and trade unions importantly draws attention to the negative (for women workers) impact of the absence of gender democracy on bargaining agendas and outcomes (Dickens 1997; Colling and Dickens 2001), that is 'women's issues' are not adequately addressed. This in turn produces and reinforces women's lower favourability to trade unions and lesser willingness to participate (Sinclair 1996; Walters 2002). This body of literature is also concerned to identify barriers to women's union participation at the levels of work, home and union, none of which can be studied in isolation. Examining only the internal union contexts or constructing women as 'free agents' able to participate in the processes and structures of democracy if they so choose, will achieve only a partial understanding

because women's relationship to trade unionism is intricately connected to their paid work and family roles and relationships.

Thus, feminist authors argue that women are a specific constituency with gender specific employment needs and concerns which unions need to respond to if they are to be successful in recruiting and retaining women (Cockburn 1995; Cunnison and Stageman 1995; Kirton and Healy 1999). It is also posited that unions need to develop more inclusive processes and structures to encourage greater female participation. The research focus presently is generally on the various forms of women's separate organising (Cockburn 1995; Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Healy and Kirton 2000; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Humphrey 2002; Parker 2002; Briskin 1993). Separate organising is designed to redress the gender democracy gap in trade unions by encouraging and empowering women (for example, women-only courses) and by establishing structures, which give women as a group power and resources (for example, women's committees).

It is against this empirical background that the thesis investigates the social construction of women's union participation and contributes to the body of knowledge in this area.

Outline of the thesis

Chapter One outlines the broad (or macro) theoretical context of and 'sensitising devices' (Giddens 1984) underpinning the research and argues that the gender 'blind' or gender neutral orientation of traditional, mainstream industrial relations research is unable to develop our knowledge of women workers and trade unionists. It locates the thesis within a feminist industrial relations paradigm, which draws on the strengths and insights that mainstream industrial relations theories and feminist theories offer.

Chapter Two turns to the micro level of analysis of the thesis. Following from the 'sensitising devices' discussed and outlined in Chapter One, the chapter explores the relevant empirical and theoretical contexts of women and trade unions. The discussion is divided into three key themes for the research: (i) the context of women's employment; (ii) women and trade unions: the empirical context; (iii) women and trade unions: the theoretical context. The first theme provides the backdrop for the latter two, which are the primary focus. Here, there is detailed discussion of explanations of women's lesser participation and under-representation in union decision-making structures, followed by detailed discussion of women's separate organising as a feminist strategy towards gender

democracy.

Chapter Three traces the historical origins of women's separate organising and women-only courses using both secondary and primary sources. The analysis shows that early developments were mainly a response to women's external exclusion from mainstream, male dominated trade unions and later developments to their internal exclusion from the structures of power and enablement. Women-only courses became a more politicised, proactive vehicle in the late 1970s under the influence of second-wave feminism and are now an established form of trade union education.

Chapter Four discusses the feminist, qualitative methodological approach of the thesis and outlines the multiple research methods employed: in-depth interviews, observation of courses, documentary evidence and 'snapshot' surveys. Importantly, and congruent with the epistemological underpinning of feminist research, the account of the research takes a 'natural history' (Silverman 2000) approach, relating the experiences and reflections of the researcher. The narrative account gives the reader a strong sense of the richness of the data and the rigour with which it was gathered.

Chapter Five introduces the reader to the case study unions – MSF and TGWU - two large male-dominated TUC unions. The chapter outlines the unions' women-only course provision and examines the gendered patterns of general course attendance, thus situating the research within an institutional setting. It presents an analysis of previously undocumented primary data including survey data, documentary evidence and interviews with the directors of education in each union and with course tutors.

Chapter Six investigates the routes to participation and involvement of the group of 29 women's school students who are at the centre of this study. The chapter draws on data from the first interviews when the women were asked to reflect back on the people, experiences and influences that stimulated their union participation. It also examines the women's forms of participation at the time of the observed women's schools and the structural barriers and constraints they encountered in the family, work and union environments.

Chapter Seven explores the women's motivations for attending the women-only courses, together with their perceptions and experiences. The analysis is organised around key themes and processes of women-only courses: 'safe space', shared learning and privileging

‘women’s issues’. The chapter shows how women’s gender and trade union orientations are shaped by the courses, such that the courses can be characterised as a significant experience in a woman’s trade union career.

In **Chapter Eight** we return to the women’s stories two years after attending the women’s schools, drawing on data from second interviews to explore how their union careers unfolded over time. The analysis shows that while some women failed to realise their intentions or aspirations for a union career, because home/personal life, work or union stood in their way, others went on to sustain and develop their participation, albeit often in non-linear, qualitative and personal ways. By exploring women’s union careers in context the analysis also provides insights into the dynamics of workplace trade unionism.

Chapter Nine concludes the thesis and discusses the implications of the study for research on women and trade unions, for methodology, for trade union strategy and policy and reflection on the research design. Whilst there is no claim for generalisability, what the thesis does achieve, through its qualitative feminist methodology, is to provide rich insights into the ways that trade union women interpret their lived experiences and utilise their personal and collective resources to navigate trade union careers with varied outcomes in the context of uneven constraints.

Chapter One

Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations: Locating Industrial Relations Research on Women

Introduction

The aim of the thesis is to explore the social construction of women's trade union participation. To achieve this it is necessary to have concepts and theories in order to interpret the data. This chapter outlines the broad theoretical context of the research in order to provide an appreciation of the influences on the feminist¹ industrial relations paradigm informing the design of the research discussed in Chapter Four and the analysis of the empirical findings presented in Chapters Five to Eight. First it is necessary to say a few words about the field of industrial relations, within which this study is located.

Industrial relations has a strong empirical tradition and values highly research useful for policy making (Hansen 2002). Studies typically emphasise the structures and institutions of industrial relations, although more recently there have been calls for more research on the social processes of industrial relations (e.g. Kelly 1998). At the same time the field is characterised by under-theorisation (Marsden 1982; Hyman 1994; Kelly 1998); while feminist industrial relations writers criticise the inadequate attention paid to women (their being under-represented in or absent from the structures and institutions studied) (Forrest 1993; Wajcman 2000; Greene 2002; Hansen 2002). The former criticism has spawned more theoretically engaged offerings from a number of industrial relations authors (e.g. Hyman 1994; Kelly 1998). However, feminist scholarship has made few inroads into the field of industrial relations (Greene 2002; Wajcman 2000). Even now with a large feminist social science literature, leading theorists in the industrial relations field have little to say about gender or women (see for example, Kelly 1998) and the research agenda generally reflects masculine priorities and privilege (Wajcman 2000). In view of these two strands

¹ This chapter discusses different conceptualisations of feminism. However, the definition informing the discussion and analysis in the thesis subsequently is the following general one: 'Feminism opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them; it thereby offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organisation and control mechanisms. It seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but not sexual dualism' (Offen, K 1992). *Defining Feminism: a Comparative Historical Approach. Beyond Equality and Difference.* G. Bock and S.

of critique, this chapter discusses the theoretical and conceptual influences on an industrial relations study, which has women at the centre.

Given the empirical orientation of industrial relations research it is useful first to reflect briefly on the general purpose of theory within the field. Giddens (1984:326) suggests that theoretical concepts are regarded by social researchers as 'sensitising devices', that is that they are useful for thinking about research problems and the interpretation of research findings. He goes on to argue that it is not necessary to clutter up written texts with abstract notions, that could be described in ordinary language. Although Giddens is from outside the field, this is a useful way for feminist industrial relations researchers to think about the purpose of theory. As feminists we wish to make our work as accessible as possible and we want it to contribute to policy making in order to improve women's condition. For both these reasons our work should not be impenetrable. However as academics we do need rigorous concepts to guide us in our endeavour to contribute to knowledge and as feminist academics we have an interest in bridging the gulf between feminist and industrial relations theory. The thesis contributes to the body of industrial relations research, which is theoretically informed, but useful to policy-making.

The chapter is organised into three main sections, which discuss the 'sensitising devices' underpinning the research. The first section considers industrial relations theory, arguing that the main influences on industrial relations research - class analysis and neo-classical theories - are separately and combined unable to explain the specificity of women's inequality within employment or trade unions. Nevertheless, the thesis is influenced by conceptions of class and considers the exercise of choice. The second section considers the main components and contemporary strands of feminist theory. Importantly, classic feminist theory deconstructs the divide between work and home, which renders it a particularly appropriate analytical lens through which to explore women's experiences of trade unions, allowing us to make sense of women's choices and behaviour in the union context. The third section – 'Feminism meets industrial relations theory' – contends that it is possible to combine the merits of industrial relations and feminist theory by adopting a broad conception of class, by positioning women as knowledgeable agents (Giddens 1984) and by recognising the structural constraints produced by gender. This provides a set of

James. London, Routledge. Offen also points out that feminism is an ideology *and* a movement for socio-

underpinning concepts capable of holding gender as the central theme whilst exploring how class and other 'identities' cross cut and mediate women's lived experiences of work and unions.

Industrial relations theory

Class is the principal concept used within sociology to theorise social inequality and it is the dominant theoretical influence within industrial relations. The main approaches to conceptualising and understanding class were set out by Marx and Weber (Bradley 1996). Classic Marxism's approach focuses on the dichotomous relationship between capital and labour and the antagonism that this inevitably produces. It forms the basis of reserve army theories (e.g. Beechey and Perkins 1987). The Weberian model is more pluralist; it arranges clusters of occupations together as social classes and forms the basis for theories of class fragmentation (e.g. segmented labour market theories) (Bradley, Erickson et al. 2000). Both approaches have been traditionally utilised within class analysis to explain the subordinate position of women and black workers. Theoretical approaches drawn from neo-classical economics and social psychology have also influenced industrial relations studies in relation to explaining employers' and employees' labour market behaviour and the genesis of collective organisation and action (e.g. Hartley 1992; Klandermans 1992).

Turning first to class theory, class is undoubtedly a fundamental and essential concept for thinking about how and why people come to be in particular occupations and how and why they come to join and participate in unions. However, class theory provides inadequate explanation of gendered social divisions and gendered power relations, which shape women's employment behaviour and their willingness to participate in unions (Walby 1986; Beechey and Perkins 1987; Walby 1990; Cockburn 1991; Bradley 1996; Pollert 1996; Gottfried 1998). Walby labels class theory as a 'malestream' perspective (1990:7): it is at best gender-neutral and at worst gender-blind (Cockburn 1991).

From a gender perspective, there are three main errors within both neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian approaches to class. First, an over-concentration on the capital-labour relation, with inadequate attention to the gendered division of domestic labour and the gendered impact this has on employment patterns (e.g. Walby 1990; Bradley 1996) and willingness

political change (*ibid*:82), which understanding is central to the analysis and the research design/approach.

to participate in trade unions (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 1996). Second a failure to deal with the way that gender has historically divided the working class. There is a tendency to ignore the trade union role in constructing women's inequality and to valorise uncritically the role of trade unions in advancing the interests of a genderless working class. For example, the assumption that men are breadwinners and women homemakers underpinned the trade union movement's historical ideal of a 'family wage', which did little to achieve equal pay for women, even holding back the project. At the same time, a unitary, class-based conception of trade union interests is also responsible for the unions' historical lack of interest in recruiting and representing women, who were not until relatively recently regarded as serious workers (e.g. Beale 1982; Cunnison and Stageman 1995). Trade union victories have in fact often been victories for men, which women could only vicariously enjoy based upon their associations with men as fathers and husbands. The third error is a function of the first two: women tend to be invisible within traditional class analysis and men are regarded as gender free beings (Hansen 2002).

These errors render class theory unable to address sufficiently the three main empirical features of gender relations in employment, (i) the gender pay gap (ii) gender segregation (iii) women's lower rates of participation (Walby 1990); or to explain the three main features of gender relations inside unions, (i) women's historically lower levels of membership (ii) their lower rates of participation (iii) their under-representation in decision-making. Thus the practical consequence of the gender-blind theoretical underpinning of much industrial relations research is gender-blind knowledge. Much industrial relations research is potentially less useful to policy-makers (and to academics) than it should be, as it fails to explain sufficiently women's experiences at a time when women are almost half the workforce and an important source of members for trade unions.

Nevertheless, despite the extensive feminist critique of class theory (e.g. Walby 1990; Pollert 1996; Gottfried 1998), it is necessary for feminist industrial relations research to engage with concepts of class. There are undoubtedly class variations in the way that gender is experienced; i.e. men are not all equally privileged, while women are not all equally subordinate (Cockburn 1991). This is clear from the findings of the study presented later in the thesis. Few, if any, feminist industrial relations authors would advocate

abandoning any consideration of class within gender analysis; it is more a question of emphasis. Reflecting this, in the broader feminist sociological literature there have recently been calls for greater sensitivity to gender within class analysis (Walby 1997) and to class within gender analysis (Bradley 1999). The thesis responds to this by adopting a broader conception of class, where it is seen as a 'complicated set of economic, political and cultural relationships arising from the way societies organise the production of goods and services' (Bradley, Erickson et al. 2000). This conception allows for gender to be held as one modality in which class is lived.

Turning to neo-classical theories, these are generally utilised to explain the preferences and choices of workers. To summarise it is argued that in making employment choices female workers take into consideration their domestic responsibilities (childcare, for example), as well as their personal preferences, skills and abilities (Anker 1997). In addition, the neo-classical approach stresses the importance of human capital (most notably education and training) in determining occupational status (Becker 1971). Thus, any gender differences in labour market outcomes are not problematic because they are the consequence of gendered individual preferences and choices; that is of rational choice (Walby 1990). Some industrial relations authors borrow neo-classical theories to explain willingness to join or participate in trade unionism (e.g. Klandermans 1992; Hartley 1992). To illustrate, Hartley (1992) considers rational choice within the context of her general discussion of union joining. She argues that the theory is appealing in the sense that it is based on subjective perceptions, beliefs and values and therefore can help to explain variation in union joining where employees are in similar objective circumstances. However in her critique, Hartley overlooks gender differences in employment and occupational contexts and takes no account of the fact that women's 'choices' will undoubtedly be influenced by their roles in the domestic domain. These omissions point to a need for an approach, which examines the exercise of 'choice' within the context of wide-ranging structural constraints. Nevertheless, neo-classical explanations are attractive to some because there is no need to confront the gendered power relations within the union movement and there is an opportunity to 'read off' from women's lesser participation, their lesser interest or belief in trade unionism.

Thus, one of the main weaknesses of neo-classical approaches is that there is a failure to take account of the structural factors that shape individual choices and preferences in relation to employment and union membership/participation (Procter and Padfield 1999;

Healy 1999). For example, because women typically assume primary responsibility for domestic labour their expressed choices and preferences usually reflect the necessity to perform a 'juggling' act of paid employment and unpaid work in the home. This argument is further reinforced by the fact that single, childless women have very similar employment patterns to men. Similarly, most female trade union activists are 'atypical' (Cockburn 1995) - older women with no or adult children - suggesting that mothers of young children, who are 'time poor' have little excess time and energy to engage in union activism. Neo-classicists acknowledge gendered differences, but contend that they are the outcome of rational choice, rather than a function of the structural constraints faced by mothers (e.g. Hakim 1991). Overall then, rational choice theory has only limited value for a gendered analysis, although it does offer a theoretical opening for examining how and why women exercise choice.

To summarise, from a gender perspective the two dominant influences on industrial relations theory leave explanatory gaps and this necessitates utilisation of feminist theory.

Feminist theory

Feminist theory is a broad 'church' which has evolved and continues to evolve. The concept of patriarchy lies at the heart of classic approaches developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Theorising patriarchy was an important first step towards redressing the failure identified by feminists, of social theory, particularly class theory, to account adequately for women's subordination (Acker 1989). It was an attempt to theorise women's inequality as caused by male domination, oppression and exploitation of women. However, in the late 1970s feminist theorists began to construct a substantial critique of patriarchy, outlined below, (e.g. see the early papers in Hennessy and Ingraham's (1997) collection). As a consequence, as an explanatory theory patriarchy has over time fallen into disuse. Nevertheless, it is important to engage with the concept and the critique because it has shaped the contours of feminist thought.

Walby's work on patriarchy provides useful insight into the debates surrounding the development of the concept (1986; 1989; 1990). Walby's main contribution to theorising patriarchy was to attempt to rescue the concept from its critics (Acker 1989) by producing a model of patriarchy as consisting of six partially interconnecting structures: paid work,

housework, sexuality, culture, violence and the state (1990:16). Walby's model addresses two major early criticisms of patriarchy (Acker 1989). First it acknowledges that patriarchy pre-dates capitalism, therefore she does not suggest that as a social system it grew from or was created by the forces of capitalism. Second it recognises that under capitalism the form of patriarchy changed, thereby suggesting that patriarchy exists in no constant or fixed form and is therefore spatially and historically contingent (Walby 1986). Walby (1990) also identified a third social structure - racism - in order to counter black feminists' claims that the combined structures of capitalism and patriarchy were unable to deal with black women's experiences. For example, black feminists argue that it is important to recognise that as a retreat from a hostile employment situation, the home may not be the central site for black women's subordination, rather it could represent a site for resistance and solidarity against racism (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993).

Walby (1990:3-5) also usefully summarises the four different dominant ways of understanding patriarchy, which emerged in the 1970s: radical feminism, Marxist feminism, liberalism and dual systems theory. She explains how the different schools of thought frame the 'problem' differently. Within radical feminism, patriarchy exists as an independent social system. The central focus is on sexual practice, sexuality and male violence against women. Critics of this interpretation of patriarchy are concerned about a tendency towards essentialism and biological reductionism (Acker 1989). In contrast, Marxist feminism holds that patriarchy derives from capitalism, such that men's domination over women is a by-product of capital's domination over labour. Here, critics contend women's inequality cannot be reduced to capitalism (Acker 1989; Barrett and Phillips 1992). This interpretation also fails to highlight how working class men (trade unionists, for example) might benefit alongside capitalists from patriarchal social structures; further, it offers no explanation for gendered divisions within pre-capitalist societies. Meanwhile, liberalism does not depend upon overarching social structures to explain women's inequality. Instead, the focus is at the micro level, upon detailed instances of prejudice against women, together with the attitudes, which reproduce such prejudice. The perspective is criticised for its failure to deal with the embeddedness of women's inequality and the interconnectedness between its different forms: the sexual division of domestic and paid labour, for example (Walby 1990). Dual systems theory is a synthesis of Marxist and radical feminist theory, sometimes referred to as socialist-feminist theory (Calas and Smircich 1996): here both capitalism and patriarchy are important in the

structuring of gender relations. There is disagreement among dual systems theorists as to whether the two systems operate as one (capitalist patriarchy), or whether they are separate, although interconnected systems.

The concept of patriarchy undoubtedly enabled feminist theorising to advance by, for example, helping us to see and understand how men's concerns and interests have come to dominate and define public and political agendas (Cockburn 1991), those of trade unions included. It also exposed how patriarchal attitudes create stereotypes of women, which, amongst other things, deny their capacity to be leaders, whether in employment as managers (Kanter 1977) or in trade unions (Ledwith, Colgan et al. 1990). In short, the concept of patriarchy has helped provide the tools with which to challenge neo-classical and functionalist explanations for women's inequality and to fill the gap left by traditional class analysis. However, as feminist theory has evolved, so patriarchy has rightly been subjected to an extensive critique.

The critique of patriarchy is part of a wider one of universal theories and a shift towards postmodernist thought as the new orthodoxy in the social sciences (Flax 1992; Bradley 1999). (The influence of postmodernism on feminist theorising is discussed below.) What is the substance of the traditional feminist critique of patriarchy? One of the main criticisms, of particular relevance to the thesis, is that as a concept it merges explanation with description and collapses into a form of abstract structuralism, losing the tension between agency and structure necessary to understand complex social processes (Acker 1989; Pollert 1996; Gottfried 1998; Bradley 1999). As discussed in Chapter Four, feminist social scientists, influenced by the concept of patriarchy advocated the use of qualitative methodologies for researching women. Ironically, the emerging body of feminist research exploring women's lived experiences exposed the very limitations of patriarchy for understanding the complex and fluid nature of gender relations. Abstract structuralism did not help feminists to understand women's lives (Acker 1989; Bradley 1999; Gottfried 1998), because once gender relations are analysed in context of lived experience the 'static oppositions' of capital and patriarchy disappear (Pollert 1996:646). Thus, feminist researchers need an approach capable of exploring the complexity of gendered social processes and relations and their in-built linkages to other social dynamics (e.g. Acker 1989, Bradley 1999, Gottfried 1998). An approach which recognises that social

phenomena can be interpreted from a class or gender perspective, but that neither is complete without the other.

Not only is an abstract structural model unhelpful, but it is also questioned whether patriarchy is actually a social system which sits alongside capitalism. Pollert (1996) argues persuasively that patriarchy does not constitute a social system in the way that capitalism does, so the concept is analytically redundant. Whilst capitalism contains an internal dynamic which drives the system, and ensures its survival, patriarchy has no such internal dynamic. There is, she says, '*no necessary internal connection between men and women as gendered subjects which defines a self-perpetuating material dynamic or economic/social system*' (1996:643). Pollert goes on to illustrate her case in very simple terms: '*Capitalists could not become 'good capitalists' by ceasing to exploit wage labour; they would cease to be capitalists*' (1996:643, original emphasis). In contrast, men and women can and do alter their material and ideological relationships with one another and this is exposed when research takes place at the level of lived experience, as in the thesis.

The second main criticism of patriarchy, lodged mainly by black feminist theorists (hooks 1989; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993), is that as a single reified structure and a universal theory it is insufficient to explain differential experiences among diverse women. Patriarchy is unable to take on how multiple oppressions cross cut and interweave, so that, for example, a black woman's experiences are qualitatively different from a white woman's and cannot simply be analysed as 'double oppression', with a theory for gender oppression and a separate theory for race oppression. This strand of criticism is also relevant to the thesis because of its intention to explore multiple identities.

However, despite the various well-founded criticisms of patriarchy, it has proven a useful conceptual tool in order to underscore the specificity of women's employment and to make women visible within the analysis of the capitalist-labour relation and abandoning it altogether contains dangers (e.g. Acker 1989). A move to a (possibly more anodyne) 'gender analysis' may weaken the connections between political issues and theoretical analysis, which made the development of feminist thought possible in the first place. Pollert (1996), on the other hand, counters this argument by asserting that the continuance

of patriarchy to inform feminist analysis carries its own dangers, namely those of failing to engage with people and of losing sight of class. An attractive compromise struck by many academics (for example Bradley 1999; Cockburn 1991; Gottfried 1998; Pollert 1996; Walby 1997) is to continue to use the term adjectivally (i.e. patriarchal) to describe specific situations and circumstances, whilst keeping sight of class and race difference. Moreover, adjectival use of the concept does not elevate it to a social structure, but sees it more as a relation or dynamic.

The critique of patriarchy is now substantial and it is clear that it cannot provide a universal explanation for women's subordination. The debate surrounding the utility of the concept has reached a cul-de-sac, with most authors having abandoned it as a universal theory. Many feminists are now calling for theorising to move beyond the abstract concept of patriarchy to more concrete levels of analysis grounded in women's everyday lives (Gottfried 1998; Pollert 1996), whilst others have moved towards postmodernism (e.g. Barrett 1992). Even Walby, one of the most prolific theoretical writers on the subject largely abandons the term in her later work '*Gender Transformations*' (1997). Along with other authors, she continues sporadically to use the term adjectivally, rather than as a noun, (a practice discussed below) but does not enter into a detailed discussion of its continuing appropriateness/utility or otherwise. Instead, she uses the term 'gender regime' after making passing reference to the six patriarchal structures she outlined in her earlier work (1997:6). More usefully, Bradley (1996:7) on the other hand confronts the dilemma and states clearly that she prefers to employ the term 'dynamic' rather than 'structure' to convey the evolving nature of sets of relationships.

What does this departure from patriarchy mean for feminist theory? There are three main alternatives. One alternative approach advocated by some authors (e.g. Gottfried 1998; Pollert 1996) wishing to avoid the abstract structuralism of patriarchy and the relativist pitfalls of postmodernism (discussed below) is termed 'feminist materialist'. Here women and men as social actors are both visible; the processes of compliance, consent or resistance are all examined; consciousness, identity and subjectivity are all concerns as are material consequences and outcomes. Most importantly a feminist materialist approach does not 'blame' men for women's oppression in a universal and uniform way and an articulation between the three structures of patriarchy, capitalism and racism is recognised

(Ingraham 1997); i.e. structure is still significant. A second approach is to side step the rather sterile debate on patriarchy and adopt a more general feminist lens (e.g. hooks 1989; Walby 1997) through which to analyse patriarchal and gender relations at the level of lived experiences. This then has the potential to lead away from the notion that there are necessarily three structural pillars – patriarchy, capitalism and racism – which explain women’s inequality and emphasises instead sets of lived relationships (Bradley 1996). A third approach is postmodernist feminism chosen by some authors over the traditional feminist lenses outlined earlier because it addresses issues of women’s diversity, difference and subjectivity. It is the general feminist lens that is taken forward in the thesis, but some elements of feminist materialism and what is now characterised as postmodernist feminist thinking have also influenced the research design and analysis.

Because postmodernism² has become enormously influential in the social sciences generally and has had a huge impact on feminist theory, it is worthy of detailed attention. Although it has remained fairly marginal to industrial relations theory and research, postmodernism is recognised by some writers as potentially relevant and useful (e.g. Kelly 1998). A definition of postmodernist feminism is elusive; indeed whether or not feminism has a place within postmodernism is contested (Hearn and Parkin 1993). Given that postmodernist feminism is the strand of feminist theory that has turned away from patriarchy altogether, it might seem contradictory to claim to be influenced by it. So, what is postmodernist feminism and how can it inform feminist industrial relations research? Despite the departure from patriarchy, postmodernist *feminism* does engage with women’s oppression (Hearn and Parkin 1993:154-5). Its strength is that it does this within a paradigm which focuses attention on a multiplicity of oppressions (based on gender, sexuality, race, class, age, disability and so on), their complexity, inter-relationship and changing nature. Importantly, ‘femininities’ and ‘masculinities’ are not reduced to biological sex categories, but are de-essentialised (Stabile 1997). That is, the emphasis is

² In order not to engage in any depth with the extensive and labyrinthine postmodernist literature, a simplified definition of what constitutes postmodernism is employed. Hearn and Parkin suggest that postmodernism has four major characteristics: (i) the ‘increasing unpersuasiveness of meta-narratives’; (ii) the ‘rise of new informational technologies’; (iii) an awareness of new social problems associated with ‘societal rationalization’; and (iv) the emergence of new social movements (1993: 151-2). From this perspective, postmodernism is not represented as an epochal change (i.e. it is not simply that which comes after the modern, so much as a new epistemology reflecting developments in post-structuralist philosophy (Hassard 1993). Equally it is possible to argue that sociological postmodernist theorising actually offers very little that is new, since the feminist critique of universalism and abstract structuralism had been made before

on the social or 'discursive' processes, through which femininities and masculinities are produced, sustained and reproduced (e.g. Alvesson and Billing 1997).

The striking weaknesses of postmodernism are first that it denies the existence of a dominant set of social categories (class, gender and race, for example, as in the modernist project) (Bradley 1999; Walby 1992), which are regarded as overly simplistic by proponents (e.g. Hearn and Parkin 1993). In fact traditional (modernist) feminist thought has become more sensitive to diversity within these categories than postmodernists would exhort us to believe. In other words the concern to expose a diversity of subjective experiences among women was not invented by postmodernists. Second, there is a de-emphasis of economic relations (Walby 1992) and of the material experiences and consequences of oppression (Bradley 1999; Flax 1992; Hearn and Parkin 1993; Pollert 1996). Third, power is diffuse and detached from class (or gender) relations (Pollert, 1996) and is present in all social relationships; it is not derived from economic or sexual divisions (Pringle and Watson 1992).

Postmodernist feminism focuses on issues of sexuality, subjectivity and textuality (Barrett 1992): postmodernists believe that the world can be understood without the aid of a social structural model (Barrett 1992). Instead, postmodernist thinking emphasises the importance of language and discourse, not just in describing the world, but in constituting social reality (Pringle and Watson 1992). The essence of postmodernist social analysis is captured by Derrida's famous statement, '*Il n'y a pas d'hors texte*' (there is nothing outside the text) (in Barrett 1992:209). This does not literally mean that nothing exists, rather that 'things' have no significant meaning outside the systems of rules and conventions (discourse) by which they are constituted. Therefore, postmodernists seek to examine the minutiae of the various discourses that constitute the subject or object of analysis. The problem for feminists is that even if postmodernism can help us to *understand* the world, can it help us to *change* it, if we become convinced that there are no '*real*' social differences and divisions?

Barrett (1992:216) posits that postmodernists have exposed the flaws of Marxist and liberal thought, but she suggests that whether they can offer a more useful alternative is a 'much

postmodernist theorising took hold. Further, the issues raised by (ii) and (iii) above are traditional concerns

vexed question'. Critics of postmodernism would suggest not (e.g. Pollert 1996). Thompson (1993:202), for example, contends that postmodernism '*represents a retreat from engagement by sections of the intelligentsia*'. Thus, Thompson rightly charges postmodernism with elitism. The linguistically convoluted and impenetrable postmodernist literature has little application to a project for social change. This is the crux of the danger of postmodernism from a (traditional) feminist perspective: there is a voyeuristic interest in women's lived experiences. However, a commitment to challenging male domination in a political or practical sense, as in traditional feminist theories (e.g. hooks 1989), is absent. This is arguably because the tools of challenge are not available to postmodernists, who neglect the social context of power relations, the structures of inequality (Walby 1992) and thereby neglect the shared experiences of social groups that can constitute a potent force for social change (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996). Maynard (1994:19) goes so far as to state '*paradoxically, although everything is about the subject, no one in postmodern analyses actually appears to do anything. Subjectivities are seemingly overdetermined by the discourses in which they are constituted, and thus lacking in both intentionality and will*' (original emphasis). She goes on to argue that deconstructing social categories through language does not cause the significance of those categories in shaping personal and subjective experiences to disappear. This is a view reflected in the analysis presented in the thesis: in other words, there are 'real' differences 'out there' (Bradley 1999:21) for feminist researchers to explore, but women's 'realities' are multiple and heterogeneous.

Feminism meets industrial relations theory

The above discussion has outlined and discussed the main theoretical influences on the thesis. The thesis draws on the traditions of both industrial relations and feminist theories to underpin the analysis of women's perceptions and experiences of trade unions. The thesis takes forward the strengths and insights each approach offers, which are summarised as follows.

As discussed above class theory informs much industrial relations theorising and it is an essential, but limited tool when researching women, because of its inability to deal with the

of class theory. However, it is not the intention here to discuss the validity of the claim to newness.

specificity of women's employment patterns and experiences. Further, it is important for feminist research to avoid the pitfalls of earlier attempts to gender traditional class analysis, where the heterogeneity of women and their lived experiences (as in reserve army thesis and dual labour market theory) were underplayed and theorising consequently proved overly deterministic. However, the view taken here is that the capital-labour relation and class positioning remain essential to an understanding of women's employment and their relationship to trade unionism and it is held as important to recognise that gendered experiences inevitably contain class dimensions. This is clear from the empirical findings of the research.

Within industrial relations theory, neo-classical approaches have provided a useful focus on individual choices and preferences, although, as discussed, explanations in this vein are severely weakened by their failure to acknowledge the embeddedness of the social constraints influencing individual women (Sinclair 1991). However, informing analysis of the empirical findings is a belief that women are 'knowledgeable agents' (Giddens 1984) and generally act in ways, which to them appear rational according to the (albeit constrained) options open to them (Purcell 1979). Therefore, the thesis does examine rational choice and human capital issues as this proves a useful way of ensuring that women are constructed as active (albeit constrained) agents, which is central to the aims of this thesis.

To overcome the weaknesses of traditional class analysis and to rebut neo-classical claims that individuals exercise free choice, feminist theory has relied heavily on the concept of patriarchy. Without doubt patriarchal theory was an important development, but one which more recently has rightly been subjected to a substantial critique, largely because it presents an overly structural and deterministic account of women's oppression, allowing little room for more fluid gender relations. However, there is support among feminist authors for retaining the adjectival form of 'patriarchal' (e.g. Bradley 1999; Gottfried 1998) to underscore '*the concrete ways in which male power legitimises authority in capitalist organisations*' (Gottfried 1998:465). Pollert (1996) meanwhile prefers more concrete descriptive terms, such as male-dominated. Pollert's preference for greater precision is justified to the extent that it is important not to overuse 'patriarchal' because it can take on a slogan-like quality, which does little to advance serious feminist scholarship. On the other hand more concrete terms are not always applicable to the specific contexts

and situations and broader terms, such as 'gendered', if overused sometimes have a somewhat anodyne or benign flavour, which does not quite capture the force or causal nature of patriarchal relations. There is therefore a midway, which is adopted in the thesis, between abandoning the use of 'patriarchal' altogether and describing all social structures and relations with which women are involved as patriarchal. Pollert talks about the 'poverty of patriarchy', but equally it is possible to argue that without the concept, feminism as a political project would be impoverished. Feminist sociological analysis is after all about more than documenting and explaining women's experiences. It is also a 'live' political project concerned with making women visible as a sex category and advancing their interests as an oppressed social group; as such it requires a feminist lexicon of which patriarchy is part. The thesis takes forward this theoretical orientation to the concept of patriarchy.

The most recent turn in feminist theorising has been postmodernist feminism. It is in its concern with social change, as in this thesis, that traditional feminist analysis differs from post-modern approaches (Flax 1992; Pollert 1996). That said, postmodernist and feminist theorising share many affinities; both reject the Enlightenment concept of a unitary self and question the concepts of neutrality and objectivity (Flax 1992). Further, although postmodernist feminism offers a way to side step the problem of patriarchy, the researcher can go forever round in circles exploring the ways multiple identities manifest and are created and recreated without ever touching base with 'reality' or with material consequences. Postmodernists are not concerned with actually advancing gender equality and have little to say about the kinds of transformations that would need to occur to achieve women's equality (Flax 1992). Therefore the approach does not sit particularly well within the empirical and policy oriented traditions of industrial relations research or within the feminist industrial relations literature to which this thesis contributes.

Nevertheless, the thesis takes forward the concept of multiple identities, but the belief that while identities are not entirely fixed, neither are they entirely fluid (Bradley 1996).

Further, there are material consequences arising from one's identities.

Informing the thesis is the belief that it is possible to attempt to integrate the strengths of modernist analyses with the insights of postmodernism (Bradley 1999:3). More precisely, it is possible to recognise the importance of discourse in shaping experiences or 'reality',

at the same time as holding on to a belief that concrete social and material realities must be at the centre of the analysis.

Conclusions and implications for the research

To conclude the delineation of the broad theoretical canvas it is worth returning to Giddens (1984), cited in the introduction. This research focuses on what Giddens (1984) calls 'the duality of structure': that is to say, this is a study of both structural constraints and actions and behaviours of individuals. The aim is to shed light on how women's inequality is perpetuated or broken down within the research context by women's agency. This chapter has discussed the theoretical tools, or in Giddens' language the 'sensitising devices', considered most appropriate to this aim within this particular research. Broadly the study can be characterised as feminist industrial relations research, a paradigm which has influenced both the design and analysis. The above discussion has shown that it is possible to be theoretically eclectic, yet congruent. The industrial relations and feminist theories discussed share orientations at the same time as having different emphases: taken together they provide a more complete theoretical framework for exploring women in trade unions than any singly could do.

The next chapter outlines the empirical context of the research and discusses concepts and theories applicable to the micro level of analysis.

Chapter Two

The Empirical and Theoretical Contexts of Women and Trade Unions

Introduction

Chapter One discussed the ‘sensitising devices’ that underpin the research, situating the study conceptually within a feminist industrial relations paradigm. Following from this, this chapter turns to the micro level of analysis and discusses the contemporary empirical and the theoretical contexts for exploring women’s participation in trade unions. The discussion is organised into three main themes: the context of women’s employment; women and trade unions: the empirical context; women and trade unions: the theoretical context; with the primary focus on the latter two themes, which are central to the research. The conclusions outline the implications of these three themes for the research.

The context of women’s employment

The thesis has the objective of seeking to understand how women’s trade union participation is socially constructed. One of the underlying premises of feminist approaches to analysing women’s participation is that the context of women’s employment is central to our understanding for a number of interconnected reasons. First, the structure of women’s employment and their experiences of employment shape women’s representation/bargaining concerns and needs. Second, the traditional view of women held by trade unions and reflected in the industrial relations literature (e.g. Kelly 1998:116) is that as a group they are difficult to organise, so it is necessary to give some consideration as to how this perception has arisen. Third, women’s employment patterns are closely bound up with their roles in the family and household, which in turn influence women’s participation in unions.

As noted in Chapter One, there are three main empirical features of women’s employment: (i) women’s lesser participation; (ii) the gender pay gap; (iii) gender segregation (Walby 1997). These three features are remarkably persistent over time and space and resistant to

policy interventions (such as the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts). That said, the picture of women's employment over the last three decades or so has been one of continuity coupled with change. These empirical observations provide a starting-point for feminist research to think about women's relationship to trade unionism.

Women's lesser participation

There are two ways of measuring gendered differentials in employment participation. One is to do a simple 'headcount' of the number of women and men employed or actively seeking work. By taking this measure there was an exponential increase in women's employment, especially married women and mothers, in the second half of the last century (Walby 1997). Although women have lower employment participation rates than men (74 per cent and 84 per cent respectively, (Purcell 2000), it is now the norm for women to be in paid employment within the formal economy. In Britain, the traditional family composition of full-time male breadwinner and full-time 'housewife' is now the exception (Wilson 1994). As a caveat, there are class and ethnicity dimensions to this picture. The higher the socio-economic group of the woman, the more likely she is to be in paid, especially full-time, employment; this is particularly true for married women and mothers as stated above. There are also significant ethnic variations in participation rates, for example, the employment rate for Bangladeshi women is just 21 per cent (Dale et al. 2002).

However, a simple 'headcount' approach conceals the extent of women's part-time work (Hakim 1993), which accounts for the bulk of the increase in women's employment. If the measure of work hours is used, men still dominate the labour market, accounting for two-thirds of all work hours (Hakim 1993). Although this approach underscores the importance of part-time work for British women, Hakim's 'reading' of the structure of the contemporary labour market is perverse. It fails to fully acknowledge the fact that women's increased numerical presence has fundamentally altered the structure of UK employment with important ramifications for industrial relations actors. One of the consequences for trade unions, for example, is that women have become more important as a source of members, discussed below (section headed *Female Membership*).

Gender segregation

Gender segregation is deeply embedded, signifying (Watts and Rich 1993; Purcell 2000) and producing gender inequality, such as the pay gap discussed in the next section. The Equal Opportunities Commission's analysis of nineteen selected occupations reveals that the two sexes are more or less evenly represented in only two occupational categories - 'chefs and cooks' and 'secondary teachers'. The remaining seventeen occupations are either at least three-quarters female or male dominated (EOC 1999). Thus most people work in jobs which are done mainly or entirely by their own sex.

Gender segregation works across both horizontal and vertical dimensions (Hakim 1979). Broadly speaking, women's jobs involve caring, nurturing, and service activities, while men monopolise management, technical and manual jobs (Fagan and Burchell 2002). Vertical segregation has received the most policy attention, it being regarded as the key issue from a policy perspective (Hakim 1992). In popular discourse this is represented as the problem of the 'glass ceiling', which is frequently cited as the most important explanation of the gender pay gap (e.g. Hakim 1992:132). However, this claim is spurious since the concept of the 'glass ceiling' merely describes what is, rather than explains why women experience difficulties in accessing more highly paid jobs. Also, women's average weekly and hourly earnings are lower than are men's in both manual, non-manual and part-time work (Bradley 1999), indicating that lower pay for women is embedded.

Whether it is as a result of policy interventions or structural or cultural changes or a combination vertical segregation has declined. Several authors cite the decline in men's monopoly on higher level jobs (for example Walby 1997; Watts and Rich 1993) as evidence of the dynamic and fluid nature of labour market structures. The presence of growing employment opportunities (as in professional and managerial work) appears to encourage the integration of the sexes (Watts and Rich 1993), but the latter is also a result of women's increased educational attainment. This change underscores the increasing polarisation of women's employment, between those who are highly educated and those without qualifications, but also between those partnered by men higher and lower in the occupational hierarchy (Procter and Padfield 1999). Significantly, highly educated women are further divided from women without qualifications by their pattern of employment

following childbirth, in that the higher the woman's level of education and the higher her occupational level, the more likely she is to be in paid (full-time) employment.

Part-time work is a highly segregated form of employment as an overwhelmingly female phenomenon (EOC 1999; Blackwell 2001). Women's strong propensity to work part-time has a number of consequences, which produce far-reaching gender inequalities. The gender pay gap is particularly wide when part-time women are compared with full-time men and only a third of part-time women are members of pension schemes, compared with two-thirds of full-time women and three-quarters of full-time men (EOC 1999). Part-time women also earn significantly less than do full-time women. Wages for part-time work are kept low by supply and demand dynamics. It is unusual for a part-time worker to be the main or sole earner of the family with the vast majority of part-timers comprising women with caring (usually childcare) responsibilities (Blackwell 2001), who trade flexibility for low pay. This means that most part-time workers can afford to accept less than a 'living wage' (Dale 1987), since their priority is to fit work around the family. At the same time, knowledge of this situation enables employers to offer low wage rates and indeed for this reason part-time women workers are an attractive source of flexible cheap labour for many organisations (Purcell 2000). Furthermore, part-time working impacts negatively upon women's ability to reach higher levels of occupational and organisational hierarchies (because part-time work is not usually integrated into career structures (Watts and Rich 1993) and is associated with 'downward occupational mobility', following childbirth and maternity leave (Brannen and Moss 1991). Although overall British women have a strong propensity to work part-time, this conceals an important race dimension that black women are more likely to work full-time (Holdsworth and Dale 1997; Walby 1997).

Bradley (1999:62) identifies seven factors, which have contributed to the prevailing pattern of gender segregation: (i) employers' desire for cheap labour encouraging them to construct certain jobs for women; (ii) men's active desire to retain the best jobs for themselves; (iii) efforts by male-dominated trade unions to exclude women from the best jobs and to maintain women's lower pay; (iv) the sex-typing of jobs predicated on assumptions about masculinity and femininity; (v) the prevalence of gendered workplace cultures, creating 'glass walls'; (vi) workers' preferences for same-sex work groups; (vii) women's domestic responsibilities restricting women's work choices. These factors

suggest that gendered labour market patterns and outcomes are a function of both structural constraints and of choices and preferences on the part of industrial relations actors and individual women and men.

The gender pay gap

The gender pay gap currently stands at around twenty per cent (EOC 2002). Much of it can be accounted for by gender segregation and the fact that male dominated occupations and sectors are generally more highly paid and of higher status than female dominated (Millward and Woodland 1995; Fagan and Burchell 2002). The reasons for this are complex and multi-faceted: the gendered social construction of skill and the trade union movement's historical apathy towards campaigning and bargaining for equal pay for women have enabled employers to utilise women as a source of cheap labour. That said, the pay gap is less pronounced in unionised employment (Metcalf 2000). Overall though, even where women and men are found in comparable jobs, with similar qualifications and experience there is still a wage difference that remains unaccounted for (Fagan and Burchell 2002). This underscores that rational explanations (e.g. women's lesser human capital or family orientations (see Hakim 1992; 1993) can only ever be partial.

A gender relations perspective on women's employment

Empirical observations centred on economic indicators such as those discussed above can only ever present a partial account of gendered employment conditions and experiences. To complement the structural economic picture, a 'gender relations' perspective argues that some gender differences in working conditions are to do with the broader pattern of gender relations and gender inequality in society that transcend the objective and material features of women's employment (Fagan and Burchell 2002) discussed above. First, the gendered division of domestic labour contributes to the gendered structure of the labour market, constraining as it does women's employment choices and opportunities. Second, gender relations in wider society mean that women are exposed to greater risk of sexual harassment, violence and sex discrimination in the workplace. This perspective suggests that irrespective of their structural position, women's experiences of employment remain markedly and qualitatively different from men's, although not homogeneous. To unpack

these lived experiences qualitative methodologies are necessary to complement the knowledge gleaned from macro data.

On the first point, recent evidence (e.g. Fagan and Burchell 2002) shows that women continue to take the main responsibility for running the home and caring for the family, whether they work full or part-time and whether or not they have children. That said the gender difference is particularly pronounced when couples have children (Windebank 2001). Thus, although women's increased labour market participation has undoubtedly altered gender relations within the home, there is little evidence of an end to women's double burden of paid work combined with main responsibility for unpaid domestic labour, especially childcare. Where the gender division of domestic work has been renegotiated this tends to be in higher socio-economic groups (Crompton and Harris 1998), which in part explains their propensity to work full-time noted above. One consequence of the 'double burden' is that women are 'time poor' and need to balance paid work and home/family life. One 'choice', arguably rational (Scheibl 1996), many women make is to work part-time during the early child-rearing years. This seemingly infinite supply of part-time female labour (mothers of young children) enables employers to construct certain jobs as part-time, which in itself then reduces the opportunity for women to work full-time later in or throughout the life course. Younger women, however, are beginning to show a determination to combine career and family (Bradley 1997; Walby 1997), which may give rise to larger numbers of women opting for full-time work in the future, assuming of course that full-time employment is available to them. However, if as suggested, employers construct work as part-time specifically for women (Crompton and Sanderson 1990), they may find full-time employment opportunities in traditionally female areas severely restricted or meet male resistance as they compete for traditionally male jobs.

There is now plenty of evidence supporting the second point that there are gendered variations in the way that employment and organisations are experienced. For example, Cockburn's (1991) and Collinson et al's (1990) case studies show how certain types of jobs (e.g. trade union officer, insurance salesperson) are permeated with gendered symbolism and meaning. One consequence is that individual women who transcend traditional occupational boundaries either horizontally or vertically often find themselves in a precarious and isolated position, and are vulnerable to sexual harassment (Cockburn 1991; Collinson and Collinson 1992, 1997) and negative sex stereotyping (Collinson et al.

1990). Bradley's (1999) and Cockburn's (1991) work also reveals how women believe their employers, and specifically male managers, perceive them as uncommitted workers, as prioritising family over career, as being unsuitable for promotion, etc. The consequences are that many women believe they are denied the same rewards and opportunities from employment as male colleagues. In this way a symbolic gender order shapes if not determines women's lived experiences of employment.

Women and trade unions: the empirical context

This section delineates the empirical backcloth against which the qualitative research the thesis presents needs to be considered.

The broad trade union context

British trade union density has fallen massively from its peak of 55 per cent in 1979 to around 29 per cent today (Brook 2002), resulting in a steep decline in collective bargaining coverage and reduced union power and influence over government and employers. This has occurred against a turbulent context of industrial restructuring, political hostility from the Conservative government of 1979-1997 and the introduction of a host of legislative interventions restricting and constraining trade union activities. Membership decline has now more or less stabilised and (at best) lukewarm relationships exist between the union movement and the Labour government of present, together with more enabling legislation in the form of a recognition procedure under the Employment Relations Act (1999) and 'labour friendly' European social policy. The prospects for and processes involved in union renewal have been extensively debated in the literature (Bassett and Cave 1993; Fosh 1993; Farnham and Giles 1995; Kelly and Waddington 1995; Waddington and Kerr 2002; Heery et al 2003). Here, the interest is in the policy responses that this debate has triggered.

The long period of decline and the more recent period of relative stability of a shrunken movement have prompted fundamental reassessment of the traditional *modus operandi* of the trade unions, which had centred on representing the interests of male workers in the manufacturing industry. Of particular note, the unions have increased the level and scope of their organising efforts, seeking to reach previously unorganised workers and groups of

workers with historically and/or currently lower rates of unionisation. (For example, see Heery and Abbott's (2000) discussion of unions and the 'insecure workforce' and Waddington and Kerr's (2002) discussion of unionisation among young workers). Indeed, in the face of social and economic changes, rather than as a result of strategic reorientation, it is evident that the characteristics of the 'typical' or 'paradigmatic' (Howell 1996) trade unionist have changed over time. Little over a decade ago, the 'typical' trade unionist was a male, full-time, manual worker in the private production sector. Today, the 'typical' trade unionist is almost as likely to be female as male, more likely to be non-manual than manual, more likely to work in services than production and in the public sector, but the one constant, more likely to work full-time (Sneade 2001).

As the traditional, male membership base has declined, so the male dominated unions have become less important within the movement and the TUC specifically (Colling and Dickens 2001). In contrast, membership in female dominated public sector unions (e.g. NUT, UNISON) has remained relatively stable and therefore some unions have risen in importance within the movement and the TUC. These changes have prompted 'top-down' initiatives to recruit under-represented groups and 'bottom-up' pressure to democratise and to become more inclusive of diverse constituencies, especially women. There is now widespread recognition that renewal and regeneration, involves recruiting and retaining more members and also revitalising policies and agendas to represent membership diversity, where women are especially important simply on account of their numbers.

This constitutes an important strategic reversal since unions have long been criticised for failing to prioritise women workers' concerns and needs and for being wedded to a unitary, white-male biased conception of members' interests (Ellis 1988; Cockburn 1991; Rees 1992; Dickens 1997). It is now indisputable that trade unions need women if they are to secure a future for themselves in a restructured economy and therefore addressing women's needs and concerns is no longer a policy choice, but a necessity. The above discussion of the context of women's employment has shown that women's patterns and experiences of employment are different from men's: in particular the strong tendency to work part-time and to be located in different occupations and industries poses recruitment, organising and operational challenges to unions. To recruit, represent and bargain for women, it is necessary to enter previously neglected territories and debates.

Female membership

Rates of union membership are historically markedly gendered, but less so now than formerly. A slightly higher proportion of men (29.9 per cent) than of women (28.9 per cent) are trade union members, but the gender membership gap has narrowed enormously from twenty-five percentage points in 1979 to just one per cent in 2001 (Sneade 2001). Looked at another way women comprised 41 per cent of total TUC membership in 2001 compared with 29 per cent in 1979. Women are dispersed across the unions and of the largest ten TUC unions, two are female dominated (UNISON and NUT), and in a further two (USDAW and NASUWT) women are a narrow majority of members.

Overall union density among women and men and the gender composition of membership is heading towards a gendered convergence. This is because the rate of decline since 1979 has been much slower and less marked in female dominated areas of employment than in male dominated and while men's membership is still declining, women's is rising very slightly. Examining union density by a range of intersecting individual characteristics, women with higher level qualifications are the most likely to be union members, part-time workers are among those least likely to be members, and black women are more likely than black men to be members (Sneade 2001). This indicates that gender alone does not determine propensity to unionise; the structure of employment, class position, age and ethnicity are also salient factors.

However, the relative importance of gender (and other demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity) compared with occupational and other structural characteristics, is contested. For example, feminist critics argue that groups of workers (such as women and part-time workers) with historically lower rates of unionisation are not intrinsically difficult to organise (e.g. Boston, 1987; Cockburn 1991; Cunnison and Stageman 1995), as is sometimes suggested (e.g. Kelly 1998). Rather union efforts to recruit these groups have not historically been concerted enough, because they have until recently *actively chosen* to focus on male-dominated occupations and industries (see Chapter Three).

Another interconnected strand of the critique draws on evidence of workers' perceptions and experiences of trade unions and argues that there are gendered variations. For example, Sinclair's (1995) study of the influence of sex on rates of unionisation, finds that

the male-female membership differential is partly attributable to women's lower favourability to trade unions and their dissatisfaction with their experiences of unions, especially unions' approaches to part-time workers. Similarly Walters' (2002) research finds that female part-timers felt the union was less effective and they were less likely to have been asked to join. This is worrying because the evidence (discussed in Chapter Three) shows that unions failed in the past to address the issues of most pressing concern for women, (Boston 1987), but contemporary studies continue to suggest similar neglect, indicating that the lessons of history might not have been learnt. The corollary is that it could be argued that the unions' current interest in recruiting women is at least in part instrumental, although the different internal environment (i.e. the presence of a critical mass of more radical feminist women) renders the contemporary context quite different from earlier periods.

Women's participation and activism

Before examining levels and forms of women's participation it is necessary briefly to outline the terminology surrounding participation and activism, because it lacks clarity, and there is therefore a need to define what is being considered. Fosh (1993:578) makes a distinction between 'formal' (e.g. attending meetings, voting in elections) and 'informal' (e.g. reading the union journal, interacting with the shop steward) participation.

Conceptually, this is a useful way of exploring women's participation because it is multi-faceted. It allows for a variety of different contributions to union life and is likely to show that there is more participation than is commonly thought, especially among women who are less likely to attend meetings and take on the steward role, as we see below.

Importantly, it allows for a distinction between people who do not attend union meetings because of lack of interest and those who take an active interest in the union, but have other reasons for not attending, time constraints perhaps. From a policy perspective this could prompt new ideas for how to increase women's participation, particularly in more formal ways. The drawback of Fosh's dualistic definition of participation is that it is not clear where the steward/representative, committee member roles fit in. Implicit is a further distinction between members who participate and activists.

This understanding is reflected in Terry's (1995:203) description of UK unions as resourced by 'unpaid volunteer activists, sometimes referred to as shop stewards', and

typifies the traditional understanding in the trade union movement of activism as synonymous with office holding. The problem with this approach is that women become less visible and numerous, as activism becomes elite and role-based, which denies the participation of many (women) members.

Klandermans (1992) also stresses the multi-dimensional nature of activism, but distinguishes between those who are active, but do not hold office from those who do hold positions. Therefore for Klandermans activism and participation appear to be synonymous, but more importantly activism is a continuum, rather than a static state of being. Examples of activism among non-office holders include disseminating information, recruiting new members, attending meetings, voting in elections and reading union newsletters. The problem with this approach is that more or less every type of union activity becomes activism from the fairly passive kind (e.g. reading union newsletters) to the highly active office-holding, which is conceptually muddy as well as unhelpful from a policy perspective.

To build on the strengths, but minimise the weaknesses, of the above approaches it is proposed to employ the informal/formal distinction, but to include office holding/committee participation as a type of formal participation, (rather than as a separate category of activism). In this way the categories of informal and formal are themselves multi-faceted. This is discussed later in the thesis with reference to the empirical data (see Chapter Six and Eight).

Whilst little is known empirically about levels of informal participation, levels of formal union participation among all members are notoriously low (Fosh 1993; Sinclair 1996), but lower still among women. Overall attendance at meetings is estimated as low as ten per cent (Rees 1992) and union elections are often uncontested (e.g. Fosh 1993), suggesting low levels of voting. In Sinclair's (1996) study, approximately 21 per cent of male workers attended union meetings regularly, whilst 13 per cent of female members did so. After controlling for the predominance of women in part-time employment, Sinclair found the significance of sex to be greatly reduced, but nevertheless important. This insight is useful to a degree because it shows that *if* women were employed in the same objective circumstances as men, they would still participate to a lesser extent, so we need to think about why this is. However, as discussed above, the structure of employment *is* gendered,

which means that we need ways of exploring women's participation that allow for the interconnection between sex categories and existing gender structures. Approaches to understanding willingness to participate are discussed below.

When it comes to participation in decision-making structures the overall picture is one of women's under-representation, although over the last fifteen years or so progress has been made (Healy and Kirton 2000) especially on national executive committees, pointing to a degree of redistribution of gendered power in the unions. Of the ten largest TUC-affiliated unions¹, five have now achieved women's proportionality on the executive committee and TUC delegation (Labour Research 2002). However, among the much larger ranks of paid officials and workplace union representatives (i.e. those who carry out the everyday work of the unions), women remain considerably under-represented. For example, none of the largest ten has achieved proportionality among paid regional officers, (Labour Research 2002); two-thirds of union representatives are men, (Cully et al. 1999). Research suggests that the growth in the number of paid officials in some unions should speed up a process of gendered transformation (Kirton and Healy 1999), while mergers and staff contractions tend to reduce the numbers of women and put back the project of transformation. Armed with a more radical feminism than their less numerous female predecessors, the present generation of paid women officials are pressing for the types of changes necessary to promote women's participation (Heery and Kelly 1990; Kirton and Healy 1999).

Women and trade unions: the theoretical context

The empirical chapters of the thesis explore women's perceptions and experiences of union participation; it is important therefore to consider the concepts and theories which can help to illuminate the findings within the broad feminist industrial relations paradigm outlined in Chapter One. These are discussed below.

Explaining willingness to participate

If the empirical evidence shows women's under-participation, how can this be accounted for? Is it simply the case that all those willing to participate do actually participate, or do

¹ These are UNISON, Amicus (AEEU), Amicus (MSF), TGWU, GMB, USDAW, CWU, PCS, NUT, GPMU, NASUWT.

some members never translate willingness into action, and if not, why not? To explain gendered patterns of participation the feminist sociological literature emphasises barriers and constraints, particularly the gendered division of domestic work, the organisation of women's work, the organisation of trade union work and the masculine construction of trade union practices and agendas (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 1996). This approach counters the old patriarchal arguments that women are inherently more passive (see Purcell 1979) or uninterested because of their lack of attachment to paid work (Cunnison and Stageman 1995). Meanwhile, the social psychological literature draws on rational choice theories and on theories of group identification (Klandermans 1992; Kelly and Breinlinger 1996; Kelly 1998). Both approaches are potentially illuminating, because in their different ways they separate *willingness* to participate from *actual* participation and allow for an investigation of the psychological and contextual factors, which might prevent the translation from one to the other.

The gendered division of domestic work

It is now generally recognised that women's union participation is constrained by traditional gender roles in the home (Colgan and Ledwith 1996). Research has found women who lead traditional lives are less likely to participate (especially to become representatives), in contrast to men in the same objective circumstances (Walton 1991; Lawrence 1994). This is mirrored in Kirton and Healy (1999) where most senior union women were 'atypical', meaning older, childfree and often partner free. These women are more able to give the necessary time, effort and commitment to trade union participation, while women with dependent children and partners are more likely to be 'time poor'. Of course, we have to allow for a life cycle effect whereby women might lead a traditional life for a period and a less traditional one later in the life course. This is a point, which emerges from Cunnison's (1987) analysis of women's union participation over the life cycle. She suggests that women's working lives typically conform to a pattern of three fairly distinct phases and that it is during the third phase, when children are older, and women are possibly divorced that they are most likely to become union activists. On the other hand, women leading traditional lives are more likely to become active if they have supportive partners, especially during the child-rearing phase (Lawrence 1994; Ledwith et al. 1990). This indicates that some re-negotiation of the division of household labour is

necessary and possible for some women. The relative importance of gender relations in the home is likely to vary over time and space; that is to be context specific. Research needs to be sensitive to contextual variation. For example, the three phase argument is less applicable to professional women who have a greater tendency to retain work continuity over the life course, and who constitute a large proportion of female representatives (Cully et al. 1999). In contrast, for women who 'choose' to work part-time to balance work and family life when children are young, it would seem counterintuitive to take on a 'third job' (i.e. become a union representative).

As discussed above, the gendered division of domestic work is temporally and spatially persistent and women's increased employment participation has not significantly altered this pattern; indicating that there has been no revolutionary transformation of gender relations in the home. Trade union policy interventions, such as provision of childcare or help with childcare costs, are designed to help women manage their different roles in order to overcome this significant barrier to participation, while accepting its existence. In this sense 'family friendly' measures constitute a short equality agenda (McBride 2001). There is some evidence, though, that once women become politicised through union participation, they are less likely to comply with traditional gendered domestic arrangements (e.g. Cockburn 1994; Jones 2002).

The organisation of women's work

Focusing solely on women's family/household roles leaves a gap: even when enabling policy prescriptions are implemented (e.g. meetings in places and at times to suit women, childcare provision, etc), women's increased participation does not necessarily follow. This has puzzled many male trade unionists and can easily lead back to blaming women's apathy, or to rational choice explanations, i.e. women choose not to get involved, so the main barriers to women's participation lie beyond the control of the union.

Another, but not opposing, feminist perspective highlights the organisation of women's paid work as a barrier to participation. Research has established an association between the lower level and type of work that women generally do and lesser participation in unions. There are two main arguments. First, that women's paid work is less likely to develop skills necessary for trade union participation, confidence, public-speaking, participating in

meetings, etc (e.g. Cockburn 1991; Lawrence 1994). Consequently when women become active, they often talk of feeling 'out of their depth' (Kirton 1999) and at a disadvantage compared to men. Second that the organisation of women's work provides fewer opportunities for the construction of a collective identity because it is often socially isolated and closely supervised. Part-time work in particular provides less opportunity to participate, because union meetings are more likely to be arranged to suit a full-time norm and part-time workers are less likely to receive paid time off for trade union duties (Munro 1999:199).

Thus, men dominate in local union hierarchies precisely because they dominate the hierarchy of labour (Munro 1999: 25); in other words the gender segregated and unequal nature of the labour market produces a form of trade union organisation which excludes or marginalises women and their gender specific interests.

The organisation of trade union work

Provision of childcare, whilst important, is then very limited with regard to its ability to enable increased women's participation. Recognition of this has led to a greater policy and theoretical concern with longer equality agendas (Cockburn 1989) and what happens to women once they do participate, for example how the masculine culture and *modus operandi* act as constraint (e.g. Kirton 1999; Healy and Kirton 2000; McBride 2001) and how women seek to cope with or act to challenge this situation.

Some practical aspects of the organisation of trade union activity reflect historical male domination, (discussed further in Chapter Three), including for example, the timing and location of meetings, which are organised to suit male employment patterns, rather than the female pattern of juggling work and family (e.g. Rees 1992). Most unions claim to have reviewed meeting arrangements (see for example the SERTUC survey (2000) to make them more 'woman-friendly', but the extent to which such a policy commitment is reflected in the practice of local branches is highly questionable. Women still appear to complain that meeting times and venues are not convenient (e.g. Bradley et al. Forthcoming; Munro 1999). Thus, the decentralised structure of trade union organisation means that national policy is not universally translated into local practice. This

underscores the importance of contextual qualitative research, which can unpack how individually and collectively trade unionists go about running local branches.

Another aspect of the organisation of trade union work reflecting men's relative 'time wealth' is the extraordinary level of commitment required for both paid and 'lay' roles, which is addressed by a number of authors (Watson 1988; Cockburn 1991; Colgan and Ledwith 1996; Kirton and Healy 1999; Franzway 2000). Franzway (2000:259) draws on the concept of the 'greedy institution' to underscore that union activism demands not only a considerable time commitment, but also a commitment to particular sets of values, which demand 'libidinal' energy. Since the family is another greedy institution, and by definition it is only possible to serve one greedy institution at a time, women especially face conflicting demands. Similarly, Watson's (1988) study of trade union officers exposes the 'long hours culture' of paid trade union work and unsurprisingly the vast majority of her interviewees were men. One of the gendered consequences of the long hours culture is, of course, women's relative absence from the ranks of paid officials (as shown above).

Trade union leadership styles

Since women, as shown above, are severely under-represented among all levels of trade union leaders, it is important to consider the role of leadership style in promoting participation. Branch officers are key to determining access to the structures of participation and the content of the bargaining agenda: to many members the workplace representative is the 'personification of the union' (Nicholson, Ursell et al. 1981:116). Participatory, or transformational, leadership styles are thought to promote participation, whilst transactional leadership styles retain a distance between leaders and led (Dorgan and Grieco 1993; Sudano 1998; Metochi 2002).

Union leaders who adopt the more participatory approach of the transformational style by being available for members to raise issues of concern, informing members of union affairs and consulting members, encourage members to see the union as their organisation. This perception then induces feelings of loyalty towards the union, which motivates members to become involved (Metochi 2002; Nicholson et al. 1981).

The weakness of this theory is that studies such as Nicholson et al's do not gender the discussion of leadership styles, when there are clear gendered implications. For example, since there is a lack of female role models in leadership positions, even women who have a willingness to participate might be deterred unless the male hierarchy adopts a 'transformational' style (Kelly 1998). This points to the desirability of avoiding exploring each variable (e.g. orientation, leadership style, opportunity structures, etc) separately. In contrast union leaders who adopt a more 'transactional' style (Kelly 1998) risk deliberately or unintentionally reproducing women's marginalisation within the structures of participation (Sudano 1997; Dorgan and Grieco 1993).

A further point to take into account is that whilst there can be no doubt that local leaders have the power either to encourage or discourage membership participation, it should not be assumed that leaders' practices reflect an either/or style. Local leaders might encourage, for example, white men's participation, but not women's or black members. Firstly, this might be because men in power want to hold onto power for its own sake as well as for the advantages it can confer, for example access to an interesting lifestyle, close relations with management, etc (e.g. Cockburn 1994). Even in the present less union-friendly context, individuals can still gain these advantages from participation in some contexts, as the data from the study will show. Secondly, as Cockburn (*ibid*) suggests, men might rightly fear that once in office women would use power differently. Women might want to encourage more female participation, (e.g. Cunnison and Stageman 1995; Kirton and Healy 1999) or to achieve different aims; to align the union agenda more with women's specific concerns, for example (Heery and Kelly 1988; Healy and Kirton 2000). On the second point, some authors argue that women conceptualise power differently, for example by seeing power as 'capacity' rather than 'domination' (Cockburn, 1994) and by wanting to use power to involve and empower others (Dorgan and Grieco 1993; Sudano 1997). This does not have to rest on essentialised notions of womanhood and femininity, but can be seen as a function of women's collective experiences of subordination and struggle for equality and a desire to utilise modes of behaviour that explicitly aim to overcome inequality. Significantly for the thesis, this discussion underscores power as a gendered resource (e.g. Bradley 1999; Healy and Kirton 2000).

The discussion of leadership styles is important in seeking to contribute to explanations of lower levels of female participation. Watson's (1988) study highlights the importance of

‘significant others’ in the union context; that is union officers who encourage and sponsor individual members to get involved and act as a trigger which stimulates actual participation. Kirton and Healy (1999) demonstrate the importance for women’s participation of gendered ‘significant others’ in the context of generally low levels of female involvement, confirming the findings of previous studies that women are more likely to ‘bring on’ other women (e.g. Heery and Kelly 1988; Ledwith et al. 1990).

The trade union agenda

The trade unions have been subjected to extensive feminist criticism for failing to bargain and campaign vigorously enough on ‘women’s issues’ (e.g. Cockburn 1991; 1995; Cunnison and Stageman 1995). That said, the notion of a unitary set of ‘women’s issues’ has been rightly called into question (Colgan and Ledwith 2000; McBride 2001). However, it is possible to acknowledge women’s diversity, while arguing that there are sufficient common experiences among women to make it possible to identify a range of work interests specific to women (Munro 2001:468). Empirically, various studies have found that whilst women share many bargaining concerns with men, they prioritise issues differently (Kerr 1992; Lawrence 1994; Waddington and Kerr 2002). Also, women workers, because they are women, or because of the ascription of gender roles, or because of the gender structure of employment, stand to benefit disproportionately from bargaining on certain specific issues such as equal pay, maternity leave and pay, childcare arrangements, sexual harassment, measures to reduce gendered barriers to career progression, part-time work etc.

‘Women’s issues’ are easy for unions to neglect or ignore because women are absent from or marginal within the union hierarchy. In the words of Dickens et al. (1988:32) ‘*the absence of women at the table has to be part of the explanation for the absence of women on the table*’: the problem then is circular. When women are present there does appear to be at least some gendering of the union agenda. For example, within MSF (Kirton and Healy 1999) senior union women have adopted woman conscious strategies with the twin objectives of transforming patriarchal union culture and union bargaining agendas. Heery and Kelly’s (1988) study of paid women officials finds that female representatives do make a difference to the conduct of trade union work because they prioritise issues such as

equal pay, childcare, maternity leave and sexual harassment in collective bargaining. Conversely, the continued neglect and subordination of women's interests by male dominated unions causes women to become alienated from their unions and reinforces their lack of participation (Cunnison and Stageman 1995:45; Munro 2001).

Individual orientations to participation

Social psychological approaches are useful in helping to explain why some individuals participate, whilst others do not, despite being in the same objective circumstances. Kelly and Breinlinger (1996:20-25) identify three individual characteristics, which influence patterns of participation. The first concerns the 'locus of control'. Here greater participation may be seen as a way of gaining power and control and is of particular importance for those who feel (or are) relatively powerless, such as women, working class or black people. The second is closely related to the first and concerns 'political efficacy', the feeling that the individual can have an impact on the political process. There is some evidence that people who feel efficacious participate at higher levels and also that those with lower levels of formal education and women perceive themselves as less efficacious. The third characteristic concerns 'individualist-collectivist' orientation, which drawing on Hofstede's (1980) work is defined as the extent to which one's identity is characterised by personal choices, goals and achievements or by the nature of the groups to which one belongs. Kelly and Breinlinger (*ibid*:25) hold that these individual characteristics provide some insight into general influences on behaviour, but that these factors have only limited value in predicting or accounting for participation in specific instances. For this task we need to explore motivations in context and consider how willingness to participate is mediated by observations/experiences of actual participation and intersects with different group identifications. Healy et al. (2003), for example, consider the cross-cutting aspects of ethnicity and gender and how these influence the experiences of work/union and orientations to participation of minority ethnic women.

Rational choice theories are an attempt to achieve investigation of motivations in context. This approach takes the individual as the unit of analysis when seeking to explain willingness to participate and emphasises members' goals or what they expect to gain from participation as motivating factors (Kelly 1998). Klandermans (1992:187/8), for example, suggests that individuals are active partly because participation satisfies important needs,

either intrinsic or expressive, such as socialising with other people, engaging in interesting activities. However, he argues expressive goals are less important to workers than the instrumental value of participation or the expectation that it will help them achieve an extrinsic goal, such as improving pay and conditions. Therefore from this perspective it is necessary to consider whether in the particular industrial relations context members could reasonably expect to secure, for example higher pay, by getting involved.

While this approach allows for an exploration of the context of individuals' decisions, the main criticisms are its emphasis on *individual* decision-making processes and the neglect of *social* processes, which also influence patterns of participation (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996) and the in-built assumption of individuals as self-interested agents (Kelly 1998). There is also a tendency towards gender neutrality, which is unhelpful when studying women. The findings of Kirton's (1999) study of senior union women, for example, lend support to all three strands of criticism. It shows that social support networks (gendered social processes) are vitally important in sustaining senior union women's participation over time. Women in the study stayed active despite encountering many obstacles to the achievement of their immediate goals. They did so not out of pure self-interest, but out of a belief in their ability to make a difference to women members and workers in the longer term.

Trade union and gender identities

In order to understand women's patterns of union participation as situated in the empirical contexts described above, it is necessary then to explore the social processes, which construct women's trade union and gender identities. The literature on social identity is now enormous and draws on both psychological and sociological approaches, providing complementary insights. This section draws on literature considered most useful for exploring the salience of social identity in the trade union context and congruent with the feminist paradigm.

From a social psychological perspective an important sense of self derives from the groups and categories to which we belong and self-identification with a group promotes the perception of a commonality of interests (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996:34-5), which could stimulate participation in a relevant group. This implies that from a number of groups to

which they belong, individuals consciously choose which groups to identify with. This approach avoids the pitfalls of reified social identities. For example, a black woman might self-identify with black people as a group, but not with women; therefore she would see her commonality of interests lying with black people, rather than with women and might become involved in a black political group. Of course, the 'right' to self-identify with a particular group is often contestable; e.g. what constitutes 'black'? Therefore the concept of belonging is far from straightforward.

From a sociological perspective social identities derive from the 'various sets of lived relationships in which individuals are engaged' (Bradley 1996:24). Here, the black woman (in the example above) could not escape the fact that she is a woman, even if she chooses not to privilege her identity as a woman. This approach suggests that social identities are not so much a question of self-identification, rather an objective fact and in this sense they can be 'ascribed' as well as 'achieved' (Jenkins 1996:142). Here it is the lived realities of social identity that would define commonality of interests.

Despite a different emphasis, both perspectives suggest that group memberships or social identities will influence patterns of participation in collective action. Bradley identifies 'three levels' of social identity: passive, active and politicised (1996:25) and in doing so offers a solution to the question of whether social identity is a matter of self-identification or objective fact:

'Passive identities' are potential identities in the sense that they derive from the sets of lived relationships (class, gender, ethnicity and so forth) in which the individuals are engaged, but they are not acted on. Individuals are not particularly conscious of passive identities and do not normally define themselves by them unless events occur which bring those particular relationships to the fore....

'Active identities' are those which individuals are conscious of and which provide a base for their actions. They are positive elements in an individual's self-identification although we do not necessarily think of ourselves continually in terms of any single identity.... When identities provide a more constant base for action and where individuals constantly think of themselves in terms of an identity, we can describe it as a politicised identity. 'Politicised identities' are formed

through political action and provide the base for collective organisation of either a defensive or an affirmative nature.’ (Bradley, 1996:25-26)

In this approach it is possible for different identities to intersect and to be or become more or less salient in specific circumstances. For example, the black woman (above) might be a teacher: this would be her occupational identity, which she is conscious of (it is an ‘active’ identity) and which from time to time might cause her to get involved in her union, perhaps participating in industrial action during a dispute. However, it is her black identity that is politicised and provides the base for constant action as expressed by her involvement in a black member group. This example illustrates the dynamic, fluid and intersecting nature of different identities, which may influence different patterns of participation over time, but not determine them. This multi-layered conceptualisation of identity is utilised later in the thesis to characterise the interviewees’ identity affiliations.

If as Bradley (1996:212) argues the construction of identity is a political process, how and why do different identities become active or politicised? Cunnison and Stageman (1995:16) emphasise the material base for the construction of women’s gender identity. They identify three elements as particularly significant: patterns of child rearing, patterns of care and service, and the experience of subordination. The problem with this understanding is the implication that all women experience these three elements in uniform ways. This is contrary to the growing body of literature, which highlights women’s diversity and the many different ways in which women experience social realities and their gender (Charles and Hintjens 1998; Yuval-Davis 1998; Colgan and Ledwith 2000). These authors argue that the identities available to women are constructed within specific power relations, which provide the framework of choice, so class, ‘race’ and ethnicity for example, cross cut gender. The latter approach then acknowledges the material basis of subordination at the same time as allowing for heterogeneous women’s ‘realities’, a theme, which the thesis because of the diversity of interviewees is able to pursue.

According to Bradley’s (1996) approach the lived relationships women experience produce practices and discourses, which promote awareness of gender, causing a gender identity to become active. However, there is no necessary relationship between awareness and participation in collective action, as Bradley (1996) recognises. Kelly and Breinlinger (1996), drawing on Tajfel and Turner (1986), suggest three possible strategies in response

to awareness of inequalities and in pursuit of a positive social identity: individual mobility, social creativity, and social change/competition. The latter two are collective responses, although social creativity is less transformative, as it would seek to promote the greater value of stereotypical feminine qualities or traditional female roles and could lead to participation in the 'other women's movement' (Sommerville 1997), pro-life groups for example. In contrast, social change/competition has more radical aims and could occur through involvement in feminist politics/groups and the adoption of a feminist identity.

An active, even politicised feminist identity is an important, although not necessary, component of transformative strategies towards (emancipatory) social change because it provides a first step to resistance and stops women believing that their sufferings are natural (as in the 'other women's movement') or merely personal (Young 1997). This is not to say that women, who do not self-identify as feminists, will not share a common agenda for change with women who are comfortable with the feminist label. Many women in the trade union context, where there is a long history of feminist influence (Boston 1987), are uncomfortable with feminism. It is often felt to undermine the movement's solidarity and unity, to constitute (inappropriately) a single cause and to reflect largely the concerns of white, middle-class women (Cockburn 1991; Colgan and Ledwith 1996; Kirton and Healy 1999; Humphrey 2002). It is also the case that in many social arenas there is now an anti-feminist discourse, which is bound to deter some women from publicly adopting the label.

Yet it is clear feminist beliefs and values inform much of trade union women's strategies and practice (e.g. Healy and Kirton 2000; Kirton and Healy 1999; Colgan and Ledwith, 1996, 2000, 2002; Cunnison and Stageman 1995; McBride 2001). Therefore if, as in the thesis, we take feminism as an analytical construct (as discussed in Chapter One), rather than simply as an 'identity', then we can argue that some women display feminist beliefs and values, even when they do not self-identify as feminists. Such women might not engage intellectually with the ideology of feminism, or they might have dismissed feminism as an explicit identity but might be committed to its goals as a project for gendered social change.

Gender democracy in trade unions

Although women trade union members clearly have the right to vote in union elections and to stand for election themselves, the empirical picture of women's under-representation in the democratic processes and structures of trade unions points to a gendered 'democracy deficit' (Cockburn 1995). What democracy means within the trade union context is contested and is historically contingent (Nicholson et al. 1981). Over the last decade or so, the idea that democracy exists *de facto* where a small group of individuals is elected to represent the membership, has come under pressure from industrial relations (Fairbrother 1984; Terry 1996; Morris and Fosh 2000) and feminist authors (e.g. Cockburn 1991; 1995; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Healy and Kirton 2000; McBride 2001; Rees 1992). The former are concerned generally with the opportunities members have to influence union decision-making, whilst the latter argue that trade unions cannot be said to be democratic if women lack influence and are absent from decision-making. From this perspective, representative democracy can be characterised as democracy without 'voice'. A grassroots (Morris and Fosh 2000) or participatory (Terry 1996) model is now the widely held ideal, with a heavy emphasis on direct forms of collective decision-making, rather than indirect representative forms. However, because unions have oligarchic and bureaucratic tendencies (Healy and Kirton 2000, McBride 2001) which can lead to the ongoing exclusion and marginalisation of women, even this might constitute an imperfect model for gender democracy.

The question is how can unions achieve gender democracy? One approach is to focus on the *structures* of democracy and to explore the types of structural change that would result in increased female participation and 'voice'. For example, to temper gendered oligarchic tendencies might involve a change in union rules and procedures surrounding office holding, for example, length of membership required to stand for election, the number of consecutive terms that a post can be held for and so on. Such changes can be regarded as liberal measures, as ways of letting women in, of increasing their numbers. As Cockburn (1995) points out though, it is important to distinguish between women's representation as individuals in a sex category and their representation as an oppressed social group. When women are present in democratic structures as individuals, they do not necessarily speak *as and for* women, which suggests that the mere presence of women does not automatically change the nature of the democratic processes and outcomes (e.g. Munro 1999). A more

radical measure is separate structures for women, which aim to ensure women's representation as an oppressed social group, discussed in more detail below.

An alternative approach is to focus on the *processes* and *outcomes* rather than the structures of democracy. This approach has salience for the thesis. Young (2000), for example, is interested in why, even when formally included in democratic institutions some people find that their views are not listened to or taken seriously. She refers (2000:55) to this process as 'internal exclusion' as opposed to 'external exclusion'. She argues that 'a theory of democratic inclusion requires an expanded conception of political communication, both in order to identify modes of internal inclusion and to provide an account of more inclusive possibilities of attending to one another in order to reach understanding'. This is very apposite in the trade union context, where certain social groups including women, ethnic minorities, disabled people and lesbians and gay men have complained not only of external exclusion, but also of internal exclusion (Colgan 1999; Kirton and Healy 1999; Humphrey 2002). The processes of internal exclusion are often enacted by majority groups by virtue of their greater knowledge of the 'rules of the game' (McBride 2001), that is union jargon, procedures and rule books (e.g. Cockburn 1991, Lawrence 1994). Linked to this, participants of meetings are often intimidated into accepting the position of the most vocal, so that even the physical presence of a group cannot be taken as a sign of democratic outcomes.

Despite its imperfections, Young (1990:92) argues that participatory democracy has both instrumental and intrinsic value, because it requires that a diversity of interests are voiced and because it provides an important means for the development of capacities for thinking about one's own needs in relation to the needs of others. Thus, 'democracy is both an element and a condition of social justice' (*ibid*: 91). From this perspective, it is imperative that unions develop strategies towards gender democracy.

Strategies towards gender democracy

Strategies to encourage women's participation were called for by the TUC in its 1979 'Charter for Equality for Women within Trade Unions' and most trade unions have now implemented a raft of liberal and radical (Jewson and Mason 1986) reforms. Liberal measures include, provision of childcare, gender-monitoring, women-only courses,

women's officers, and new approaches to conducting union business (e.g. adjusting the timing and location of meetings). Radical measures include, reserved seats for women on governing bodies and on union delegations, electoral reform (proportionality), women's conferences, women's committees (Kirton and Greene 2002). The initiatives, which can be classified as liberal aim to 'level the playing field' with the creation of fair procedures and the dismantling of gendered barriers such as lack of childcare provision or trade union skills. The radical initiatives involve direct intervention to recast union government, for example the creation of reserved seats for women on governing bodies and to give women influence on union decision-making via women's committees and conferences (Kirton and Greene 2002). Women's separate organising is a significant element of the more radical measures and it is this approach that has most relevance to the thesis; it is therefore given detailed attention.

Women's separate organising

In a recent survey 13 of 27 UK unions provided some form of women-only groups (SERTUC 2000), suggesting widespread acceptance in the union movement of the strategy of women's separate organising. The strategy has delivered gains for women: a comparison of UK trade unions between 1987 and 1997 shows a shift from a liberal approach towards more radical forms of separate organising and a greater representation of women in union structures over time (Healy and Kirton 2000). Feminist authors have shown a great deal of interest in women's separate organising, generally agreeing that it is a key mechanism in developing a long equality agenda (Colgan and Ledwith 1996; McBride 2001; Kirton and Greene 2002; Parker 2002). First, because it allows under-represented constituencies to come together in a safe environment (Briskin 1993) to develop their own priorities and agendas, which can then be fed into the mainstream. Second, because it legitimates the representation of women as an oppressed social group, which is key to changing the nature of what counts as trade union business. However, it is not inevitable that the latter will result.

Briskin's work has been particularly influential in developing conceptual approaches to understanding women's separate organising. She (1993:94-97) considers three possible claims: that separate organising is a form of 'ghettoisation', that it is necessary to correct the 'deficits' in women, and finally that it is a pro-active positive appropriation of

women's experiences. The ghetto model assumes that integration into male dominated structures on the same terms as men is the strategic aim, and that gender differences are fundamentally insignificant. From this point of view women's structures are ghettos to keep women quiet, ineffective and talking only to each other. Thus, separate organising could be used as a strategy by the male-gendered oligarchy to maintain the status quo. It might actually legitimate the confining of 'women's issues' to powerless domains and ensure that these issues continue to be seen of marginal importance to the mainstream business of unions (Healy and Kirton 2000; Humphrey 2002). This description evokes some of the early forms of women's separate organising following the merger of women's unions into the mainstream movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Chapter Three and Cunnison and Stageman 1995). However, it cannot be assumed that this interpretation of women's groups is simply one of a bygone age. For example, Parker's (2002) study found mixed outcomes and that tensions between women's groups and the mainstream remain.

The deficit model recognises the significance of gender and the need for separate organising, but the emphasis is on women changing or on correcting women's inability to function in the male dominated movement. Briskin (1993:96) cites the example of some women's courses, arguing that courses that focus on 'changing women' by increasing their confidence and developing their assertiveness lack the politicised content of a proactive model, which she considers problematic. Briskin's understanding assumes that following a course the now more confident and assertive women become integrated within the male norms and co-opted to the masculine agenda, rather than having become politicised through the process of becoming more confident. That this situation is the case is far from clear or inevitable and research such as presented in this thesis can contribute to our understanding of how in practice women's courses function and therefore how we can position them conceptually. (This theme is discussed in Chapter Six using the empirical data.)

The proactive model is informed by recognition of the gender-specific character of experience in employment, the home and wider society (as discussed above). Women must organise collectively to bring their gender specific knowledge to the mainstream to effect democratic change. In line with this, McBride (2001) finds that women use separate organising to talk about issues not normally on the trade union meeting agenda, such as

domestic violence and sexual harassment. She suggests that women's groups provide women with a constant source of authority and influence on mainstream structures, pointing to a gendering of the union agenda as a possible outcome of the more proactive model.

Briskin (1993) clearly believes that the proactive model offers the greatest potential for transformation. However, there is some evidence that current forms of women's separate organising are underpinned by both deficit and proactive models to the extent that some women's groups may seek to work alongside mainstream, male dominated structures, whilst others seek to fundamentally recast trade union decision making processes. Parker's (2002) study finds that the objectives of women's groups reflect a pragmatic and gradual pursuit of change shaped by the constraints of the existing union framework, suggesting that a 'pure' model of either type is unlikely to dominate the strategic orientation of women who engage in separate organising.

Despite, or possibly because of its potential for transformation, the strategy of separate organising, although now widely accepted, remains controversial among men and women trade unionists alike. Measures such as reserved seats and separate courses are often charged with being tokenistic or patronising gestures, which rather than leading to democratic transformation might simply marginalise the issues and the people involved (Briskin 1993; Humphrey 2002; Kirton and Greene 2002). This criticism is a contemporary permutation of old dilemmas discussed in Chapter Three and invokes the question of whether separate organising is perceived as a feminist political tool or as an aim. A more recent criticism is that separate organising embodies essentialised notions of women, which denies women's diversity and their heterogeneous interests (see Colgan and Ledwith 2000). Reflecting shifts in feminist theorising (discussed in Chapter One), it is, for example, now recognised that trade union women are divided by factors such as class, age, 'race', ethnicity, as well as by occupation and political affiliation, which means that separate organising needs to be capable of addressing within-group diversity. Within the trade union movement a further (again longstanding) criticism is that separate organising dilutes unity and solidarity (the cornerstone of trade unionism), and is a distraction from 'real' union business (e.g. Humphrey 2002; McBride 2001). From this point of view it is politically unacceptable and resource draining, especially in a period when unions are struggling to survive.

Alternatively, to rebut these criticisms, it can be argued that inequalities are historically embedded in the structural and cultural fabric of trade unions and to redress these requires the empowering environment of separate structures (Briskin 1993). Whilst the heterogeneity of women cannot be denied, it is also possible to argue that there exists enough commonality of interest based on a shared experience of gender specific oppression to make it possible to identify a women's union agenda (Munro 1999). Further, that unity within diversity is both possible and desirable (Young 2000; Briskin 2002) and that unions must reinvent themselves as pluralist organisations in order to survive.

To accomplish its aim of working towards gender equality, separate organising must meet certain preconditions, which Briskin (2002:37) summarises as maintaining a (delicate) strategic balance between autonomy from the traditional structures and practices of the union movement and mainstreaming into those structures. The former creates opportunities for trade union culture and practices to be deconstructed and reconstructed, whilst the latter is necessary to prevent further marginalisation or ghettoisation of women. With regard to the form of women's separate organising which is the subject of the thesis – women-only courses - it is unclear how Briskin situates women-only courses within her framework. Drawing on the idea of 'strategic balance' though, it could be argued that women (tutors and students perhaps) must have autonomy over the curriculum of women's courses (i.e. it should not be men who decide how and what women learn). But women must also have some influence on mainstream union courses so that as women participate more widely their experiences are positive. Thus, equally important as the structural arrangements, as indicated by a number of studies (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Healy and Kirton 2000; Parker 2002), will be the way that women as agents of change act on both mainstream and women's structures to head in the direction of gendered transformation. This is one of the central themes of this thesis, which is explored later using the empirical data. Women-only courses are given more detailed attention in Chapter Three.

Conclusions and implications for the research

This chapter has identified key issues in the empirical contexts of women's employment and participation in trade unions relevant to the research. It has also discussed the micro level concepts and theories, derived from the feminist industrial relations paradigm

discussed in Chapter One, which inform the analysis of the empirical findings the thesis presents. The implications of the above discussion for the research are now considered and the concepts and theories that are taken forward in the thesis are summarised.

With regard to the context of women's employment, women experience significant disadvantage in employment, arising from structural characteristics and ideological factors at the level of wider society. From the brief outline of the dominant patterns of women's employment, it can be seen that gender remains a strong determinant of pay, status, occupation, industry and the likelihood of labour market participation in the first place. It also remains a strong determinant of roles in the household and family. The gender structure of employment and of the household combined with the gender specific character of subjective employment/family experiences then influence women's relationship to trade unionism. However, it is important to acknowledge that women constitute a heterogeneous social group; their employment and family/household roles/experiences are mediated by, for example, age, class and ethnicity. Although the salience of gender as an organising principle (Cockburn 1991) in the labour market is persistent, the structures that impact on women are dynamic and negotiated and interpreted by a diversity of women as subjects in the making of their own histories. The theme of how context structures choices and influences behaviour in the trade union environment is pursued in the chapters analysing the empirical data.

Turning to the broad trade union context, this research is not explicitly concerned with the prospects for union renewal, nor with all the policies and processes that are likely to be necessary to achieve membership growth. However, it is concerned with one of the main policy outcomes of the more hostile environment and poor fortunes of the unions, that is the greater focus on how to increase women's participation and work towards gender equality and democracy. The irony of attempting the latter at a time of resource constraint and against a struggle for survival should be lost on no one reading this thesis.

Nevertheless, we should not be surprised: it is a sense of crisis that generally pushes organisations towards transformative change (Carter 2000:132). Thus the broad trade union context outlined above is salient for this research to the extent that it has provided an extra instrumental force to add to the moral arguments already marshalled to support actions and interventions towards these ends, one of which is women's separate organising.

Further, the empirical picture underlines the fact that equality issues cannot be divorced from 'mainstream' trade union issues, as the unions move forward into an uncertain future.

With regard to women's membership of and participation in trade unions, the chapter has shown that the gender composition of union membership has changed over time such that women are now an undeniably important source of members, however there remains a question mark surrounding how well unions serve women. The answer to this problem has to lie in encouraging more women to become involved in union affairs, yet the analysis of women's participation reveals an overall picture of women's under-representation at all levels of the hierarchy. There are various theoretical explanations for this, which the thesis draws on in analysing the empirical data.

The range of concepts and theories discussed in order to shed light on willingness to participate underlines at the micro level the significance of the broad feminist theoretical framework set out in Chapter One. A feminist approach involves seeking to understand women's union participation in context of work, family and union. In other words we have to know the context in which orientations to participation express themselves through actions and behaviours and how they intersect with gendered barriers, constraints and opportunities and with actual experiences of participation in order to avoid the problems with the 'propensity to participate' approach discussed earlier. From the greater availability of evidence it is clear that the organisation of household work, women's paid work and trade union work are all likely to constrain women's participation, but not in any precise combination or uniform way. The qualitative methodology used to gather the data for the thesis (outlined in Chapter Four) allows for the unpacking of the interrelationships between the various factors that promote and constrain women's participation and offers rich insights to contribute to this debate.

The chapter highlighted the importance of one set of actors, that is trade union leaders, in shaping structures and experiences of participation, as well as the union agenda, raising the question of whether women behave differently as leaders and/or have a different agenda. Approaches to understanding identity formation processes are useful in this regard. The activation of both trade union and gender identities is important to the extent that collective identification might promote participation, whilst a politicised gender identity might promote a critical stance which could lead to participation in women's separate organising

and challenge to the patriarchal *status quo*. Using the empirical data the thesis explores how women in their local work and trade union contexts conduct themselves as trade unionists and the various group identifications that influence their approaches.

Women's separate organising was positioned as a radical measure towards gender democracy designed to give women representation and voice as an oppressed social group. Separate organising at rhetorical and national policy level is now widely established in trade unions, but this does not mean that it is not contested at local levels, a tension, which is shown by the research findings. Women-only courses, like other forms of women's separate organising, are designed to encourage greater female participation and to give women the opportunity to learn to cope with the male-dominated union structures, but also to challenge the gendered ideology underpinning trade union policy and practice. In following the lives of a group of participants of women-only courses, the thesis addresses this theme.

The above summary of the implications of the empirical and theoretical contexts discussed in the chapter highlights the value of qualitative investigations of women's participation, which can contribute to understanding the complex inter-relationship between structure and agency in the trade union context.

The next chapter steps back in time to explore the historical context and evolution of women's trade unionism, separate organising and women-only courses. It then brings the discussion back to the present period to provide more detailed discussion of contemporary women-only courses.

Chapter Three

The Historical Context and Evolution of Women's Trade Unionism, Separate Organising And Women-only Trade Union Courses

Introduction

Thus far the literature review has located the research within a feminist industrial relations paradigm and explored the contemporary empirical and theoretical contexts of women in unions. Congruent with the aim of exploring the social construction of women's trade union participation, this chapter provides a brief examination of the historical context to locate the research 'problem' within a longer time frame, i.e. to outline the historical genesis of women's place in unions. Following Layder (1993:175) the historical dimension of the thesis is employed to supplement and complement the contemporary analysis, which is the primary focus. The historical dimensions most relevant to this research are first the history of women's trade unionism and separate organising, the history of trade union education and how it came to exclude and marginalise women and 'women's issues'. Second, how and why women-only courses emerged and evolved and came to be widely seen as a necessary element of overall trade union education provision.

The chapter draws primarily on existing historical literature. However, the attempt to construct the picture was hampered by the fact that the historical literature on women in unions has little to say about trade union education and the historical literature on trade union education has little to say about women. Similarly, empirical industrial relations research conducted much before the late 1980s, was generally gender blind. For example, one 1970s study on the training of trade union officers (Brown and Lawson 1973) tantalisingly informs the reader that the sample included eight women in a survey of 175. But, the text is peppered with references to the male gender of the officers surveyed and the reader learns nothing about the women involved. Thus the attempt to construct a historical account of women's union education provided an illustration of the gender blind nature of industrial relations and indeed of labour history research, discussed in Chapter

One. The omission of a gender perspective on union education was partly rectified in the early 1980s when a series of articles in the practitioner oriented *Trade Union Studies Journal* began to address the issue of educating women. Therefore in view of significant gaps, it was also necessary to gather selectively primary historical evidence, particularly for the period up to the late 1960s, which involved mining Trades Union Congress¹ (TUC) documentary sources to discover more about the provenance of women-only courses than the existing literature reveals.

Before turning specifically to address women's trade union education, the chapter briefly sketches a short history of women's trade unionism and separate organising in order to provide a context for the discussion of women's education. The chapter then outlines significant developments in trade union education generally and women-only courses specifically, in three periods, utilising the concepts of external and internal exclusion (Young 2000; see Chapter Two). The first period is 1900 to 1945 when the foundations were laid for women's exclusion; the second is between 1945 and the late 1970s when contextual events and internal decision-making consolidated women's exclusion; the third is from the late 1970s when the demands of feminist women began to force inclusion. The final section of the chapter discusses the contemporary nature of women-only courses.

A short history of women's trade unionism and separate organising

It is impossible to understand how and why women's separate organising, in particular women-only courses, emerged without a sense of the extent and nature of women's participation and involvement in trade unions. As can be seen from **Table 3.1**, women workers have historically been an important source of members to unions, yet the trade union movement has not always welcomed women into membership and has historically neglected women's needs and concerns (Boston 1987). Initially women responded to male hostility and external exclusion by organising separately; it was not therefore a matter of feminist principle, rather separate organising was widely seen as a temporary necessity, or

¹ The primary documents consulted were 36 annual reports of TUC women's conferences in 1926 and then 1931-1966 and two reports on trade union education in 1920 (TUEEC 1920) and 1930 (Millar 1930). The existing literature covered the later period. I concentrated on discovering the TUC's approach to educating women trade unionists primarily because of the enormous task involved in finding out what, if any, provision individual unions had, bearing in mind that the intention was to outline a historical context, rather than conduct historical research *per se*. TUC provision was taken as a barometer of how the movement generally

as a form of 'interim separatism' (Colgan and Ledwith 1996). The tensions and dilemmas surrounding women's separate organising never entirely dissolved and throughout the history of women workers' organisation there has been considerable debate on the issue (Cunnison and Stageman 1995).

Thus, it was women who spearheaded early campaigns to unionise women and generally into separate unions either because of men's refusal to admit women to the appropriate industrial/occupational union or because there was no appropriate union, since men had prioritised the formation of unions in male dominated employment. For example, Emma Paterson founded the Women's Protective and Provident League in 1874 (to become the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) in the early 1890s). The League, whilst not a trade union itself, was set up to help establish individual unions for women employed in bookbinding, millinery, mantle-making and other skilled sewing trades (Drake 1984:11). It was a response to male opposition to women's entry to trade unions, but its ultimate aim was acceptance into the male dominated movement (Boston 1987). Accordingly, the League actually favoured the opening of men's unions to women, rather than separate unions for women, but wherever this was opposed it sought the support of men in the forming of women's unions (Soldon 1978:17). Where women were admitted to 'men's' unions, women's sections or branches were often formed, but frequently functioned under male officers (Soldon, 1978:60). This was an example of internal exclusion and proved an effective way of segregating women and marginalising their concerns at the same time as keeping surveillance on their activities.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the proportion of women in paid employment outside the home was still very small (about thirteen per cent) (Boston 1987:64), although of course working-class women took paid work into their homes. Nevertheless, a number of white-collar women's unions were formed in the early 1900s (Soldon 1978:53), as was the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) in 1906. The latter was an attempt to establish a general labour union for women belonging to unorganised trades or not admitted to their appropriate union. An enormous increase in female trade union membership occurred during the First World War during which women substituted for male workers. By the end of 1918 the female membership of trade unions stood at just over

approached women's trade union education in different periods, although of course initially some women's unions no doubt provided courses which would have been *de facto* women-only.

one million, representing about seventeen per cent of total membership (Drake 1984:111). During the war women had been encouraged to join the general unions, but the ranks of the NFWW had also swelled from 5,000 members to 80,000 by 1918 (Soldon 1978:85). The union movement overall was still almost exclusively run by men, regardless of the

Table 3.1: Women and Men Trade Union Members 1900-2000²

Year	Female M'ship (000s)	Increase In Women %	Density Women %	Male M'ship (000s)	Increase In Men %	Density Men %	Women as % of Total M'ship
1900	154	-	3.2	1,869	-	16.7	7.6
1910	278	44.6	5.3	2,287	18.2	18.6	10.8
1920	1,342	79.2	23.9	7,006	67.3	54.5	16.0
1930	793	(69.2)	13.4	4,049	(73.0)	30.8	16.3
1940	1,119	29.1	17.6	5,493	26.2	40.3	16.9
1950	1,684	33.5	23.7	7,605	27.7	54.6	18.1
1960	1,951	13.6	24.1	7,884	3.5	53.6	19.8
1970	2,583	24.4	31.2	8,089	2.5	59.0	24.2
1980	3,771	45.9	39.9	8,468	4.4	65.0	30.8
1990	3,752	(0.5)	32.0	6,195	(36.6)	43.0	37.7
2000	3,350	(12.0)	28.9	3,884	(59.5)	29.9	46.3

proportion of women members, although a very small number of women had started to appear on the committees of some mixed sex unions (Soldon 1978:56).

For women workers, the end of the First World War brought with it widespread unemployment as employers, supported by trade unions, discharged women from positions in factories and offices and a marriage bar was imposed in the public sector (Boston 1987, Cunnison and Stageman 1995). Union bargaining strategies now emphasised the importance of the 'family wage' for the male breadwinner. In essence the end of the war brought with it a return of the attitude that a woman's primary role was that of wife and mother (Boston 1987:132-145), although the war had shattered the myth that women were

² Figures provided in Table 3.1 relate to the membership of all registered trade unions and not just those affiliated to the TUC. This is to avoid skewing the data at points in time when female-dominated unions (such as NALGO) first joined the TUC. Further, because of the limited historical literature on women in trade unions, data presented in the table had to be gathered from a range of sources; therefore the only way to ensure consistency and comparability across the periods was to cover all registered trade unions. Sources: 1900-1960: Bain, G.S., R. Bacon, and J. Pimlott (1972) 'The Labour Force', in A.H. Halsey (ed) *Trends in British Society Since 1900*, London: Macmillan. 1970/1980: Waddington, J and C. Whitston (1995) 'Trade Unions: Growth, Structure and Policy', in P. Edwards *Industrial Relations*, Oxford: Blackwell. 1990/2000: *Labour Market Trends* (2001:433-441)

incapable of skilled work. Against this relatively hostile climate, union women were organising themselves inside the movement to push their cause forward indicating that separate organising had become a political tool in response to internal exclusion, although criticism of the male hierarchy was muted (see Drake 1984). Drake (*ibid*: 213) identified the chief function of women's advisory councils as 'education and propaganda', describing them as a 'practical training ground' for inexperienced women, indicating that the ultimate goal of women's separate organising was to enable women to take up positions in mainstream structures. So far we can see that early forms of women's separate organising constituted what Briskin (1993) would characterise as initially a ghetto model and later a deficit model.

During the two decades of falling membership from 1920-1940, the TUC was keen to recruit women in order to stem the overall decline in membership. However, the movement lacked leadership for women and there were few efforts by the male leadership to make recruitment campaigns appeal specifically to women (Boston 1987:157). The WTUL had achieved its goal of merger with the TUC in 1920 and women were subsumed within the male-dominated organisation. Nevertheless, in response to pressure from some trade union women and a motion at the 1923 TUC conference, women were afforded recognition within the TUC by the establishment in 1922 of two reserved seats on the General Council, and in 1926 of an Annual Women's Trade Union Conference (Boston 1987:157). However, the conference was not a women-only structure. On the contrary, the male-dominated National Women's Group of the TUC tightly controlled it (TUC 1926:3). By now women's position in the union movement was an uneasy one between separation and unity (Boston 1987).

There were no further women's conferences until 1931 when the renamed Conference of Unions Catering for Women (CUCW) was held, organised by the newly established National Women's Advisory Committee of the TUC. The significance of the change of name should not go unnoticed: the new name confirmed that the conference was *about* women and their interests rather than *for* women as a women-only structure. Women workers, because of their lower pay, continued to be viewed by men in the trade union movement as a threat to male rates of pay, especially as during the economic slump of the early 1930s men's employment decreased at a far greater rate than did women's. However, the perceived solution now was to engender greater solidarity between men and

women by drawing more women into the male dominated unions (Soldon 1978:135). Congruent with this there was opposition to women's separate organising (Boston 1987:162).

By 1940 a sizeable proportion of total union membership, union women's position was strengthened during the Second World War through further membership gains (arising from the mass employment of women). A new, albeit small, body of militant women stewards emerged who used the women's advisory structures of the TUC and of some individual unions as a vehicle to press their demands (Cunnison and Stageman 1995:28), indicating a shift in the orientation of women's separate organising. However, their claims had a liberal emphasis on equal treatment, meaning 'same' rather than 'different', with equal pay the principal concern.

By 1950 many women had left paid employment as the wartime nurseries disappeared, whilst others had returned to their former lower status, low skilled jobs. Women's primary role was once again seen by employers, trade unions and wider society to reside in the home. The trade unions showed no real commitment to acting on women's employment issues – nurseries, equal pay, and rights of married women to equal employment opportunities were all issues that received scant attention by the movement.

Throughout the 1950s an increasing number of married women entered paid employment, although the growth was concentrated in part-time, sex-segregated work, which enabled women to conform to the prevailing conservative and traditional ideology and enabled unions to continue to prioritise the 'family wage'. There was a considerable numerical and proportionate increase in women's membership, but they still only constituted about a fifth of total membership (see **Table 3.1**). The relatively low level of female unionisation was attributed largely to apathy and lack of trade union consciousness among women (Boston 1987:247): in other words, the unions blamed women.

Between 1964 and 1970 women accounted for an enormous seventy per cent of the increase in members of TUC trade unions³ and this was to be important for the

³ It is important to note that rather than representing new union members, much of the increase in women's membership of TUC unions during the 1960s and early 1970s is attributable to the new affiliation of some female dominated unions, such as NALGO in 1964.

development of a vocal and assertive women's voice within the movement. However, despite or possibly because of, considerable growth in women's membership, unions showed little direct concern to recruit more women into union decision-making. For example, although in 1967 women comprised around half of the membership of the public sector union NUPE, the union sent a delegation of twenty-four men to the TUC annual conference (Boston 1987:265).

The strike by TGWU Ford women machinists in 1968 was pivotal: it was led by women and was about women's working conditions. It has been described as the point at which feminism in the British trade union movement became significant (Boston 1987:278-279). The so-called 'new-wave feminism' underpinned the emergence of a new understanding by trade unions of the need to widen their policy agendas to include the specific concerns of women and to introduce structural change to encourage women's participation (Cunnison and Stageman 1995). The 1970s witnessed a number of changes in the trade unions, which were to herald the beginnings of gender equality in the movement. These included: an unprecedented increase in women's union density to almost forty per cent in 1980; an increase in women's share of total membership to around thirty per cent; the drawing up in 1979 of the TUC *Charter for Equality for Women within Trade Unions*; an increase in the influence of women's separate organising in the wider union movement; and an increase in women's representation in mainstream decision-making structures. Not all women supported women's separate organising, but there was now more unified support than ever before and a widespread belief that it was an effective political tool, if not an end in itself (Boston 1987).

This brief history of women in trade unions highlights the longstanding existence of a context of internal and external structural constraints inhibiting women's equality within employment and the unions, coupled with evidence of women's struggles to direct their own destiny, largely via separate organising, within the trade union movement.

Importantly the historical picture shows how the contemporary participation of women in unions, outlined in Chapter Two, has been socially constructed over time by various actors, mainly women themselves. The chapter now turns specifically to explore how women-only courses came into being in the context of the emergence and evolution of general trade union education provision.

Laying the foundations for internal exclusion: women-only courses 1900-1945

This section shows how the foundations were laid early on within context of male domination for women to be excluded from the decision-making processes shaping the birth and evolution of trade union education provision.

Although some trade unions began providing schools and classes as early as the 1840s, before the First World War, the term 'trade union education' would not have been recognised. Instead, the debate centred more generally on questions of 'working class' education, with providers offering subjects as diverse as economics, history, geography, psychology and philosophy against a context of poor general educational provision (Holford 1993). A number of 'external' labour movement organisations developed the earliest provision, whilst individual unions' expenditure on education was minimal (McIlroy 1980) and TUC involvement was distant. The Workers' Educational Association (WEA), founded in 1903, was at the forefront of developments, together with the Central Labour College (CLC) and later the National Council for Labour Colleges (NCLC), founded in 1909. Ruskin College, Oxford, established in 1899 also had strong links with the trade union movement⁴. With regard to the participation of women in the nascent trade union education provision, the literature is generally silent. However, given the overall union context described earlier it is fairly safe to assume that working class meant male.

That said, it was soon recognised by male trade unionists that women needed to have better access to union education courses if they were to become more involved in the unions and to encourage other women to join (Drake 1984:42). However, the women spearheading the early campaigns for women's equality within unions were mostly middle-class, who themselves were relatively well educated. For example, Emma Patterson (1848-1886, daughter of a teacher), Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960, daughter of a barrister), Mary Macarthur (1881-1921, daughter of the owner of a draper's store) (Boston 1987). Their own class consciousness would not necessarily have inclined them towards perceiving

⁴ The unions were involved in the governing bodies of both the WEA and Ruskin College, as it was intended that students would be working class and drawn mainly from unions. The unions provided (and still provide) scholarships to Ruskin College – many of today's trade union leaders and paid officials are Ruskin *alumni*. By 1909 there was a strong element among some Ruskin students of dissatisfaction with the lack of socialist content in courses and suspicion of the college's paternalist traditions. This led to the establishment of the Central Labour College and subsequently the NCLC. By contrast with the WEA and Ruskin, whose tutors

(lack of) educational provision for working class women as a major issue impacting upon the organisation of women.

There were further significant developments in trade union education in the years immediately following the First World War. The WEA formed the Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC) in 1919, which was the first scheme designed specifically for trade union members, which the unions ran themselves through their own structures (Holford 1993:47-8), providing a range of weekend and summer schools. Because of their marginalisation in the trade union hierarchy, women had little say in these developments, although the National Federation of Women Workers provided special summer and weekend schools for women (TUEEC 1920:9)⁵.

The question of how best to educate women into trade unionism more generally was discussed at the first Women's Trade Union Conference in 1926, where one woman speaker, supporting a resolution calling for parents to educate their children in the principles and values of trade unionism asserted:

'I am hoping we shall be able to educate our shop stewards and collectors, because if we got [*sic*] a proper system of educating our shop stewards and collectors we would have a larger percentage of women in our ranks than we have to-day. If the men would do their share the girls would have receptive minds instead of being antagonistic as they are to-day.' (TUC 1926:22)

The speaker does not call for women's courses, but does indicate that women were beginning to articulate their dissatisfaction with the lackadaisical attitudes of male trade unionists towards women. By the early 1930s, when as discussed earlier greater effort was being applied to representing women and their interests, there were women within the TUC arguing specifically for women's courses. Although, as stated earlier, the CUCW was not a women-only structure, it was a forum where 'women's issues' could be legitimately discussed. One important outcome relevant to this research was a motion to the 1931

were mostly university lecturers, the NCLC drew its tutors from former and current students, creating a form of autonomous working class education.

⁵ Although early provision was biased towards catering for the needs of working class men, there was some, albeit limited, formal educational provision specifically for working class women. Hillcroft College, Surrey, founded in 1920 and loosely associated with the unions, was a residential, women-only college designed to serve educationally disadvantaged women, i.e. those who had left school at fourteen and who had worked since leaving school. The TUC offered *one* annual scholarship at the college.

CUCW⁶ that women's courses should be piloted within the TUC (TUC 1931). In response the TUC began providing women-only schools from 1932 onwards, first experimenting with the holding of two weekend schools. It is evident from CUCW reports that members of the National Women's Advisory Committee tutored on women's schools, although it is not clear that tutors were exclusively female.

In 1933 it was reported at the CUCW that the weekend schools had been deemed a success and a motion was put to make them permanent and to extend the numbers. This was agreed in 1934 against some male opposition (TUC 1934). The subject of women-only schools continued to feature on the agenda of the CUCW, suggesting continued controversy and in 1936 their purpose was clarified:

‘The general purpose in holding special schools for women is to bring together women in the various localities who are likely to carry on the work of trade unionism in their locality and give them enthusiasm and inspiration’ (TUC 1936:13).

In 1938 such schools were described as highly successful in fulfilling their purpose of encouraging women's participation (TUC 1938).

In summary the period from around 1900 up until 1945 witnessed the birth and subsequent formalisation of a system of trade union education. The emphasis on gender neutral constructions of working class education laid the foundations for women's exclusion. From the beginning of the twentieth century working class men gained access to education through organisations such as the WEA and by the 1920s were honing their trade union skills within the TUC education scheme. Working class women and women trade unionists were catered for less well. TUC courses specifically for women first began in 1932: ironically this was a period of defensive and conservative leadership in the movement as a whole (Boston 1987:155). This suggesting that this innovation proposed by the male dominated CUCW was a less than radical one and that it was probably more about keeping the now more vocal women quiet, indicative of a ghetto model of women's separate organising (Briskin 1993).

⁶ The CUCW reports have a running agenda item 'Educational Facilities', where numbers of women attending various schools are reported and where on occasion conference's discussion of women's union education is reported. These were scrutinised in an effort to discover orientations and attitudes towards educating women and are drawn upon as a resource in the chapter.

Consolidating internal exclusion: women-only courses 1945 – late 1970s

The 1945 election of a Labour government and its pursuance of harmonious industrial relations provided new opportunities for the trade union movement to expand its education provision. Attention in the domain of industrial relations increasingly focused on collective bargaining and in response the education provision of the TUC and of individual unions began to concentrate on the areas deemed necessary for trade unionists to participate in that process (Smith 1982). To the extent that overall provision grew, this was an exciting period for trade union education. However, for women, underrepresented as they were among union representatives and officers, the evolving provision had little to offer. For example, the 1950 CUCW noted that although the numbers of women attending TUC courses were higher than the previous year, they remained low (TUC 1950).

The TUC continued to hold its women's weekend schools in the 1950s, but the scale of special provision was very small, reaching only tiny numbers of union women. In 1950, for example, a total of 211 women attended TUC Women's Department Schools (TUC 1951). In 1952, reportedly 'anxious to stimulate the interest of women', the TUC arranged a special Women's Summer School at Ruskin College Oxford. The 1952 CUCW stated:

'It is not intended that this special facility should discourage affiliated organisations from nominating women as students from general schools. It was hoped that the experience of a TUC school for women would help to encourage women members to participate in the general courses and then to take a greater part in trade union affairs' (TUC 1952).

This and other CUCW reports of the 1950s indicate ambivalent and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards this form of women's separate organising on the part of both female and male trade unionists. For example, the following year, 1953, a motion put to the CUCW on women's summer schools rekindled the controversy over whether special women's courses should be a temporary or permanent provision as agreed in the 1930s. Male and female speakers in favour of temporary status believed that separate education for women was necessary, but that the ideal was for women to take part in general schools. Speakers in favour of permanent status emphasised the continuing need to positively encourage women's participation. Supporters lost and the motion was carried to the effect

that women's schools should be considered a temporary experiment (TUC 1953), suggesting little support for a feminist principle of women's separate organising.

In 1954 the CUCW reported on a survey of 'Service to Trade Unions by Women Members'. The survey noted the scarcity of women on National Executive Committees, but stated that all the participating unions 'declared or implied that full opportunities for women already existed', implying that women did not choose to get involved and there was no need to give special encouragement. The report states:

'A few [unions] stated categorically that it was the responsibility of the women to exercise their rights and one union even remarked that it was not particularly desirable or necessary to give special encouragement' (TUC 1954).

Unsurprisingly then, only one of the responding unions (which were not named in the report) held women-only courses. Two unions mentioned domestic responsibilities and lack of time as deterrents to women's attendance at general courses, but there was no discussion of how these barriers could be surmounted or removed. This is unsurprising given the dominance of conservative social values during the 1950s, despite the influx of women into the labour market. The survey also reports on 'an interesting experiment' concerning a school composed of 'leading women', which points to a longstanding interest in having women educate other women:

'These students were provided with notes and when similar schools were held in other areas the most promising of the women were invited to conduct classes. Most of them did extremely well and the other women responded favourably to the experience of being helped by one of their own number.' (TUC 1954:12)

Paradoxically, in the face of the perceived obstacles to women's attendance, women-only schools continued to be relatively successful in attracting students, especially those newly involved. For example, it was noted in the 1956 CUCW report that:

'Unions are showing greater success than in the past in interesting a wider circle of their women and girl membership in educational activities' (TUC 1956).

The TUC held women's schools throughout the 1950s, although CUCW delegates were regularly reminded that the schools were intended as an introduction to trade unionism. Therefore repeated attendance by individual women was discouraged, suggesting that once

women had attended a single course they should be able to cope with the male dominated context (TUC 1958). The legacy of this approach remains apparent today, as we shall see in Chapter Five. There are some indications that the TUC experienced difficulties in sustaining efforts to attract newer women, but that women who did participate moved on to attend more women's courses:

‘In considering the provision of educational facilities for women, it has been noted that in the last four years attendances [sic] have fallen by one third at the weekend schools which were intended to provide a general introduction to trade unionism, but that the two schools which had been held in each of the past two years on more specific subjects had been well attended.’ (TUC 1960)

The establishment of the TUC's Education Department in 1964 was another exciting and in many ways positive development which led to the mushrooming of day-release courses. However, the development also preceded and enabled a further policy shift towards prioritising the training of shop stewards (in response to the recommendations of the 1968 Donovan Report, (Smith 1982). This effectively meant that the opportunity for education to stimulate interest in trade unionism prior to election or appointment as a representative had diminished. This development carried particular implications for women who were less likely to be stewards and who were therefore further excluded from the main thrust of union education. For example, CUCW reports noted in two consecutive years (1965 and 1966) that the numbers of women taking part in general TUC courses were small and had declined (TUC 1965). The TUC continued to provide women's schools throughout the 1960s and they provoked no further controversy. We cannot assume though that this was because women-only courses were now universally supported. It is equally possible that no dissent was articulated because the provision was small scale and it simply was not worth confronting the now more assertive and militant women over this issue.

Continuing the trend established in the immediate post-war period, the emphasis on training representatives was underscored again in 1972, when the TUC argued in response to the government Commission on Industrial Relations for a contribution from the 'public education service' towards the cost of training union representatives in recognition of their important role in good industrial relations (Smith 1982). However, despite the TUC's fairly narrow agenda, it also established a greater variety of modes of attendance by the early 1970s, including residential weeks, summer schools, day release, weekend schools,

evening classes and correspondence courses (Salmon 1983). This rendered trade union education potentially more inclusive, although in practice women continued to be underrepresented. It is not possible to be precise about the extent of women's underrepresentation before 1976 because the TUC only began systematically monitoring women's participation in its courses in that year. However, it is safe to assume given the greater availability of evidence that prior to the late 1970s, women comprised only a tiny proportion of trade union students. For example, in 1976 the proportion of women TUC students was just eight per cent (Labour Research 2000). The fact that women's participation was not monitored is of course indicative of the TUC's lack of concern for developing special measures to increase women's involvement, highlighting the gender blind nature of industrial relations policy and practice of the time.

Legal reforms in 1978 conferring entitlement to paid educational leave for recognised union workplace and safety representatives had a significant impact, enabling student numbers and the number of courses provided to increase substantially, but narrowing the type of courses offered. Also, in 1978 public funds (in the form of grant aid from the Department of Education and Science) were made available for TUC-approved training courses. These developments allowed the establishment of the cornerstone of the TUC's educational provision – the Ten-day Programme, a day-release course designed to induct new workplace representatives into their role. The broad, liberal educational objectives of the early provision had now firmly given way to training courses with specific instrumental objectives (Pedler 1974).

Enter feminism – building bridges: women-only courses from the late 1970s

The twin developments of the mid- to late 1970s of paid educational leave and public funding of trade union education proved a mixed blessing and had implications for the orientation of union education. On the one hand the widespread expansion of provision and take-up was made possible; on the other hand the content of trade union education became to a greater extent circumscribed by the necessity for representatives to gain employer approval to attend. For example, a number of Industrial Tribunal cases arose from employers' refusal to grant paid time off to attend certain courses (Salmon 1983). This occurred particularly where the course syllabus was deemed to have no bearing on the

employer's relations with the union, which would undoubtedly have included women-only courses.

The enabling context of the preceding period was soon to become hostile with the election in 1979 of the Thatcher government in the midst of economic and industrial decline. One outcome relevant to the discussion here was that tighter management controls rendered it more difficult for workplace representatives to take the paid educational leave which had become a central feature of collective bargaining. Further, large-scale redundancies in the unions' manufacturing and industrial heartland significantly reduced the number of trade unionists available for training. A 1982 study of shop steward training found that whilst some firms were continuing to actively encourage stewards to attend union courses (in the belief that this would improve workplace industrial relations), many others were opposed to union training (Bright and MacDermott 1982). A TUC review of its education services five years later reconfirmed that employers were becoming more obstructive in granting paid release and were also challenging attendance on grounds of irrelevance of course syllabuses (Labour Research 1988). The consequence was a substantial decline in overall provision of union education during the 1980s (Holford 1993; Salmon 1983; TUC 2001), particularly in the longer (ten) day-release courses, although short course provision increased to make it easier for trade unionists to negotiate paid leave or take unpaid leave.

Yet against this generally hostile background emerged one of the most important periods of development in women's union education attributable to the general influence of feminism, the efforts of feminist trade union women and the 'woman friendly' legal reforms⁷ of the period. As stated earlier, by the 1970s feminism was a strong influence on union women, as revealed by the new demands they were making of their unions and by the way that they were using separate organising as a vehicle. Feminists now demanded inclusion on their terms: they highlighted barriers to women's participation in courses, such as childcare and called upon unions to develop responses (such as the provision of creches). Under mounting pressure from feminist trade union women, in 1978 the TUC Education Committee conducted a review of education provision for women trade unionists. It examined two key areas: (i) the adequacy of existing educational provision in dealing with the issues raised by the position of women at work and in the unions; (ii) the

⁷ The Equal Pay Act (1970, 1983) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975).

scope for special educational provision to meet the special needs of women and to help increase their involvement and influence in unions (Elliot 1980).

The outcome was the provision of women-only 'bridging courses', which concentrated largely on basic trade union issues and on developing the skills necessary to perform in a union role. The emphasis, initially at least, was to equip women to function as activists and stewards in the male-dominated union context, i.e. to provide a bridge to participation, arguably a deficit model (Briskin 1993). This development was soon followed by the 1979 TUC charter 'Equality for Women within Trade Unions' which urged individual unions to give special encouragement to women to attend courses and promoted the establishment of women's separate organising, although not specifically women-only courses. Individual unions also started to provide women-only courses and by 1987 nine of the eleven largest TUC unions did so (SERTUC 1987).

The historical evidence indicates that earlier incarnations of women-only courses were little more than 'remedial classes to give the ladies a chance to catch up' (Beale 1982:104). In contrast, in the late 1970s even if the TUC aim was fairly conservative, the women tutors aimed to develop women's trade union and gender consciousness and their confidence in their personal abilities (Cunnison and Stageman 1995). The mutually supportive environment of women-only courses provided a safe place for women to develop their knowledge and skills and their own approaches as women trade unionists and, critically, encouraged women to undertake further courses (Beale 1982; Cunnison and Stageman 1995). The evidence suggests that the unions were unable to control the social processes of the courses, even if they sought to direct the educational agenda: this is a theme the thesis explores in Chapter Seven.

Women-only courses were usually tutored by women, on grounds that women tutors shared experiences with students and therefore could support women more effectively (Aldred 1981), therefore one of the spin-off effects of the growth of women's courses was an increase in the number of women tutors. This also impacted on the overall provision, because a larger number of women began tutoring general courses and using their experiences of women-only teaching to inform their overall approach to trade union tutoring. In a 1981 article drawing on her recent experience of teaching a TUC women-only, ten-week course, one tutor described how the experience had changed her approach

to trade union tutoring: *'any doubts I had about the validity of separate educational provision for women have disappeared. Further, it has had the effect of forcing me to rethink my view on topics where I had always accepted the 'correct' trade union wisdom'* (Pierce 1981), the 'correct' version being a masculine construction.

This kind of experience stimulated debate among trade union tutors about the need to address 'women's issues' within the general curriculum in order to avoid divorcing women and their concerns from mixed-sex courses. These issues were debated in the early 1980s in a number of contributions (mostly by practising trade union tutors) to the *Trade Union Studies Journal* and can be summarised as follows.

There was general support for women-only courses, but concern that they would do little to redress the male bias of general educational provision (Aldred 1981; McIlroy 1982). New course materials were needed for the general courses, dealing with the new social and economic issues, including those of specific relevance to women. For example, learning activities needed to abandon the image of the shop steward as a man working in the manufacturing industry (Holford 1993) by using language denoting both sexes to refer to stewards. Mixed-sex (or frequently *de facto*, men's) courses also needed to consider the historical and contemporary participation of women, explore sexism within unions and wider society (Beale 1982a) and confront the conflictual nature of gender relations in the labour market (Grayson 1985). For example, men needed to recognise the uncomfortable dimension of trade union history that men have not always supported women in their struggles (e.g. Beale 1982; Boston 1987). In summary it was felt that trade union courses offered potential to challenge the deep-seated sexist attitudes and assumptions prevalent in the unions, which needed to be dislodged if cultural change was to occur (Grayson 1985).

A quote from one tutor captures the views expressed by many others: *'it is not just a question of educating women, (like some colonised race about to be enfranchised by the colonisers) in the ways of Trade Unionism. It is a question of examining how the principles and practices of Trade Unionism can work against the interests and involvement of women, and exploring means of overcoming and changing this situation'*, (Elliot 1980:4). Despite the perceived need to rethink trade union courses altogether, women-only courses won considerable support from feminist and some male trade union tutors. They

acknowledged the possible pitfalls, but believed them to be key to developing among women the confidence to challenge male norms and power within the unions.

As trade union courses generally altered and became more 'women-friendly' (Cunnison and Stageman 1995) women's participation in mixed sex courses increased rapidly in the years following the introduction of the 'bridging' courses and the TUC charter and by 1985-6 women represented a quarter of TUC students overall (Labour Research 1988). Thus, although mixed courses were still male-dominated, women could now generally expect not to be a lone female participant, therefore the environment was less threatening to many women. In terms of the longer-term impact, Cunnison and Stageman (1995) claim that the 'feminisation' of general courses came to a halt in the late 1980s with TUC cutbacks and a generally hostile environment and relatively few unions successfully 'mainstreamed' women's equality issues into mixed-sex courses. The 1990s were a period of retrenchment and defensive union strategy generally, although women-only courses continued to be provided by the TUC and many individual unions. There is a dearth of literature on trade union education in this period, probably explained by academic researchers turning their attention to the question of whether unions could survive the harsh climate. However, the less hostile climate and feminised context of the late 1990s and early 2000s has revived interest in union education and kindled feminist interest in the contribution women are making to the survival of the movement as shown by the discussion in Chapter Two.

Towards inclusion: contemporary women-only courses

The chapter now turns to consider the contemporary nature of women-only courses and the questions taken forward in the research. With regard to the contemporary empirical picture, women are now closer to proportional representation in TUC courses than formerly, making up thirty-three per cent of students (TUC 2001), against forty-one per cent of TUC members (Heery et al 2003). Interestingly, this has produced no significant challenge to the existence of women's courses, and the debate about whether they should be temporary or permanent has not been officially revisited within the TUC since the 1960s. However, the ongoing ability of women-only courses to provoke controversy at grassroots level is shown in the empirical chapters of the thesis.

Nevertheless, women-only courses are now widely established and accepted as a form of separate organising as evidenced by provision by the TUC, the ten largest TUC affiliated unions and many smaller unions. Many women-only courses are open to 'ordinary' members as well as to office-holders, because these courses are still seen as a device for encouraging more women to participate (Greene and Kirton 2002; Munro and Rainbird 2000; 2000a). Cook et al (1992:126) propose that women's courses serve four functions: induction of the inexperienced; members' exposure to female role models; their mobilisation as pressure groups for equality; and reassurance for possessive husbands. The available evidence suggests that the first three functions are critical (e.g. Greene and Kirton 2002; Munro and Rainbird 2000; 2000a) and whilst the fourth receives less attention, it still surfaces as an issue in this thesis and other research (e.g. Cunnison and Stageman 1995).

Considering the centrality of union education to wider trade union objectives and the belief that women-only courses help to increase female participation, there is surprisingly little research specifically on women-only courses. Recent exceptions include Greene and Kirton 2002; Kirton and Greene 2002a; Munro and Rainbird 2000; 2000a; Kirton and Healy forthcoming; although some studies of women's participation touch on women's courses as part of their investigation (e.g. Cunnison and Stageman 1995; McBride 2001; Parker 2002). These studies emphasise the content, processes and outcomes of women-only courses, which give the courses a distinctive character.

With regard to outcomes, one of the questions is whether women-only courses do give rise to increased female participation. Anecdotally the dominant belief is that they do, but there is only limited evidence to confirm this because research has not followed up ex-students to find out what became of them. There is also a question surrounding what counts as increased participation; i.e. moving up the union hierarchy, starting to attend meetings, doing more courses? One US study (Catlett 1986) surveyed women approximately eighteen months after attending a women-only course and found that an overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that the course had encouraged them to be more active. This thesis can contribute qualitatively to these debates, especially the latter question, because unusually interviewees are revisited two years after attending women's schools (see Chapter Four).

Another question is whether women-only courses empower women to develop their own terms for participation, rather than fall in with the masculine norms and values traditionally underpinning trade union culture and practices. In McBride's (2001) study on women's separate organising in UNISON, one regional women's group believed it was training women to 'run the union' through women-only courses. McBride (2001:177) contends that the benefit of learning such skills in a women-only environment is that 'expertise' and 'democratic skills' could be conceptualised in such a way as to provide the means to challenge the male-defined 'rules of the game'. Linked to this, Greene and Kirton (2002) argue that building women's confidence is a key outcome of women-only courses. It is not always clear whether women's lack of confidence in the trade union context stems from being new or from being a woman, but their lack of confidence is seemingly enhanced by male domination of structures (Kirton 1999; Munro 1999). Participation in women-only courses appears to build women's confidence to participate in the wider union. The course activities are key to confidence building; for example, some women had never spoken in a public arena before and the women-only course provided a 'safe', supportive environment where they could practice. These themes are given in-depth attention in Chapter Seven.

These themes raise the question of how the processes of a women-only course differ from a mixed-sex course, i.e. why should women's courses have these effects? Trade union courses generally employ a pedagogical model, which emphasises participants' experiences; the benefits of collective organisation and developing shared understandings and definitions (Walters 1996). Women-only courses also utilise this model, but the women-only environment gives it a different character, such that it is possible to argue that women learn more effectively in the women-only setting. Firstly this is because women talk about trade union issues from a women's perspective when there are no men present. This has the effect of raising gender *and* trade union consciousness (Cunnison and Stageman 1995) and secondly because modes of expression in the women-only setting are different (Greene and Kirton 2002).

The latter is worth exploring in more detail because it is a key theme of the thesis (explored in Chapter Seven). Referring to Young's (2000) notion, discussed earlier, of internal exclusion, she (2000:56) sees the solution to the problem of internal exclusion as lying in more inclusive modes of political communication. She argues that political interactions privilege specific styles of expression, shared and favoured by members of

dominant groups, for example the norm of dispassionateness and the devaluing of emotion, figurative expressions and the telling of personal stories. In contrast, Young (*ibid*:71) sees narrative as an important mode of expression for excluded groups, because the stories exchanged provide a means for group members to identify commonalities of experience, which can be part of the process of politicisation. However, storytelling is liable to be dismissed by dominant groups as pure anecdote. Thus, people's contributions to discussions are often excluded from serious consideration not because of what is said, but how it is said. The theme of modes of political communication surfaces in the analysis of the empirical data and it is also noted in Greene and Kirton (2002) that in women-only courses, participants felt at liberty to openly display emotions and tell personal stories. Other sites of women's separate organising also provide opportunities for reconceptualising modes of political communication, which is important for women's politicisation and indicates a link between democratic structure and process (e.g. Healy and Kirton 2000). The processes of women-only courses are also analysed in detail in Chapter Seven.

Conclusions and implications for the research

The chapter has outlined the historical context of women-only trade union courses. It has shown that the development of women's separate organising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was mainly a response to external exclusion from mainstream, male dominated trade unions (Boston 1987). Once women were more generally admitted to male trade unions, they gradually began to organise separately within them as a response to internal exclusion and hostility (Cunnison and Stageman 1995). Women's separate organising only became a more politicised, proactive vehicle in the late 1970s under the influence of second-wave feminism. The evolution of women-only courses has to be situated within this framework of understanding. That is, the evidence gathered has shown that early forms of trade union education did not cater well or specifically for women and women had little or no influence on developments because of their absence from the male dominated trade unions, which were leading developments. In the 1930s, women no longer had their own separate unions; were more numerous in the male dominated unions, and the TUC, prompted by a motion put by the CUCW, began providing women-only courses on a small scale basis and continued to do so through to the 1970s. The stated intention was to encourage increased female participation both in courses and in unions

generally, although there was little evidence of unions wanting to let women into the structures of power before the late 1960s. The situation for women started to alter significantly once the influence of feminism took hold in the 1970s and by the late 1970s women's separate organising generally and women-only courses specifically were appropriated by feminist women towards more radical, politicised purposes. The feminist aim of the late 1970s was to empower women to challenge the male dominated unions and to define their own terms for participation and involvement. With feminist women teaching the women's courses, the male hierarchy in effect had little influence. Whether the radical edge is now less sharp at a time when many union women are reluctant to identify as feminists (see Chapter Two) is questionable. Nevertheless, the available contemporary literature establishes women-only courses as an important form of separate organising capable of encouraging women's participation largely because it constitutes a space for women to define their own ways of working. This theme is pursued in the empirical analysis. In conclusion the historical analysis shows that whether women-only courses bear the hallmark of marginalisation or empowerment is historically contingent upon the overall context of women's unionism in different periods.

The literature review has discussed and outlined the feminist industrial relations paradigm within which the study is located (Chapter One); discussed the theoretical and empirical contexts of women and trade unions, highlighting the major themes to be taken forward in the research (Chapter Two); and provided a historical and contemporary context for the institutional site of the research - women-only courses (Chapter Three). The following chapter discusses and describes the methods used in the gathering of the research data.

Chapter Four

Research Methodology

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to situate the study within a research paradigm and to explicate the chosen research methods. First, a few brief words on how the project came about. During the period 1998-1999 I was involved in a research project with colleagues at the University of North London looking at union strategies and policies in relation to membership diversity. One strand of the project involved investigating the unions' educational policies towards women, focusing on TGWU's National Women Members' School and MSF's National Weekend Schools for women (the latter organised by the women's committee). This work resulted in an article exploring the unions' equality approach using the theoretical constructs of liberal and radical equality and diversity approaches (see Greene and Kirton 2002). This project provided a platform for me to negotiate with the unions to expand on the early work by observing courses and following participants over time. The interviews, observation and analysis utilised in the thesis constitute work I subsequently undertook for the programme of PhD research.

The chapter first discusses what the feminist paradigm (discussed in Chapter One) means for the design and execution of the study and linked to this the rationale for the qualitative methodology employed. Next the chapter outlines the multiple research methods: observation within the chosen trade unions, the interview programme, the 'snapshot' surveys and the use of documentary evidence and discusses the process of gaining access to the case study organisations. Finally, there is a discussion of the methods of analysing the data.

I follow Silverman's (2000) recommendation of a 'natural history' approach to the methodology chapter of the thesis, by setting out the personal context of the research and by detailing some of the key research experiences in the first person. I believe that the 'story' of how the research was conducted is important for understanding the 'story' that

the research has produced. This will be elaborated upon as the chapter progresses, but in essence it means that I acknowledge my subjectivist position in the research process; that is I do not situate myself as a 'white-coated scientist'. In other words, my own background and characteristics, especially as a woman researcher, are important features of the research approach, therefore these are briefly summarised.

After university I worked for three years in personnel roles and quickly came to see a dissonance between my world-view and that of management, especially in relation to the way I perceived myself and other women were treated. After an introduction to feminist literature I decided to leave the private sector and I was employed for more than ten years in the voluntary sector, in feminist (women-only), political and trade union sponsored organisations and was involved in a number of trade union supported campaigns (some women-only). This led me to attend several TGWU courses (as a member); later to work as a tutor on trade union courses and to carry out policy research for a number of unions; and to attend the TUC's regular 'tutor briefings'. I only occasionally taught women's courses, but during this time I encountered many trade union women in both paid and unpaid positions and talked at length with many of the barriers and constraints they faced in the course of their union careers¹. I therefore had a longstanding interest in women in unions and my MA dissertation project (Kirton 1997) was the first opportunity to pursue this academically: the present research builds on and complements this earlier work (see Kirton 1999; Kirton and Healy 1999; Healy and Kirton 2000; Healy and Kirton 2002). Now, as a university lecturer, with a history of trade union education, my belief is that education is not something that 'is done' to students by their teachers; rather it is a *process* in which students actively engage (or not) and it is also a collective and social activity. This 'rag bag' of work experiences has influenced my understanding of the social world of work and therefore the epistemological position underpinning this thesis.

¹The thesis utilises the concept of 'career' to analyse women's participation in unions. The term 'career' is appropriate to the analysis because it conveys a stronger sense of purposeful activity and an unfolding over time. In Layder's (1993:76) terms 'career' captures both objective and subjective dimensions. In the context of the thesis, the subjective career refers to the private meanings and interpretations of union participation, while the objective manifestations of a union career include office-holding. This is important to the analysis because, for example, a woman's union career might not develop in objective terms, but if she over time feels more confident and effective in her role in subjective terms there might have been considerable career development. Further, according to Layder's (*ibid*) framework, the concept of 'career' is held as relevant to a variety of non-occupational areas. Thus, people can have multiple careers. In this study women's work, family and union careers are relevant, although the primary focus of the research design and empirical analysis is on union careers.

The feminist research paradigm

Given the existence of competing epistemologies, in order for a reader to interpret research 'findings' it is important to have an understanding of the paradigm that the researcher was working within. In Chapter One feminism as a theory for explaining women's oppression was discussed. This chapter outlines feminist approaches to carrying out research. I also want to address how this fits with the qualitative methodology employed. The intention here is not to engage extensively with competing theories of ontology and epistemology, but to situate the research within an epistemological framework.

Social science research has been enormously influenced by Enlightenment ideas concerning objectivity, which was to be achieved by placing the emphasis on empirical investigation capable (allegedly) of producing generalisable explanations (Webb 2000); that is statistically verifiable quantitative research, which could be interpreted (allegedly) without researcher partiality. Feminists and others preferring more interpretative approaches, have challenged the epistemological foundations of the emphasis on objectivity and have sought alternative ways of researching the social world, arguing that research findings do not simply reflect objective reality, rather they require interpretation by inescapably partial and subjective researchers.

The intention here is to discuss what feminism means for research rather than theories of feminism *per se* (see Chapter One for a more detailed discussion of theories of feminism), although the latter clearly guides the former. Feminist research can be understood as an approach or perspective, which informs analysis, rather than as a method (Webb 2000). However, since it is now recognised that there are different feminisms, what a 'feminist approach' looks like probably requires some explication. Harding (1987) identified three epistemological positions, which are useful for framing the discussion: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and feminist post-modernism. Feminist empiricism emerged in the 1960s to question the androcentric character of social research and to call for investigations centred on women. This approach added women in to the research picture, but did little to challenge the power relations embedded in constructions of 'knowers' (Webb 2000). That is, the approach continued to position the researcher as

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knower, rather than women themselves, in an unquestioning fashion, thus reproducing the subject/object distinction of traditional social science research.

Feminist standpoint theory addresses this criticism in its rejection of the goal of objectivity, on the basis that it is a masculine construction. In contrast, the importance of acknowledging the subjectivity and partiality of the researcher is underscored and knowledge produced from this perspective is regarded as less distorted (Webb 2000). Feminist standpoint researchers privilege the subjectivity of oppressed groups and perceive research to be a political project whose aim is to be transformative for women. Through the research process women as objects of research become knowers or subjects in the research process as the traditional power relationship between researcher and researched is destabilised by the female researcher seeking a non-hierarchical relationship with interviewees and investing her own personal identity in the relationship (Oakley 1981). This then gives researched women voice, as it is not only the researcher who is positioned as knower. The theory has been influential and for many feminist scholars feminist research has come to mean research which is 'by women, on women and for women' (Webb 2000:43). The general orientation is political and emancipatory.

However, critics of feminist standpoint theory argue that it fails to engage meaningfully with the heterogeneity of women's lives and experiences and in particular privileges the experiences of white women. It might then be somewhat naïve to expect that any given feminist researcher could construct the above type of interviewer/interviewee relationship with all other women, irrespective of other social identity characteristics such as race and class. As discussed in Chapter One, feminist post-modernism emerged through the 1980s and 1990s in response to the growing recognition of women's heterogeneity and the perceived inappropriateness of universal theories of women's oppression. Research in this relatively new tradition typically plays up the fluidity of multiple identities based around subjectivist positions and plays down the concept of fixed gender identities. Rather than focusing on the biological categories of men and women, masculinities and femininities are explored.

My strongest affiliation is with feminist standpoint theory, but I concur with Webb (2000) that it is possible for feminists to combine different elements of these frameworks within

their research. Indeed the epistemological approaches are, arguably, not mutually exclusive. I believe it is important to be sensitive to one's (relatively) privileged position as an academic researcher, to have a reflexive sensitivity to the lesser privilege of some women and to avoid a biologically reductionist interpretation. This should help to resolve some of the problems of producing knowledge, which reflects the multiple realities of a diversity of women's lived experiences. However, it might be necessary for the individual feminist researcher to decide that there are certain aspects of women's experiences that she cannot research by virtue of not being on the inside of that particular social world.

For example, I came to research relatively late as a working mother and a trade unionist (characteristics shared with many of the women being researched), but also as a highly educated, middle-class, (albeit from a working class background), white woman (characteristics which sometimes separated me from the researched individuals). Given the heterogeneity of women and their experiences, I concluded that it was not possible for me as the researcher to be all knowing about women, any more than it was possible for me to share all the diversity of the women's lives. However, I was not prepared to simply research a group of women mirroring my own social identity characteristics. As Oakley (1998) notes working class and black people have lower participation rates in qualitative research, which can lead to false inferences being made. This has to be partly because middle class white women dominate academic researchers on gender. Thus, it does not seem to me acceptable for feminists to evade researching under-researched groups out of allegiance to a theoretical position, which in practice serves to further deepen the absence of certain groups of women. In summary, I argue that rejecting essentialist and universalist assumptions about women does not involve an outright rejection of the notion of a shared female ontology rooted in experiences of a common (albeit broad) condition of oppression, nor does it involve evading research on 'other' groups of women altogether. In the account of the research activities below, I show how in practice I sought to reflexively resolve some of these dilemmas within a rigorous feminist methodological framework.

Qualitative research

Feminist (standpoint) research documents the lives and activities of women, seeks to understand the experiences of women from their own point of view, and conceptualises

women's behaviour as an expression of social contexts (Reinharz 1992:51). It is because of this aim that with regard to methodological approaches, feminist scholarship is inextricably linked to qualitative methods to the extent that feminists who utilise quantitative methods often apologise for doing so (Oakley 1998). After all the feminist critique of social science research was essentially a critique of positivist and quantitative research, which it was argued, privileged masculine knowledge (Oakley, 1998). Feminist research thus came to be associated with qualitative methods, particularly in-depth, face-to-face interviews, which allow women's 'voices' to be heard, seemingly fitting well with feminist political concerns. Reinharz (1992:44) goes so far as to claim that 'feminist researchers who have done interview studies have modified social science concepts and created important new ways of seeing the world'.

However, the relationship between feminist research and qualitative methods is not cast in stone. Arguing against methodological binarism - the unquestioning alignment of feminist scholarly work with qualitative methods and the unreasoned rejection of quantitative methods, Oakley (1998) shows how historically social reformers have used quantitative social investigations to reveal the conditions of women's lives, for example the extent of female poverty. She also shows how large-scale surveys continue to expose gender inequalities in society. Similarly, Purcell (1990:632) calls for continued quantitative monitoring of labour market statistics, together with qualitative research on gender on grounds that both approaches 'can together contribute to changing the world as well as understanding it better'. These arguments lead us towards advocating the careful selection of methods, which are suited to the nature of the investigation. This exhortation applies as much to feminist research as to any other. In other words qualitative methods are not inherently suited to explorations of women's lives and quantitative survey work on matters which pertain to women can also make an important contribution to advancing gender equality through knowledge of women's lives. Thus it is important for feminist researchers, just as any other, to explain, if not justify their methods.

Generally though, feminist readers would not require a feminist researcher to defend the use of qualitative methods, quite the contrary. However, in the wider realm of social science research, it is ironically qualitative researchers who are still called upon to defend their methods and their findings. This is largely because qualitative research does not claim

to have a wider predictive capacity, in the way that a quantitative approach does. Bearing in mind feminist research's preference for qualitative methods, whilst at the same time recognising various criticisms of the qualitative approach, I now explain why a qualitative methodology was chosen for this particular study.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the barriers to women's involvement and participation in unions are well documented in the feminist industrial relations literature. Less is known about the actual experiences of women union members in specific contexts and how these experiences are interwoven with institutional and structural barriers. Generally, there is a need for methodological approaches to contribute to the filling of the knowledge gap created by utilisation of quantitative methods, as is recognised by leading industrial relations researchers, for example Kelly (1998); McCarthy (1994). Rubin and Rubin (1995) assert that qualitative methodologies are suitable when the purpose of the research is to unravel complicated relationships and when the researcher wants to understand how present situations have resulted from past decisions or events. Accordingly, in-depth qualitative interviews were congruent with my research objectives, enabling me to explore the tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies that are part of women's everyday lives in context of patriarchal society, thus forging a link between agency and structure.

Further, Layder (1993:127) regards the use of qualitative methodologies as central to field research, which seeks to give an account of social activities taking place in 'bounded social worlds' such as specific occupational groups, or in this case a trade union setting. The qualitative methodology allowed for the in-depth exploration of actors' definitions and interpretations (Layder 1993; Stroh 2000), surfacing the significance of informal processes and practices (Rubin and Rubin 1995) in the union context and giving the 'voices' of the researched group prominence. This would not have been possible with a quantitative standardised approach, which could not have uncovered the complexity and diversity of responses it was necessary to analyse for the particular objectives of this project. Thus the qualitative methodology fitted well with both the research objectives and the feminist paradigm.

Importantly the longitudinal dimension and life history approach of the research (explained further below) also allowed for interpretations and perceptions to be situated within the

context of changed and changing material and personal circumstances. There is a tradition in feminist sociological research of multiple interviews (Reinharz 1992:36-7), which enable the researcher to see how thoughts, experiences and interpretations are situated in particular circumstances. For example, I was interested in the way that women's trade union 'careers' are interwoven with their occupational and family 'careers', particularly in the way that involvement in these multiple 'careers' is dynamic and responsive to the constraints and demands of one another. The qualitative methodology combined with the broad concept of 'career' (as in Layder 1993:134) enabled various strands of individual activity to be explored whilst at the same time maintaining the emphasis on trade union 'careers'. Multiple² interviews add to this strength because it is possible to build up greater trust and openness with interviewees, such that the researcher learns things that a single interview might not have touched on.

In qualitative research, using a plurality of methods, as is done in this thesis, can overcome some of the commonly perceived problems of small data sets, because different data sources provide an opportunity to confirm or refute preliminary findings from one source. Of course it is also possible that multiple methods produce contradictory evidence and incline the researcher towards different conclusions (Oakley 1998). Arguably, there is no way of achieving a perfect research design. Nevertheless, as is explained below, the use of multiple methods in qualitative research is a worthwhile endeavour because it enhances the interpretative quality of the data. However, this does not provide insulation against research bias; on the contrary all social research faces the problem of the influence of the researcher and her/his values on the data. From a feminist perspective it is important to recognise this in order to qualify the knowledge claims made, but most importantly to be reflexive, as discussed below.

However, this is not to say that a quantitative methodology would not also have had strengths in its capacity to capture the views of a larger group of trade union women. Interviews can provide answers to the 'why' questions (Stroh 2000), but are less able to tackle the 'how many' or 'how often' questions, which are also pertinent to the broad aim of this research, but less applicable to the more precise objectives. In recognition of this,

² Here meaning more than one with the same individual.

limited use is made of a short survey of women course participants, described in more detail later, to answer some of the ‘how many’ questions pertinent to the research.

Research Methods

The purposes of this section are to outline the chosen research methods and to elaborate upon the fieldwork. Qualitative research often involves the use of organisations as case studies (Burton 2000). However, one of the criticisms of case study research from a positivist perspective is its lack of generalisability. One of the ways of overcoming this criticism and of deepening the interpretative quality of the data is to use more than one case study to enable the results to be compared and contrasted and the findings to appear more robust. Another way is to choose cases, which contain certain typical or representative characteristics (Burton 2000). I use two case study organisations – MSF and TGWU, two of the largest British trade unions – for the purposes of contrast and comparison. Both case study organisations reflect the typical characteristics of British trade unions: they are male-dominated with growing female memberships; decision-making bodies are male-dominated, they are both occupationally diverse general unions.

The fieldwork consisted of two phases of observation, surveys and interviews (see **Appendix One**). However, methodological and analytical emphasis is given to the interviews with course participants (held at two points in time) since it is their ‘voices’ that the research seeks to hear. It is worth emphasising that one of the most significant features of the research methods is the fact that participants were interviewed twice, with a significant time gap in between interviews. This constitutes an original methodological approach in industrial relations research, which deepens the analysis and enriches understanding of women’s participation in unions by overcoming the ‘snapshot’ element common to both quantitative and qualitative studies.

The Research Map (adapted from Layder 1993) in **Figure 4.1** depicts the relationship between the research elements, aims and objectives, methods and theoretical issues. The Map is also multi-layered and shows how the fieldwork is located at the levels of ‘situated activity’ and ‘self’, whilst the literature review situates the study in a broader setting and context and in turn the women’s experiences are located within the wider context depicted

in the literature review. Thus, from this it is possible to see how the research aims and objectives relate to the different levels of analysis. A vertical reading shows how feminist theories thread through the various layers of analysis. Layder (1993:71) argues that whilst the 'elements' refer to levels of social organisation which are closely interrelated, these can be scrutinised separately for analytic and research purposes. Indeed, it is necessary to make decisions about which 'elements' to accord primacy in order to design a manageable project. Thus, according to Layder's (*ibid*:74) analysis it is justifiable for a researcher to focus attention on one or two areas or 'elements' whilst the others remain in the background and are addressed for contextual and theoretical purposes in the way that I have shown in the adaptation of the Research Map.

Before discussing the research methods in more detail, issues surrounding gaining access to the two case study unions are addressed.

Figure 4.1: Research Map (adapted from Layder, 1993)

Research Element	Research Focus And Aim/Objective	Research Method	Theoretical Issues
Context	<p>Focus: Gender relations in context of patriarchal society</p> <p>Research Aim: To explore the potentialities for women's trade union courses to act as a vehicle for developing women's union participation.</p>	Secondary literature review	Industrial relations theories; feminist theories; structures of constraint and enablement; in historical and contemporary contexts.
Setting	<p>Focus: Male-dominated trade unions</p> <p>Research Objective: To explore whether and how women-only union courses contribute to developing and sustaining women's participation and involvement.</p>	Secondary literature review	Theories of union participation, of trade union orientations, union democracy, collective organisation and actions, feminist theories.
Situated Activity	<p>Focus: Women-only trade union courses, women's workplaces and local union structures.</p> <p>Research Objective: To examine the national level women-only courses of two case study unions and to explore the social processes which occur on these courses in order to investigate the ways in which women's gender and union identities are shaped thereby.</p>	Secondary literature review. Historical and contemporary TUC documentation. Observation of women-only courses in the two case study unions. Examination of the two case-study unions' relevant documentation, including course materials, course monitoring data, policies. Interviews with the two unions' directors of education, education officers and course tutors.	Feminist theories, feminist practices, i.e. women's separate organising and feminist theories of women's participation and involvement.
Self	<p>Focus: Experiences and perceptions of women course participants</p> <p>Research Objective: To explore the ways in which women utilise their agency both within the education and broader union contexts to advance gender democracy within trade unions.</p>	Two-stage interview programme: 1 st interview shortly after attending a women-only course, 2 nd interview approximately 2 years after the course. Semi-structured interviews with samples of women course participants. Snapshot surveys of course participants.	Orientations to trade unionism, work and family. 'Identity' issues with a focus on gender, class and race. Feminist orientations and feminist practices.

Gaining access to MSF and TGWU

Securing access to organisations and people is necessary for any successful research project (Burton 2000) and there are many practical as well as philosophical issues to consider (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). My choice of case study organisations reflects some of the pragmatic considerations and dilemmas involved in gaining access. It is also important to reflect upon obstacles to gaining access because these in themselves can provide insights into the nature of the case study setting (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) as is evident from the discussion below.

The world of trade unionism is a small one and there is a tendency within it to be suspicious of potentially opportunist academics and other supposed 'careerists'. When negotiating access there is therefore a need to be sensitive to this climate and to consider how one presents oneself to the gatekeepers. Having previously carried out a case study of senior women in MSF, I had already successfully negotiated access on that project and previously interviewed the director of education. Also, since I had built up a fairly thorough knowledge of the structures and culture of the union, it seemed a practical research strategy to begin a new project there, which was related to, but would build upon my earlier work. MSF is a fairly open union in terms of its relationship with academic researchers in the sense that the union bureaucracy tends to be only marginally involved in issues of permission to carry out research and only then if there is a concern that confidentiality might be breached. I had previously had access to confidential minutes of the meetings of the National Women's Sub-Committee and was known to the union as a trustworthy researcher. There were therefore no problems in gaining the kind of access I required to conduct the study of women's experiences of trade union education. Formal interviews were set up with the director of education and the education officer responsible for the national women's school - 'Women's Week' - and the terms of the access arrangement were formalised. In the first instance, this included permission to attend 'Women's Week'. I later asked for access to course monitoring data and to course materials. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) note, negotiating access is to some extent an ongoing process, rather than a one-off event. I was careful not to appear too demanding at first, and so I saved some requests for information until a later date when relationships were more firmly established. A friendly, but formal relationship was maintained with the director of education, whilst my relationship with the education officer became very

friendly. The informality of the latter relationship was important for the research process because it meant that I felt able to email or telephone with any questions or queries, no matter how small or seemingly trivial. It is also the case that our discussions about course content and pedagogy, which took place regularly over the period of the fieldwork, appeared to be valued and this provides an example of feminist qualitative researcher engagement. The informal contact also familiarised me with the culture of MSF, power relations within the education department and so on, and provided the opportunity for me to ‘give something back’ to the researched organisation in return for all the effort and time put in by various members of staff.

TGWU is an under-researched union and this I believe is largely because it is less open to academic researchers. The fact that the union is not well researched made it attractive, particularly when thinking about possibilities for publication. Also, I had been a member (for ten years) and one time shop steward of TGWU, so I knew something about the union. My own activism was located largely at workplace level, since my membership coincided with the birth of my children, women’s time poverty being particularly apposite here! Therefore I had no personal contacts at the higher levels of the union. A colleague, a well-known figure in the trade union movement, particularly in education circles, acted as an informal sponsor of the research by introducing me to a key gatekeeper, the director of education, with whom I discussed access on the same basis as with MSF.

Access was agreed following a first meeting with the Director of Education, although he was less than pleased when he discovered I was a former TGWU member, but had left the union to join NATFHE and further that I had once almost accepted a job offer with rival union GMB. I think this reaction points to the precariousness of access generally and to the strong ‘insider’ culture which exists within TGWU, making access for research purposes difficult to begin with and difficult to sustain. However, a formal relationship was maintained – we met formally on two occasions and informally on numerous occasions during the fieldwork. Again, I believe this was important for the research process, particularly in terms of access to detailed documentation concerning education in the union. The constructive relationships, which I built with key gatekeepers in both unions, I believe, had profound and positive consequences for the research.

Reflexive Observation

As can be seen from **Appendix One**, altogether I carried out five periods of observation in the two unions. This section elaborates on observation as a research tool and explains the use of the terms ‘non-participative’ and ‘participative’. A fairly detailed account is provided of some of the experiences of observation to capture the essence of what I saw and heard, as well as how I behaved and was treated (Silverman 2000). The periods of observation were important opportunities for me to establish myself as someone prepared to learn about the organisations and to establish myself not as an ‘insider’ exactly, but as someone who could cross the boundary towards understanding the language and culture of the organisations (Rubin and Rubin 1995). This helped ensure that I saw the organisations for what they are, rather than the filtered representations usually made available to ‘outsiders’ via publicity media. Thus, observation served the dual purposes of bringing me closer to the case study organisations and gave a different perspective on the interview data gathered. I could, for example, have obtained names and contact details of women to interview through education officers rather than by attending courses myself. Such an approach would have created a distance or a barrier between myself the interviewees and the organisations, which would have been detrimental to the project. Observation as I have utilised it, could also be regarded as a method of triangulation. Arksey and Knight (1999) suggest triangulated research includes one method of data collection that describes and interprets the context in which the interaction takes place (in my research, observation and documentary evidence), and one that is designed to illuminate the process of interaction itself (the interviews). However, I prefer to see observation as tied to a reflexive research approach, where it is important to access as many opportunities as possible to study the chosen social world.

In summary observation involved sitting-in on courses, note taking and participating in activities where requested by the tutor to do so. Informal discussions with course participants and tutors were also a feature. The value of participating in ‘normal’ social settings (e.g. at lunch and dinner) should not be underestimated as a way of building trust with key people (e.g. tutors) (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), and as a way of gleaning information that might not emerge in the context of a formal, tape-recorded interview. More details are provided below in the context of each union. Observation activities were

located at national level women-only, five-day residential courses (see **Appendix One** for details).

Prior to attending the courses I gave some thought to the observation process: how I would behave and interact with participants and tutors, what kinds of things I would be looking for. In short it was necessary to manage aspects of myself (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) from appearance (e.g. clothing) to demeanour (e.g. body language) in order to 'fit in' and to maximise opportunities for discovery. In terms of my own behaviour whilst observing, I was guided by the course tutors in order to build positive relationships so that access did not become a problem. Since I had previous work experience as a trade union tutor, I knew what to expect of the course in terms of pedagogical orientation; that is I had a prior understanding of the student-centred, participative nature of union courses.

Therefore I gave some thought as to how I would carry out observation of small group work. I was also influenced by the literature review, and from that reflected on how women-only courses seek to encourage women's participation. I produced a list of issues for observation, which included noting how women responded to and engaged with activities designed to develop confidence; the processes and dynamics of shared learning (including examples of encouraging and supporting each other); the dynamics of the tutor-student interactions; and tutor and student interpretations and application of the curriculum (information on the actual curriculum was elicited from course materials). Notes were taken in a fieldwork notepad and were later typed, when further reflections were added.

Observation at TGWU 'National Women Members' School', October 1999 and October 2001

The School is held at T&G Centre in Eastbourne, from Monday to Friday. T&G Centre is an impressive building situated on the seafront with beautiful views of the coast from the bedrooms. Participants arrive on Sunday evening when the formalities of registration are undertaken and a social evening is held. In October 1999 I observed the 'Women at Work' course and generally spent my time talking to participants. (See Chapter Five for more details of the courses.) In October 2001 in addition to observing classes, I concentrated on talking to and interviewing tutors as they are also part of the course community and I had not been able to spend time with them in 1999.

On my first morning the tutor introduced me to the group as a researcher from the University of North London and I was invited to explain why I was there. I was conscious of the social distance this introduction might create between the course participants and me. I was also aware of the prevalent 'them and us' discourse in TGWU and the consequent need for me to play down my own professional academic status if I were to be trusted by interviewees. The need to be trusted is an important feature of feminist research (Reinharz 1992) and I was conscious from the outset of how social distance might alter the dynamics of the research process. It turned out that many course participants assumed I was an (unthreatening) student. I also took the opportunity in my brief introduction to seek their agreement to my observing in their small group activities. The relatively large number of participants meant that I was able to sit at the back of the room and unobtrusively observe and take notes during the whole-group sessions. It is important that note taking is congruent with the social setting being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Once the discussions started participants appeared not to notice my presence. The director of education had also made clear that whilst he was very happy for me to attend, he would expect me to make myself as 'invisible' as possible during the formal classes so as not to disrupt the learning.

When the group broke up for small-group discussions I would catch the eye of one woman and ask her if I could join her group. I felt a little apprehensive in this because I did not want the women to feel that I was judging their contributions. At the start of each of these discussions I told the group that I would not join in because the course was for their learning and not for mine and I was anxious not to intrude. However, I studied the set exercise with the group and then listened attentively to the ensuing discussion. I did not feel it appropriate to make notes during these discussions. Instead I made notes in the coffee break immediately following the session or when we returned to the classroom. Occasionally, if the women were having difficulty answering the questions posed, someone might look at me and say something like, 'you must know the answer to this, come on give us a hand'. Generally, I felt the women to be comfortable with my presence. During the coffee breaks I mostly joined a group of women (when not writing notes!) and chatted about the course – what they thought of it so far, where they were from, what job they did and so on. They were also usually interested to find out more about what I was doing, so time was also spent explaining the research project.

After an early dinner there is a session in the General Assembly Hall. This might be a speaker from the union or it might be focused on a topical trade union event. For example, in October 1999 there was a talk by women workers from the airline catering company 'Sky Chefs' who were on strike at the time. The Centre has a bar where participants gather in the evenings following the formal session. The atmosphere is relaxed and sociable and many participants mentioned to me the importance of being able to 'unwind' at the end of a hard day's work. That said, most women appeared to continue 'talking union' during the evenings. The evenings provided further opportunities to talk with tutors during dinner and in the bar afterwards. I made notes and reflected on what had been said when I went up to my room. On the last night I was invited to attend the post course, debriefing meeting for tutors, which takes place in the general secretary's apartment, followed by dinner at a local restaurant. This was a very interesting event providing a 'window' into the culture of the union. Copious quantities of alcohol and cigarettes were consumed in an atmosphere, which was at once formal and informal.

The meeting was informal in that it was punctuated with friendly chatter, jokes and laughter, yet the director of education steered the meeting through its agenda in a formal manner. Each tutor gave a summary of the course s/he was involved in (one of the tutors was a man), which addressed course content, the nature and behaviour of participants, any issues which needed to be addressed for the next national women's school'. Significantly the director of education asked each tutor to name any new women they considered to have potential to go further in the union¹. The meeting lasted two hours and although much drinking had gone on, the general tenor was very serious and there was a thorough dissection of each course. This seemed to indicate the importance attached to the event, together with the necessity for the director of education to justify its continuance to the general secretary. I listened to the discussion and took notes. At the end I was asked if I had anything to say about the course I had attended. It seemed appropriate to concentrate on what I saw as the positive outcomes of the course. I was thanked for my contribution and also for taking an interest in the union's courses. The meeting was important for the research as I saw how the courses are reflected upon and developed. It was also important in the sense that I gained further insight into the culture of the union: the tutors are all very close in personal terms and appear to be a tight-knit group with a strong culture wary and

¹Interviewee Mandy was one woman identified.

suspicious of ‘outsiders’. They also appeared reticent when making criticisms, which were often rebutted by the director of education.

Observation at MSF ‘Women’s Week’, June and September 2000, June 2002

The school is held at MSF’s Whitehall College in Bishop’s Stortford. The building dates back to the 19th century and is situated in twenty-one acres of parkland. It is a pleasant location in which to learn – something that is much commented upon by participants. The structure and organisation of the school bears many similarities to that of TGWU.

Participants arrive on Sunday evening to settle into their rooms and register. I focus here on the school in June 2000, although in the analysis in later chapters I draw on observations from all three schools (see **Appendix One**). (For more details of the courses, see Chapter Five.)

The education officer, was keen for me to observe her course, ‘Skills for Organising’, because it was new and she said it would be useful to have some feedback from an ‘expert’. It was interesting that she positioned me as an expert and also that she solicited feedback from the start, which I was happy to give. This position was congruent with the feminist research paradigm, where researchers do not locate themselves as impartial, objective outsiders, but invest something of themselves in the research process. This was an opportunity for me to give something back to the organisation and was also an example of how researchers act on the research process impacting on outcomes, something recognised by feminist and many qualitative researchers, but rarely by orthodox quantitative social research. With just eight women, observation of the ‘Skills for Organising’ course had a different character to observation at TGWU. Prior to the course the education officer said that I could either participate fully in the course as if a student, or I could participate as and when she felt it necessary, observing for the rest of the time. I felt that it would be inappropriate to participate fully as I was not an MSF member and did not want to occupy a false position in the eyes of the other women. I therefore felt more comfortable for her to introduce me as a researcher. However, I joined the group round the table, which meant being discreet about note taking: if discussions were in full-flow or everyone else was taking notes, I took the opportunity to make some notes there and then, but on other occasions I waited until the next break.

There were various occasions during the two days when participants were asked to reveal something personal and I was asked to join in with those activities. On the first of these occasions I was not expecting to participate and when it came to my turn I quickly had to tell the group ‘something about myself, which you wouldn’t guess from looking at me’. Strangely, I felt quite nervous as I revealed myself to be a keen tennis player. I was also annoyed with myself at my choice of revelations – tennis, a thoroughly middle-class pursuit and there was I trying to build up the credibility to interview what was a predominantly working-class group of women! On later occasions I revealed some of my own vulnerabilities (e.g. about being a full-time, working mother). This situation felt quite awkward but I was conscious of the need for members of the group to like me and to relate to me as a woman, if they were to agree to give me their time for interviews in their offices and homes. The ethics of attempting to engineer this situation troubled me, but having said that my revelations were ‘real’.

For various activities the group divided into either pairs or two smaller groups. For the paired activities I generally avoided observing because it felt too intrusive. I used these moments to talk to the education officer about how the course was going. These discussions had the character of a conversation, rather than an interview, since she was interested to hear my views and opinions. Naturally, I made every effort to make constructive criticism. In September there were only seven participants on the course I attended and so I was asked to participate in the paired activities. During the course, again because of the small size of the group, I felt I got to know the participants and it quickly became less tenable to maintain the detached observer role during the small group work. I tried to keep my contributions to a minimum, but felt that when they pushed me to join in, there was effectively no choice.

As at TGWU coffee breaks were spent with the participants, whilst lunch breaks were an opportunity to talk to the tutors of the other two courses and to listen to feedback the three tutors were giving to the director of education, who also joined the group for lunch. Although there is no formal post course, debriefing meeting, the education officer invited me to meet with her to discuss the course. This was another opportunity for me to give her some feedback, but also to ask questions pertinent to the research and to discuss some of the participants, especially those who had shown an interest in taking on a union role.

Summary of Observation Experiences

The periods of observation produced a wealth of notes and reflections recorded in notepads and in typed form. However, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:185) suggest, field notes can never entirely represent the knowledge and insights acquired during periods of observation. New reflections and insights are continually developing often stimulated by further fieldwork and literature reviews.

In both the case study organisations I was made to feel very welcome by both staff and course participants alike and observation was very enjoyable. This did not, however, prevent me from feeling like an intruder at times and conspicuous at others. I was also an object of curiosity, particularly among tutors. Observation involves by nature extended periods of appearing to do nothing (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) and tutors in both unions were clearly amazed that I was being paid to 'do nothing'! I usually shrugged this off with one or two self-mocking jokes. The periods of observation were characterised by long, intensive and tiring days – 'doing nothing' can be exhausting! When circulating in the research setting the researcher/observer is always looking for the possibilities for finding out something or being introduced to someone that might assist in the research, therefore to relax in that setting is impossible. The stamina and commitment required for this type of qualitative research should not be underestimated.

Reflexive Interviewing

As can be seen from **Appendix One**, altogether I carried out 55 in-depth interviews with directors of education, course participants and course tutors. This section provides an account of how I carried out the interviews with course participants, whilst details of the interview questions are contained in appendices three and five. Since the intention was to explore meanings and encourage interviewees to define the significance of events in their lives, rather than to collect descriptive data or find out what 'actually happened' (Layder 1993:117), semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate (Arksey and Knight 1995). The interviews took a life history approach (Rubin and Rubin 1995:74) to the extent that I was interested in exploring how the women understood and experienced various life stages. To begin with, a small number of closed questions were asked, but generally questions were open-ended, requiring the interviewee to provide examples and reasoned

arguments in response (Stroh 2000). I devised interview guides (**Appendix Three** provides a discussion of the background to and underpinning of the interview questions) to give a logical flow to the conversation, but, in practice the order of questioning was not strictly adhered to, rather the guide acted as a prompt to ensure that I guided the conversation through topics of interest and relevance to the research questions. However, the time spent on each of the question areas varied depending on the experiences of the individual woman. There was an active role for the interviewee in shaping the discussion, with time and space to explore topics of a related nature that interested her.

Thus the interviews took a form, which Rubin and Rubin (1995:7) compare with ordinary conversations, in that questions and answers follow each other, people take turns in talking and the answer to one question determines the next. The interview is 'invented anew each time it occurs' and interviewees can be positioned as 'conversational partners' (Rubin and Rubin 1995:11). The interviewer's 'job' is to listen intently to what the interviewee is saying, to pick up on key words, themes and ideas and to note important omissions. This aligns with feminist approaches to research in so far as there is the opportunity for women to have voice through the research process, which itself de-emphasises a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Reinharz 1992; Rubin and Rubin 1995). That said, I believe it is also important to recognise that the interviewer does have an agenda and objectives (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) and as stated above to keep control of the interview will redirect the conversation if it strays too far from relevant themes. In practice this potential tension did not prove to be unmanageable, possibly because the broad aims of the research were explained to each interviewee at the outset.

I was keen to hear the interviewees' experiences and interpretations of the courses I had observed without imposing my own. Reinharz (1992:28) argues that the feminist interviewer should at least begin research with the intention of believing the interviewee. This involves being sensitive to different ways of knowing and seeing and accepting that there will not necessarily be a single shared interpretation of the same event or phenomenon. In particular, I was conscious of the need to look for differences of experience, perception and opinion among the women structured around race, ethnicity, class, disability and sexual orientation. The design of the interview guide and the course of the actual conversations had to allow for different perspectives to emerge. These aspects of the interview programme are addressed in further detail below.

Since my intention was to interview each participant twice, the importance of establishing a good rapport was enhanced – after all any woman who found the first interview experience daunting, intimidating, boring etc, would not co-operate with the second. This meant that I had to give particular attention to building trust and confidence during each of the first interviews. Self-disclosure was an important aspect of this (Arksey and Knight 1999) in line with the feminist methodological approach (Reinharz 1992), yet it was also important not to disclose characteristics, which might erect barriers (for example, I avoided parading my academic qualifications). No one I contacted refused to be interviewed which for me indicated the potential perceived benefits for women taking part. Women, especially working class women, are not often asked their views on social institutions; neither are they accustomed to having someone interested in the details of their lives. I felt that most women found it quite gratifying to be taking part in research and they were more than willing to give me their time. Arksey and Knight (1999) suggest that for some people interviews can be cathartic or empowering, since the chance to talk about yourself and your views on a one-to-one basis is a rare one. My final question in the second interviews was ‘how have you felt about being interviewed?’ This elicited some interesting responses. The women were overwhelmingly positive about the experience, although they answered in different ways. Some commented that I had made them feel very comfortable and they had enjoyed meeting me. They had not found any of my questions intrusive. Most said that they had welcomed the opportunity to give their views on the union. Many appeared flattered to have participated and showed immense interest in the research. Some also saw the fact that the union was ‘allowing’ this research to be conducted, as evidence that unions are finally ‘taking women seriously’. Whether or not this is the case is of course debatable, but I decided not to disillusion them!

The face-to-face interviews were mostly carried out either in the woman’s workplace or in her home. I was conscious of the need for the interviewee to feel at ease and in her own territory (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) for the interview to be most productive. My only request was that there was somewhere quiet available where we could talk undisturbed. The interviewees were assured that the discussion was confidential and anonymous. None of the interviewees refused to be tape-recorded, although there were occasions when I was asked to switch off the tape because the woman was telling me something she felt to be sensitive. In these instances I made notes afterwards of this

section of the interview. Two interviewees had difficulties at first in talking naturally with the tape going, so I switched it off until they had settled into the discussion and then asked for permission to switch it on, which was granted. Most research methods textbooks suggest the use of small, unobtrusive tape recorders (for example, Stroh 2000). In contrast I carried out my interviews using my young son's rather large Fisher Price tape recorder. In the first instance this was because my micro 'dictaphone' had stopped working and the hastily conceived contingency plan involved the use of the Fisher Price recorder. On the first occasion, embarrassed, I unveiled the tape recorder from a 'Safeway' carrier bag and made a joke about its unprofessional appearance. This caused much laughter and an opening conversation about the ages of our respective children, which I felt served to 'break the ice' in a way that a contrived 'ice-breaker' could not have done. Henceforth I decided to use the Fisher Price recorder, partly because ironically the 'toy' proved to be more effective at picking up the conversation, even in some fairly noisy environments and as an ice-breaking strategy – it never failed to work!

During the interviews I found myself adjusting my use of language in order to build rapport with the woman and to make her feel comfortable with me (Arksey and Knight 1999; Rubin and Rubin 1995). This was obviously based on my perceptions of the woman, her background, level of articulacy, friendliness, etc. I designed the interview guides to keep the questions as open as possible and to avoid leading the interviewee towards a particular answer. However, sometimes I had to rephrase questions when it was apparent that the interviewee had not understood the original questions and on some occasions I had to probe, where answers were not forthcoming.

As might be expected, the second interviews were easier to conduct, as by then I had not only spent time with the interviewees at the course, but I had interviewed them once before. There were few nerves displayed and we were able to get straight to the discussion. One woman commented that she had felt nervous prior to the second interview, as she was worried that she would have nothing to say to me, but I reassured her that I really just wanted to catch up on what she was doing. In the second interviews I also made limited use of more structured questions in the form of response sheets in order to be certain to have addressed key questions/themes.

From the perspective of the researcher, qualitative interviewing is an exhausting process, both physically and emotionally. My fieldwork involved many winter car and train journeys, often in the face of bad weather, train strikes and other serious hitches on the roads and in the rail network in 1999/2000. These factors often influenced practical decisions such as whether to carry out a telephone interview. Interviews were often emotionally draining because in talking about their paid work and trade union involvement, women often divulged stressful and sometimes tragic personal circumstances. As I was drawn into their lives I often found myself disturbed by their emotional states and some of their stories in the way described by other feminist researchers (see Reinharz 1992). This also made me reflect on the possible constraints of interviewer self-disclosure, in the sense that even if I had had a similar experience I feared heightening emotions to the extent that the interview would be 'lost'.

The Interview Programme

Given that the research focuses on the lived experiences of participants of women-only trade union courses, the interview programme largely focused on course participants. However, the education directors of both unions were also formally interviewed, as was the MSF education officer responsible for 'Women's Week'² and seven course tutors.

Course Participant Interviewees

Participants for the two-phase interview programme were drawn from the short questionnaire completed in 1999 (TGWU) and 2000 (MSF). The tables in **Appendix Two** provide biographical information on women participating in the study, from which it can be seen that interviewees are a diverse group in terms of ethnicity, age, family situations, educational background, and occupation. There are also two disabled women in the sample – one from each union. With regard to class, the interviewees' self-identification raises some interesting questions about what class means to trade union women. Most were from working class backgrounds and self-identified as working class, often despite being university educated or in management/professional positions. Further, some were over

² The TGWU education officer responsible for women's courses was first on maternity leave and subsequently on long-term sick leave for the entire duration of the fieldwork (more than two years). She later

qualified for the jobs they had, such as the bus driver with 'A' levels. This suggests that class is to some extent at least a consciously assumed identity, rather than simply an objective positioning. The primary analytical focus in the thesis is on gender, with class intersecting with gendered experiences and identities (as discussed in Chapter One).

It was a deliberate research strategy to have a diversity of demographic and occupational characteristics represented among interviewees as well as both inexperienced and experienced activists. This was particularly important in the light of recent feminist theorising (see Reinharz 1992) and the shift away from assumptions about the universality of women's experiences. I felt it was important that the sample of interviewees would enable me to engage with debates about women's multiple identities. However, since interviewees had to be selected from those volunteering, it was not possible to achieve matching samples in each union. Overall the women's diversity provided a richness of experience reflected in the discussion in the empirical chapters of the thesis.

It is worth briefly considering to what extent the demographic and biographical characteristics of the group of interviewees are typical or atypical of women trade unionists as a whole and to what extent they are representative of women in their own unions. Previous research has found women activists generally to be atypical, meaning older (over 40), childfree and partner free (Cockburn 1991; Kirton and Healy 1999; Ledwith et al. 1990). In contrast in this research, there is a concentration of women in the age category thirty-one to forty, which would place them as younger-than-atypical female activists (although there is an age spread). This might be explained as a research sample bias, which can occur with small qualitative studies. On the other hand it might reflect the fact that this research uses trade union courses, as the site in which to locate interviewees, which afforded direct contact between researcher and members/activists. In contrast, other studies (e.g. McBride 2001; Munro 1999) have typically used branch and committee structures as the research site and presumably have been more reliant on branch secretaries' (or other such office-holders') identification of activists. Branch secretaries might take a narrower view than the one taken here of what counts as activism and therefore some women activists might be invisible to them (see discussion in Chapter Two).

returned to work for a short period and then went on long-term sick leave again. On cost grounds she was not

Whatever the explanation, the relative youth of the present sample is interesting in terms of the discussions of barriers and constraints in Chapter Six and Chapter Eight. The most common age group is the one where one might intuitively - and based on other research, e.g. Cunnison (1987) - expect less female trade union participation, considering it coincides with the child-rearing years. It is noteworthy that eight of the twelve women with dependent children currently held formal union positions. Again this is relevant to the discussion of barriers and constraints, especially as this sub-group of mothers were a mix of married, divorced and single women. This also contrasts with some previous research. For example, Lawrence (1994) found in her study of NALGO and NUPE a virtual absence of women with young children among office holders. Understanding how and why mothers sustain activism is useful for thinking about gender equality in trade unions and is analysed when women are situated within their local work and union contexts in Chapter Eight.

Some research (e.g. McBride 2001) on women trade unionists has suffered from a lack of ethnic diversity, because of black and ethnic minority women's under-representation among activists, particularly office-holders (LRD 1998). Such research then unwittingly perpetuates a race-blind approach being unable to unpack racialised experiences and perceptions of unions. In contrast, the six black women in this study represent a fifth of the total sample of interviewees enabling issues of race to be addressed and 'black voices' to be heard at various junctures in the thesis, even if generalisations cannot be made because of the small sample size.

The highest level of qualification held by the majority of the women suggests that highly qualified women are over-represented in the TGWU group, when compared to the union's membership as a whole (see Chapter Five). This is not the case for the MSF sample as the union is composed largely of skilled and professional workers, although public sector workers are over-represented. This is not inconsistent with other studies, which have suggested that highly qualified women perceive and experience fewer barriers to their involvement and participation (e.g. Cockburn 1991; Lawrence 1994). However, if the nineteen office-holders are considered separately, around one half are highly qualified,

replaced. It was therefore not possible to interview anyone in this role.

indicating that there is no necessary relationship between level of qualification and propensity for office holding.

First Interviews with Course Participants

First interviews were carried out within one and five months of the course, with an average gap between the course and interview of three months. At this stage 29 women were interviewed (fifteen from TGWU and fourteen from MSF), representing a sample of about a quarter of participants from each union. With qualitative research it is always difficult to settle on a number of interviewees. How many are enough and enough for what? Rubin and Rubin (1995:72) suggest that the researcher keeps adding interviewees until the point is reached where each additional interviewee adds little to what has already been learnt. This point was reached within the research context, when the same or similar interpretations and experiences had started to emerge, but it is difficult to be precise about when this phenomenon occurred. However, I feel confident that the sample size has the capacity to meet the research objectives and moreover that what I learnt from the interviews holds good for the themes being studied (Rubin and Rubin 1995).

Twenty-one first interviews were face-to-face and lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours. These were all tape-recorded and fully transcribed. I transcribed the majority of 'phase one' and all of 'phase two' interview tapes myself and this provided an opportunity for further reflection on the interviews, which effectively started the process of interview analysis. Eight interviews were by telephone and these also lasted around one hour, with comprehensive notes being taken. It is generally not considered ideal for qualitative interviews to be conducted by telephone, particularly with strangers, because of the lack of body language cues which are so important in establishing relationships (Rubin and Rubin 1995). However, it should be noted that I personally met all interviewees during the courses observed and had a number of informal 'chats' with them during breaks and social functions. This helped to mitigate some of the weaknesses of telephone interviews, in the sense that the interviewee and myself were already acquainted, we could picture one another and I could open the conversation with an 'ice-breaker' drawn from our earlier meeting. Also, telephone interviews were arranged for a quiet time and place usually in the evenings from my home to theirs. The informality of my initial meeting with interviewees was also important for breaking down the asymmetrical power relationship between the

researcher and the researched. The broad question areas and the full interview guide are contained in **Appendix Three**.

Second interviews with course participants

Second interviews were conducted some fifteen to eighteen months following the first, i.e. approximately two years after attending the women's school. By necessity four of these were also conducted by telephone; however, the women first interviewed by telephone were now interviewed face-to-face. Given the time lapse it was anticipated that the sample size of the second phase of the fieldwork would shrink, which proved to be the case. Fourteen (seven MSF, seven TGWU) of the original 29 women were involved in the full second interviews. A further nine women were followed up by telephone, news of one seriously ill woman was obtained from another interviewee and five women could not be traced. Second interviews had the broad agenda of 'catching up' with the woman's union career and any changes in her work and personal circumstances that were likely to affect her union participation.

The broad questions areas and the second interview guide are contained in **Appendix Five**. The guide was to some extent tailored to suit the circumstances of the individual woman, for example, whether or not she was a union representative. Before the second interview took place the transcript of the first interview was carefully read to identify any particularly interesting threads to pick up and pursue. From this a list of tailored questions was produced and these were built into the overall discussion.

Interviews with union officers and course tutors

Interviews with the two unions' directors of education were conducted in order to understand the formal aims and objectives of women-only education within the particular union context. Questions covered union communication structures and strategies; media for advertising courses; perceived barriers to higher levels of women's involvement; the role of education in promoting women's involvement.

Education officers and course tutors were interviewed because of their key role in operationalising education objectives. The interview guide for course tutors can be found

in **Appendix Six**. These interviews situated the woman's role as a tutor within the context of her own involvement in trade unionism and trade union education. Tutors were also asked to draw on their experiences of teaching women-only and mixed sex union courses to make comparisons and contrasts on matters of student-tutor interaction, group dynamics, behaviour of male/female participants. The interview also attempted to gauge the tutor's personal commitment to women-only courses, as it was thought that this would influence her approach in the classroom.

Interviews with education officers and course tutors importantly offered provider and educator perspectives, which enabled the data gathered from participant interviews to be set within the strategic and operational contexts of the unions.

Snapshot Survey

At each of the courses I attended I had permission to distribute a short survey (**Appendix Seven**) to participants, which sought to elicit descriptive and attitudinal data from a larger population. The questionnaire was deliberately kept short so that it could be completed on the last day of the course, together with other paperwork, rather than being returned by post, in order to maximise the number of returns. Ninety-nine questionnaires were returned from 118 participants (84%) of the TGWU schools, whilst sixty-seven returns were received from ninety-five MSF participants (71%). This good return rate and healthy respondent size enables the thesis to tackle a small number of 'how many' questions. It also establishes some of the qualitative findings as indicative, if not generalisable.

Documentary evidence

Historical documents from the TUC archives are used to complete the picture of the evolution of women-only courses in the trade union movement broadly. These have been discussed in Chapter Three and importantly provided a backcloth for the research, which alone the literature review was not able to do.

In addition, the full co-operation of both unions in the research secured access to a variety of relevant documentation, including course monitoring data and course materials, which

are systematically examined in Chapter Five to provide a comprehensive gendered analysis of two unions' education provision which is unavailable elsewhere.

Regarding the sources of the data, TGWU education officers are required to collect attendance data by gender and to provide quarterly monitoring reports to the director of education, which are subjected to analysis to identify any gendered patterns of attendance, which might inform future course developments. I was given access to these reports for 1999-2001. MSF also asks students to complete a monitoring/evaluation form, but these are filed in hard copy format and the union does not have a computerised database for storing and retrieving the information. In order to provide data for the research a secretary used the files to produce a spreadsheet of attendance by gender, which was then supplied to me. The course monitoring data is used to inform analysis of the patterns of gendered access to union courses, whilst the course teaching packs gathered during periods of observation allow consideration of underpinning philosophy, substantive content and pedagogical orientation (see Chapter Five).

Data Analysis

A potential weakness of qualitative methodologies is that they inevitably produce a mass of data, far more than is possible to include in any written analysis (Stroh 2000). Sitting down to write the empirical chapters was for me one of the most enjoyable activities of the study, but also one of the hardest. There were so many intrinsically interesting and illustrative stories from the women that it was difficult to decide which ones to include and which ones to exclude. As the chapters grew and grew, I struggled to edit them to a more manageable length. Finally I had to be ruthless and make decisions reflecting the main research objectives and the theoretical underpinning and hoped to do justice to the experiences of the women trade unionists and the perspectives of the union officials who gave so freely of their time.

As with much qualitative research, there is no obvious point at which data analysis began, but because I started the fieldwork early on I was informally analysing my data for the entire duration of the project even when not sitting at my desk or computer. I quickly learnt always to have a notepad to hand. For example, reflections following the periods of observation and the interviews (often occurring on train journeys to and from work)

constituted part of the analysis, if analysis is viewed as an ongoing process, rather than as an event, in the life of a research project (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). For example, the idea to organise the data presented in Chapter Seven around three key processes of the women-only courses – ‘safe space’, shared learning and privileging ‘women’s issues’ – occurred to me on a train journey to work. I remember it well as how to organise that particular discussion had been troubling me for several days. The journey was an opportunity for quiet reflection where I sketched out the map shown in Chapter Seven, **Figure 7.1**.

The formal analysis began with examination of documentary evidence from which I constructed a descriptive picture of the unions’ policy and practice in relation to women’s courses, which is used for contextual purposes in Chapter Five. I analysed questionnaire data from the ‘snapshot surveys’ with the aid of the software package SPSS and used it to support some of the ‘how many?’ and ‘how often?’ questions with data drawn from a larger population.

In accordance with the research strategy depicted in **Figure 4.1** and the feminist research paradigm, I accorded analytical emphasis to the interviews with course participants, so this was the area where the greatest time and effort were spent. Interviews with other actors, observation, the ‘snapshot surveys’ and documentary evidence are used more for the purpose of situating the former in the organisational context. A two-pronged strategy was taken to achieve the formal analysis of the mass of course participant interview data.

First, I read and reread each interview transcript as a whole looking for and noting common themes, which related to the objectives. In most cases (24 interviewees) I could follow the stories of the women over a two-year period either with the second interview transcript or notes of the follow-up telephone conversation. This was important in order to build familiarity with the specific circumstances and contexts of each of the women and so as not to lose the individuality of her narrative over time.

Second, I used a custom-designed database software package to organise and retrieve interview data thematically. Four interview sets were created: two for MSF (one for first and one for second interviews) and two for TGWU. I then selected categories (topics) for

each set of interviews drawn from the objectives, the literature review and the interviews themselves and allocated to these sections of text from the transcripts.

One example of the emergent nature of the data analysis is the use of the concept of union participation as one of a possible range of 'careers' that women might juggle, discussed in Chapter Eight. This only occurred to me by reading the individual interview transcripts, by seeing the women as whole selves. This is possibly because the literature rarely talks about union careers, although the concept is implicit in many of the discussions around how women manage home, work and union. Using the career concept fitted with my objective of exploring the overlapping nature of women's lived experiences in different social contexts, particularly home, work and union. It provided a framework for analysing the subjective meanings attached to union careers, as well as more objective manifestations. It also allowed voluntary union participation to emerge as a 'career option' from which women can gain the intrinsic satisfaction that many people expect to gain from paid work.

In contrast, an example of a theme drawn from the literature was that of the purposes of women's separate organising. I was already sensitive to debates surrounding this theme from my previous work and research experience and this underpinned analysis of the women's course experiences. However, another example of a theme taken from a reading of the literature and from my earlier research (see Kirton 1999) was women's networking. I expected this to emerge strongly, but possibly because of the fact that the courses I studied were national (and therefore participants came from all over the country), on the contrary networking was not a primary outcome for the women.

The database then enabled me to analyse interview data thematically either on-screen or in hard copy format and I was also able to add topics such as union as an alternative career (to a work or family career) as and when I 'discovered' them. The strategy also enabled me to explore topics in greater detail, helping to avoid unintentionally overplaying or downplaying certain themes. Use of the database also facilitated the uncovering of 'deviant' examples and ensured there was not too great a focus on the stories of a few women.

One of the decisions which emerged from analysis of the data was to present the research findings thematically rather than union by union. My original intention in using two

unions as case studies was to compare and contrast. From observation of courses and from analysis of the interviews it soon became apparent to me that the similarity of experiences and perceptions far outweighed any differences. This then became an interesting research finding in itself, but in terms of presentation meant that a union by union analysis would have been overly and pointlessly repetitious. This form of presentation also fits with my objective of privileging the experiences and voices of the women participants over the institutional site. Of course there is a balance to be maintained; therefore Chapter Five does offer a contextualised description and analysis of women's courses in the two unions. In Chapters Six to Eight numerical representations for each union of views held or of experiences are shown in brackets in order to demonstrate the similarities generally, but also to highlight any differences.

As a feminist researcher, it was also important to me to reflect on how best to present the data in order to recognise and preserve the women's humanity. First, I wanted to ensure that the women's collective voices are heard, but that their individuality is not lost.

Therefore I give each woman a pseudonym, which bears some resemblance to her real name in order to preserve the race, class and age associations of their names. I have also chosen quotations and illustrative examples that are more widely representative of the group of interviewees, but important exceptions or 'deviant' (Silverman 2000) examples are also mentioned. Second, in order to 'bring to life' at least some of the interviewees as 'whole selves' I draw pen portraits of four women, (two from each union). The four women are selected from the fourteen who were fully interviewed twice. Their demographic and biographical characteristics differ in many respects and their union careers start from different influences and take different directions, as we shall see later. Their stories are told individually as the thesis progresses. This is designed to give the reader a greater sense of the depth and richness of the interview data than could be conveyed with individual quotations alone.

Since this is a qualitative research project, quantitative representations of the research findings are kept to a minimum. The main concern in the analysis is not to compare numbers or offer measurements of women holding one viewpoint or another. The intention is to gain a deep interpretative understanding of predominant experiences, perceptions, orientations or opinions and to 'hear the voices' of the women interviewees who are the main focus of the research. To achieve this aim, Chapters Six to Eight quote extensively

from the interviews, the stories of four women are told and the career trajectories of the 29 interviewees are charted in tables 6.1, 6.2, 8.1 and 8.2. However, as Smith (1988:110) acknowledges, the work of the researcher is to move beyond pure and faithful description of subjects' lives to investigate the ways in which broader social relations and dynamics shape the actualities of women's everyday worlds. In this process, I acknowledge my own influence as the author. In other words, in the analysis I have also listened to my own 'voice' and interpreted the women's 'stories' and here it is possible to argue that another researcher might have taken the project in a different direction or understood the stories and the voices in a different way. My 'insider' knowledge as a feminist trade unionist, combined with reflexivity, on balance constituted strengths rather than weaknesses.

Conclusion

This chapter has explicated the chosen research paradigm and set out the specific methods utilised in the fieldwork. The former has provided the reader with an understanding of the framework for analysis and interpretation of the research findings. The narrative account of the research experiences has given an indication of the richness of the data and the rigour with which it was gathered. In conclusion, the chapter situates the study in the context of industrial relations research.

There are now signs of a greater sensitivity in industrial relations research to gender issues and the experiences of women (Wacjman 2000). I argue that qualitative methodologies remain appropriate for the study of women in unions for at least as long as trade unions are male-dominated and masculine-biased. Quantitative work can tell us where women are in unions, but it reveals little about the lived experiences of women within the masculine culture of unions. It is the unwritten rules, informal norms and everyday cultural practices of unions, which sustain and reproduce the gendered status quo. Qualitative research has the capacity to develop knowledge of such gendered relations and meanings. My choice of a qualitative methodology also reflects my deep interest in the detail of women's lived experiences, which in turn reflects a fundamental epistemological position rarely articulated, but for which I offer no apology. After all the process of research is one to be enjoyed, not simply endured. The next chapter introduces the reader to the case study unions, MSF and TGWU.

Chapter Five

Women's Education in MSF and TGWU

Introduction

This chapter introduces the reader to the case study unions – MSF and TGWU. It briefly outlines the unions' approaches to gender equality and the various forms of women's separate organising, within which women's courses can be located. The bulk of the chapter is dedicated to providing a previously undocumented overview of the unions' systems of education, a discussion of gendered patterns of attendance at mixed-sex courses and an outline of women's education provision. This provides the context for the analysis of the interview data, but equally is interesting in its own right since education is a major sphere of union activity. Five principal sources are utilised: union documents; 'raw' data provided by the unions; interviews with the unions' directors of education, education officers and tutors; observation of courses and the 'snapshot' surveys.

Gender representation and gender equality strategies in MSF and TGWU

MSF and TGWU are two large male dominated TUC affiliated trade unions: with approximately 416,000 members in 2002 women constituted 33 per cent of overall membership in MSF and 21 per cent of approximately 860,000 members in TGWU. MSF membership consists largely of professional and skilled workers drawn from both the private and public sectors, whilst TGWU membership is composed of manual and non-manual workers in production and services in the public and private sectors. Generally speaking the typical MSF member is more highly qualified than the typical TGWU member, but this is not an absolute rule as for example MSF has a craft section, whilst TGWU has a white-collar section.

Table 5.1 provides data on women in MSF and TGWU as members, activists and paid officers. As can be seen, both unions have achieved or exceeded women's proportional representation in two senior lay structures: the executive council and TUC delegation,

whereas women in both unions are under-represented amongst national and regional paid officers. In addition, little is known about the gender composition of workplace representatives and shop stewards (the former is the term used in MSF, whilst the latter is the term used in TGWU reflecting its larger ‘blue collar’ membership), however both unions are concerned to develop strategies to recruit more women as representatives. One measure dating from the late 1990s in both unions, has been the introduction of ‘women’s reps’ (discussed further in Chapter Eight), a cadre of female representatives with the special responsibility of supporting women members. It is intended that ‘women’s reps’ will add to the existing complement of representatives and stewards, rather than act as substitutes.

Table 5.1: Women in MSF and TGWU as members, activists and paid officers 2002

	MSF	TGWU
Total membership	416,000	858,797
Women in membership	133,141	179,817
Women as % of members	32	21
Women as % NEC members	33	33
Women as % of TUC delegation	31	24
Women as % of national paid officers	20	6
Women as % of regional paid officers	20	Not available

Source: Labour Research 2002

Greater advances towards gender equality in the lay decision-making structures, when compared with the paid official corps can be attributed to the pursuit of gender democracy having led to the introduction of a raft of gender equality strategies. These include women-only courses, regional and national women’s committees, national women’s conference and reserved seats for women on the executive committee, which over time have had the effect of increasing women’s representation. This is not to say that no effort has been expended on increasing the number of female paid officers. For example, in the mid-1990s MSF established an officer training programme to increase the presence of women and other under-represented groups (see Kirton and Healy 1999). TGWU recruits paid officials from the ranks of activists and lay officers, which given male domination of the union has tended to bias selection towards men. However, the union has now recognised this as a problem and is seeking to develop strategies to tackle women’s under-representation (TGWU 1999). Women’s courses are for example used for the purposes of

identifying women who might go further in the union and in 2001 the union held a training course for senior female activists on how to get paid employment with the union.

Thus, both unions have utilised the strategy of women's separate organising, at the same time as providing channels for women's guaranteed representation in the 'mainstream' such as reserved seats on executive councils and commitment to a principle of women's proportionality on all union committees and delegations. Their approach and record of achievement (e.g. women are at least proportionally represented on the executive committee) compares favourably with other large unions (see Kirton and Greene 2002), however, it is clear that the gender equality project is an ongoing one in both unions. Education is seen as a major tool to this end.

Education in MSF and TGWU

In terms of education provision MSF and TGWU have broken away from the TUC (MSF in 1990 and TGWU at the end of the 1970s) to develop their own comprehensive in-house programmes. Both unions believe that their own specialist staff is best placed to define the educational agenda and to develop it. The two unions' education programmes have broadly similar aims established by their executive bodies. These are to: provide education and training for members, representatives, activists and full-time officials; offer locally-based and national provision; provide broader social and political education; use education as a vehicle to promote the greater participation of under-represented groups and offer members the opportunity to embark on an 'educational ladder' linking with mainstream further and higher education. However, the two unions have established different systems to achieve these aims, which are now explained.

Education in MSF

Before focusing specifically on women's education, it is worth briefly sketching overall education provision in MSF so that it is possible to see how women's courses fit in and also how they came into being. The union provides a range of learning opportunities for representatives and members within a centralised, national education provision including residential courses and distance learning. The education department and national courses are located at the union's residential college – Whitehall College in Bishop's Stortford,

which has a capacity of about 3,500 students per year. The college can accommodate up to 55 students, although most courses are small: typically 12-13 participants (maximum 18-20), with events such as 'Women's Week' and 'Family Learning Week' offering a choice of parallel courses. In common with most other trade unions, MSF courses are free of charge to members and representatives and the cost of travel is also reimbursed. Free creche facilities are available, although the take-up is quite minimal with the women-only 'Women's Week' and female dominated 'Family Learning Week' unsurprisingly having the highest take-up. Most participants receive paid leave from their employers and a regional official will intervene on behalf of any representative denied paid leave. In the case of 'ordinary' members, some receive paid leave others take annual leave. Anyone unable to take any form of paid leave to attend a course can claim a flat rate weekly payment in compensation for loss of wages. According to the Director of Education, this rarely occurs.

Although predominantly a national provision, the union does also provide locally based courses through its fourteen regional councils, organised by regional education officers, who are lay activists. These are usually short courses held at weekends on topics such as organising, health and safety, legal rights, equal opportunities, women's courses and black member courses. The regional and national women's committees also regularly organise weekend schools/workshops for women members.

Nationally, the range of courses provided by the union is broad, from introductory courses for representatives, to sector-based courses, to issue-based courses, to courses for members, examples of which are shown in **Table 5.2**. The provision is concentrated on basic training for new representatives and for safety representatives. This is partly a response to demand, but is also seen as a priority for the education department. No courses are made compulsory for MSF representatives, although they are strongly advised to attend appropriate courses.

MSF course tutors are either paid education officers or professional freelance tutors. Freelance tutors are mostly individuals who have had a relationship with the union for some time and usually have a history of professional involvement in the union movement. For example, of the two freelance 'Women's Week' tutors, one was a full-time tutor at an

Adult Education Institute (and provider of union courses), whilst another was a former TUC education officer.

The education committee steers the direction of the provision, although policy is operationalised by the education department. On occasion the education committee requests specific courses – for example the committee recently asked for equality courses to be provided for the union’s paid officials – however, its role is more one of overseeing and advising. Generally then it is the responsibility of the education department to make decisions about the offering. To this end the team of education officers, together with a researcher and the director, regularly meet to plan and discuss future work. Work is allocated in a *laissez-faire* manner, with education officers volunteering to tutor and take responsibility for developing particular courses. This approach has resulted in the only woman education officer taking responsibility for ‘Women’s Week’ and equality courses, although this area of work is not specified in her job description. Education officers also make suggestions for new courses and provided the proposals fall within the aims and objectives of the union, they are given the opportunity to develop and try out new ideas. Also, freelance tutors are free to introduce their own materials into courses provided these fit within the course programme established by education officers. The courses follow a traditional trade union pedagogic approach (Walters 1996), centred on participatory activities and student interaction, but involving some tutor input, although the precise mix of activities varies according to tutoring style.

Educating MSF women

This section examines factors necessary for understanding the role and nature of women’s courses in MSF. First it considers the gender composition of mixed-sex courses; second it outlines course publicity methods; third it focuses on women-only courses; finally it turns to the role of the tutors.

Gender composition of mixed-sex courses

Although overall women are now proportionally represented on mixed-sex union courses in MSF, the education department has a number of positive action measures in place, which seek to ensure that the proportions of women attending courses are sustained if not

increased. For example, the union monitors course attendance by gender and ethnicity and then uses this information to target course advertising at particular groups.

Table 5.2 provides a breakdown by gender at national MSF schools over a one-year period demonstrating that despite these measures men almost always dominate the union's mixed-sex courses. The exception is courses specifically for National Health Service (NHS) representatives, where there is a gendered reversal of domination, with women accounting for more than two-thirds of participants, almost certainly a function of the predominance of women employees in the health sector. There is also a noticeable decline, with the exception of *Economics* in the proportion of women attending intermediate and advanced courses. This is worrying because it could indicate that women are abandoning or not progressing in their union careers.

Table 5.2: Gender Composition of Selected Mixed-sex MSF National Courses (Actual period - 1.11.99-31.10.00)

Course	Female %	Male %
Introductory Courses		
New Representatives	39%	61%
Health and Safety	41%	59%
Skills for Organising	45%	55%
NHS Representatives	68%	32%
Intermediate Courses		
Representing Members at Work	22%	78%
Improving Negotiating Skills	25%	75%
Tackling Bullying and Stress	17%	83%
Advanced Courses		
Contemporary IR	15%	85%
Economics	31%	69%
Pensions	0%	100%
Other Courses		
Lifelong Learning	69%	31%
Family Learning Week	57%	43%

Source: Data provided by MSF

It is also interesting to note that women are more than half of participants at *Lifelong Learning* and *Family Learning Week*. These gendered patterns of attendance can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, they could simply be a function of male and female spheres of interest. However, taking the *Pensions* course as an example, MSF's National Women's Sub Committee held a well attended Women's Weekend School in 2000 on pensions, in addition to weekend events on stress and bullying. That said, it might

be that certain courses do not ‘speak’ to women’s specific concerns (*Economics* or *Contemporary Industrial Relations*, for example?), and that given women’s time constraints (discussed in Chapter Two) they select the courses they consider to be most relevant. Second, it could be inferred that (some? many?) women will opt for women-only courses wherever these are available. For example, women-only courses are available in negotiating skills (where women’s attendance in mixed courses is relatively low), whereas women-only courses for new representatives and in health and safety are not available (where women’s attendance at mixed courses is higher). Third, although connected to the first point, there is some evidence (for example, Lawrence 1994) that women and men rank trade union issues in a different order of priority and participation in union courses may reflect these gendered divisions. For example, women’s higher attendance at the *Lifelong Learning* course could be an example of this with women according higher importance to training and promotion than men (Lawrence 1994; Waddington and Whitston 1997). Fourth, *Lifelong Learning* and *Family Learning Week* are open to ‘ordinary’ members as well as representatives and since women are less numerous among the latter than they are the former, this could explain their greater presence at these particular courses.

On the other hand, the overall picture of male domination of MSF’s courses is not surprising given that men constitute two thirds of the union’s members. Using this quantitative measure, interestingly women are actually over-represented in three types of generic training courses for representatives – *New Representatives*, *Health and Safety*, *Skills for Organising* (as shown in **Table 5.2**). This could suggest that the union’s record in attracting women to courses is good in so far as women are more than proportionally represented in at least three core courses. Even though women are under-represented in most intermediate and advanced courses, overall they constitute 40 per cent of course participants in the period.

Publicising courses

Thus although women are proportionally represented among course students, there is still a perceived need in the education department to sustain efforts to recruit women to courses. The director of education described advertising as ‘the single biggest difficulty’ for the education department, especially when it comes to attracting women. In an attempt to address this problem, courses at Whitehall College are advertised through a variety of

channels in order to increase the numbers of members receiving course information. Leaflets are sent to regional paid officials, branch secretaries and workplace representatives and directly to people who have already attended a Whitehall course. Regions, branches and workplaces use a variety of more or less extensive and effective methods for disseminating course information to members and representatives, including announcements at meetings, notice boards and mailings to members' homes. That said, the 'snapshot' surveys (see **Table 5.3**) found that the vast majority of students heard about 'Women's Week' in 2000 and 2002 via published materials.

Table 5.3: How did you hear about 'Women's Week'? (MSF, 2000/02)

Publicity Method	Number of Respondents (%) N = 67
Literature/publications	50 (75%)
Word of mouth	15 (22%)
Other	2 (3%)

On the one hand, this is positive in the sense that women get to hear about courses through their own actions, i.e. reading union literature, indicating a prior or existing interest in the union. On the other hand there are worryingly low numbers of women hearing about 'Women's Week' by word of mouth, possibly suggesting low levels of sponsorship for the school or poor communication with women members at workplace/branch level, the latter unlikely to *foster* interest in the union.

Women-only courses

As can be seen there is a very mixed and variable pattern of women's attendance at mixed-sex courses, which is difficult to explain using monitoring data alone. However, it is certain that mixed-sex courses within MSF are mostly male-dominated and although this is not surprising, given that the union itself is male-dominated, this situation nevertheless is a cause for concern for a union hoping to pull more women members into participation. This fact alone makes a case for women's courses, which provide a 'safe space' for women's learning and a relevant curriculum. (This is discussed further in Chapter Seven, when the voices of women students inform the discussion.) The union's director of education locates the purpose of the union's national women's school within positive action strategies:

‘Women’s Week is part of a programme of positive action to equip women with the knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence they need to be more effective in the union at all levels. It’s about ensuring women take up their place in the union and increasing their participation rates.’

‘Women’s Week’ is the cornerstone of women-only education in MSF, although the regions also offer women-only courses from time to time as stated above. ‘Women’s Week’ was initiated by the female director of education, supported by the women’s committee, more than twenty years ago in 1982 against a background of male domination of mixed courses. It is without doubt significant that it was a woman who made the case for women’s courses, which links to the debate about the importance of the characteristics of trade union leaders in Chapter Two. The director of education believed that women’s courses have a major role to play in developing women, particularly towards participation in the union’s higher echelons:

‘The activity rates of women as workplace reps are reasonably high, but when you get to the decision making bodies and the political administrative structure of the union, you get the phenomenon of the disappearing woman. That has changed to some extent and I think the women’s courses are part of the impetus for that change. Women from the courses go on to become regional council members, to speak at annual conference. They become representatives on the executive and also full-time officers.’

(The way the tutors perceive the purposes of ‘Women’s Week’ is discussed in Chapter Seven.) ‘Women’s Week’ is a five-day residential school, which attracts 35-40 students. It is publicised through the usual channels described earlier and the education officer responsible has also developed a database of women who attend in order that they can be mailed directly with course information. This approach has been taken because of concern that some (male) branch secretaries do not support women-only education and therefore do not make women members and activists aware of its availability. This is a particular problem in relation to newer women, which ‘Women’s Week’ hopes to attract who are unfamiliar with union structures and processes and are more dependent on their branch secretaries for information. The director of education also indicated that there had originally been some opposition, especially from male paid officials, to the establishment of women’s courses. Twenty years later there was still a degree of resistance, which could take the form of questioning the point of investing in this type of course, or asking why

there is no men's course. Generally though she now encountered little opposition suggesting a greater acceptance of women's separate organising and the important role that women have played in establishing it as legitimate.

Reflecting its aim of increasing women's participation, 'Women's Week' is open to 'ordinary' members as well as to representatives and some students will have completed a number of union courses, whilst for others it might be their first course. Since 1999 it has offered four parallel courses: Developing Women's Leadership (MSF2000), Negotiating Skills for Women (MSF 2000a), Assertiveness for Women (MSF 2000b), Organising Skills for Women (MSF 2000c). Women can attend 'Women's Week' as many times as they wish and it is quite common for a woman to complete all four courses.

Course content

The analysis in this section is informed by course materials collected in the periods of observation and by interviews (with the director of education, education officer, tutors) and observation. 'Women's Week' courses focus on personal skills' development. This was an approach developed in the mid-late 1990s by the current female education officer, partly in response to dwindling demand for 'Women's Week' courses and partly from her belief that women need certain skills in order to participate in the union on equal terms. Her own background as an activist in the union and former 'Women's Week' student had informed her belief. The underlying objective is to deliver an experience of value to participants, which it is hoped, will increase their involvement within the union. (Students' course experiences are discussed in Chapter Seven.)

The courses can be characterised as student-led: they emphasise active student participation based on small group discussions and feedback, and relatively little time is given over to tutor input. An example of a course programme – 'Negotiating Skills for Women' - is contained in **Appendix Eight**. During the course, typically each new topic is preceded by approximately ten minutes of tutor input, after which there might be one or two student activities which could last anything from half an hour to one and a half hours. The tutor explains what the activity involves and this is also set out in the course handbook. The course handbook also contains notes to support the topics, which the tutor reads through, giving examples to explain concepts and issues surrounding practice.

Students have the opportunity to make comments and ask questions, which they frequently do, highlighting the student-led nature of the courses. If the course starts to run behind schedule, then it is the tutor input, rather than the student participation that will be shortened in order to catch up. On these occasions students are advised that the course handbook contains information sheets which they can read in their own time. Following group feedback, the tutor summarises the key learning points from the activity.

The topics are often generalised and many activities are purposely not explicitly situated within the context of trade union activism in order that inactive women members might also find them beneficial. For example, on the ‘Negotiating Skills for Women’ course (see programme in **Appendix Eight**) the first day is spent exploring in very general terms what negotiation is and how it is carried out (MSF 2000a). The second day considers legal rights for trade unionists in negotiations, while the rest of the day is given over to generalised principles in negotiating strategy. The third day looks at individual behaviour in negotiation situations and the fourth day has a substantial group negotiating activity. The course activities can either be situated in the trade union context or not, depending on the balance of student interest/experience. In other words, if most students are active members or interested in becoming active, the tutor will place the emphasis on the workplace/union contexts, otherwise the context will be more generalised. For example, on the negotiating skills course participants’ attention was drawn to the way that people continuously negotiate in their everyday lives: this prompted women to talk about negotiations over divorce, access to children etc. Significantly, on the second or third day the tutor asks students to review the course so far and to make any suggestions for extra/alternative issues they would like to address. This indicating a degree of flexibility with regard to course content, and also highlighting again the student-led nature of the courses. To summarise, the bulk of the learning hours are given over to active student participation, organised and facilitated by the tutor. Thus the emphasis is very much on facilitation of learning rather than didacticism. If the role of the tutors is not to teach students, what is their role?

Course delivery: the role of the tutors

‘Women’s Week’ tutors are always female. Neither of the freelance tutors had attended women’s courses as students, although they had both undertaken mixed-sex union courses.

Significantly, all the 'Women's Week' tutors self-identified as feminists (a theme pursued in Chapter Seven) and expressed an ideological commitment to women's separate organising. The question 'what makes a good tutor for women's courses?' elicited the following responses:

'You have to see the value of women and want to be part of the process of getting them to see it too. You need to be good at involving others, a good listener and interested in other women.' (Ruth)

'Empathy with other women is essential and it's also essential to understand how people learn. You need to keep a very close eye on individual women so that you can help them learn. It's also important to establish relationships of trust within the group.' (Gina)

'A good listener. You need to be flexible enough to respond to the needs of the group and what they want to learn. You need an empathy with women and you need to create opportunities for women to admire each other to boost their self-esteem.' (Jackie)

As can be seen the tutors emphasised certain qualities, which in their view facilitate women's learning. Thus, they stress the social processes of the courses, rather than their own didactic role as experts or teachers. This is congruent both with trade union pedagogy and with feminist conceptions of organising.

Education in TGWU

This section provides an overview of TGWU education provision in order to situate the subsequent discussion of women's education. TGWU provides a range of learning opportunities for stewards and members. The union operates a largely decentralised education programme with the bulk of its provision regionally rather than nationally located. In terms of student numbers, around 500 per year participate in national courses, compared with around 10,000 per year participating in regional courses. According to the director of education, this is a function of the larger size of the union – with over 800,000 members extensive regional provision is deemed essential in order to provide a cost effective education programme and to reach as many stewards as possible.

The education department is located at the union's National Office in London. National courses are held at the union's hotel and conference centre 'T&G Centre' in Eastbourne,

which has a capacity of about 85 persons. Creche facilities can be made available at both national and regional courses, but actual provision depends on a viable number of applications being made. Regional education programmes are the responsibility of paid regional education organisers (REOs) (one in each of eight regions). Until 2000, three of the eight REOs were women, but due to some internal movement the union now has only one woman REO.

All stewards are required to attend a shop stewards course and members attending courses (e.g. National Members' School) are first required to complete the first level of the union's Home Study Course, otherwise applications are rejected. This distance learning course aims to give students 'a good idea about the history, the structure, the policies and objectives' of TGWU (TGWU 1998). It is described as the first step on the 'T&G Learning Train' (TGWU 1998). The rationale is that individuals should demonstrate a commitment to the union and to union education prior to the union investing in her/his training and education. The requirement, set by the General Executive Council (GEC) is controversial, however, with some officials believing that it could deter some members (especially women and newer activists) from participating. The director of education claims that some members reportedly find the course quite burdensome, particularly those who left formal education many years earlier.

Importantly, TGWU operates its courses on an 'all expenses paid' basis, which includes creche facilities and travel. TGWU expects the majority of students to take paid educational leave to attend union courses. It seems that for most stewards this will be the case, although 'ordinary' members may not be granted paid leave in some workplaces. The union will compensate individuals unable to take paid educational leave with a flat rate daily payment. The director of education said that he did not believe that the issue of paid educational leave was an obstacle to greater participation in union education. However, since women are more numerous among 'ordinary members' than they are among stewards, it may be that women are less able to take advantage of paid educational leave, since only stewards are legally entitled to it. This was certainly a factor suggested by Diana Holland, National Organiser for Race and Equalities.

The TGWU system of education is a largely decentralised one, however, this does not mean that control of the provision is concomitantly decentralised. There are several

mechanisms in place, which ensure that the provision is controlled from the centre, largely by the director of education, but overseen by the general secretary.

First, TGWU's national and regional provision operates within the union's '1992 Education Guidelines' and formally the general secretary has to approve all changes to existing courses and any new courses. The guidelines set out two core objectives: firstly, the training and education process should begin for all shop stewards within six months of election/appointment; secondly, equality courses should be offered to all shop stewards by all regions (TGWU 1992). Regional Education Organisers (REOs) are required to ensure that these two objectives are met. To meet the second objective, there are two types of courses: women's and black member and equalities awareness courses. REOs report quarterly to regional education committees (RECs) on their activities. In turn the RECs send these reports to the national education department, which must include gender and ethnic monitoring data. In this way the director of education is able to oversee regional education, pointing to central control of a decentralised system. This chapter presents data (in **Table 5.4**) from the union's largest region – Region One, covering London, the South East and East Anglia.

Second, national courses utilise a mandatory set of course materials designed by national office. These are issued to tutors and must be adhered to, although tutors are able to make suggestions for changes at the tutors' 'debriefing' meeting, which follows national courses. From observation of one debriefing meeting (discussed in Chapter Four) though, there is little room for dissent from the national prescriptions decided upon by the director of education. In contrast, tutors on regional courses have some discretion as to what kinds of activities and information they use on their courses. REOs meet regularly to discuss developments in their regions and to share best practice and reports from these meetings are sent to the director of education who closely monitors the regions' activities.

Third, proposals for new courses also emanate from various TGWU committees and the education department is then responsible for ensuring that the regions provide these courses. For example, the National Women's Committee proposed a 'women's political course' and some of the industrial committees suggested women-only sector based courses, which are now regionally and nationally held. Also the education department and the equalities department work very closely together to develop new ideas – for example, the

equalities department initiated a campaign on sexual harassment, which was backed up by a regional and national educational programme developed by the education department.

The tutoring system in TGWU has some unique and interesting features, which are worthy of detailed explication. Courses are tutored by education and research department staff from National Office, but mostly by 'lay' tutors from the regions. There is also a specialist national women's education tutor¹ who is responsible for the development of course materials for national women-only courses. The large cadre of full-time 'lay' tutors located in the regions are appointed by TGWU, but technically employed by a partner college or university. The union also has a number of casual tutors, who are usually in full-time employment and who teach perhaps one or two courses per year. All tutors must have a history of 'appropriate' active involvement in the union.

'Appropriate' involvement has traditionally meant steward, branch secretary etc and given male domination of these positions this has resulted in women's under-representation amongst lay tutors. However, in recognition of this and at the behest of the (female) national secretary for equalities and the director of education, more recently women, black members and members of other under-represented groups are considered if they have been involved in, for example, women's committees, black member forums etc. The caveat is that the director of education stated that he discourages 'wanabees', who he defines as people who are looking for paid work from the union, but who have shown no commitment through a history of activism. He was not prepared to put a figure on how long the record of activism had to be, but said that he made a judgement in each individual case. From interview it was clear that the close working relationship (and friendship) between the national secretary for equalities and the director of education had led to some shift in the latter's thinking on the required background of lay tutors, again demonstrating the important role senior women can play in reshaping unions.

Of course the possibility that women will be less able to meet the prerequisite of prior activism cannot be ruled out. The rationale given by the director of education for the lay tutor system is the belief that only TGWU members can understand the issues and problems facing other TGWU members, and only they can situate those issues and

¹ Unfortunately, I was unable to meet or interview the postholder as in the early part of the project she was on maternity leave and subsequently became seriously ill and took long-term sick leave. She was not replaced.

problems within the context of the union's structures, policies and objectives. This is privileged over gender or other demographic considerations.

The process to become a tutor requires considerable commitment itself, which could produce gendered outcomes. Would-be tutors need to produce a portfolio of evidence of their own activism, which then informs the basis of the director of education's decision whether or not to accept them to a tutor-training course. They must also have completed a considerable number of TGWU courses before they are invited to attend a compulsory, tutor-training course. This is a five-day residential course taught by the director of education. It entails formal assessment and anyone who fails the course might be given the option to retake it or might be 'counselled' away from the ambition to tutor. Successful students work in partnership with an established and experienced tutor, until they are deemed ready to work alone. This is described as an 'apprenticeship' scheme. Tutors usually start working for the union on a casual basis and some are then subsequently appointed to positions in partner colleges and universities as and when vacancies occur.

Educating TGWU women

This section examines factors necessary for understanding the role and nature of women's courses in TGWU. First it considers the gender composition of mixed-sex courses; second it outlines course publicity methods; third it focuses on women-only courses; finally it turns to the tutors.

Gender composition of mixed-sex courses

TGWU monitors course attendance by gender and ethnicity both nationally and regionally, in order that any patterns of under-representation may be investigated. In practice it appears that the union is satisfied if women's participation in education reaches proportionality levels, i.e. twenty per cent. Table 5.4 shows that women are relatively well represented at some courses, for example, all levels of shop stewards' courses, but under-represented at others, for example, safety representatives' and branch secretaries' courses.

Monitoring information also contributes to policy developments, such as increasing the women-only provision. Women's participation in Region One has fluctuated since 1984

(when systematic records were first kept), but averages around twenty per cent (Batten 2000), indicating an inability to break through the twenty per cent proportionality barrier irrespective of new publicity channels, more issue-based courses, etc.

Table 5.4: Gender Composition of Selected Mixed-sex TGWU Region One Courses (2000)

Course	Female %	Male %
Introductory Courses		
Shop Stewards	24%	76%
Safety Reps	19%	81%
Voluntary Sector Reps	57%	43%
Pensions	21%	79%
Intermediate Courses		
Shop Stewards Part 2	22%	78%
Safety Reps Part 2	12%	88%
Advanced Courses		
Branch Secretaries	13%	87%
Shop Stewards Part 3	22%	78%
Safety Reps Part 3	13%	87%
Other Courses		
Bargaining for Equality	56%	44%
Race Equality	16%	84%
Law at the Workplace	10%	90%

Publicising courses

Although like MSF, TGWU has achieved women's proportionality overall in courses, the union perceives an ongoing need to reach newer women and to sustain efforts to recruit women students, entailing giving consideration to publicity methods. TGWU courses are publicised to stewards and members using a variety of methods, including mailings to branch secretaries, advertisements in the union's magazines (this method was particularly effective when women's courses were advertised in the women's magazine *Together*), mailings to REOs, Regional Women's Organisers (RWOs), and Regional Industrial Officers (RIOs). REOs are responsible for producing regional course brochures, either quarterly, six-monthly or annually, depending on the scale of provision in the particular region, which are then distributed to branch secretaries, who in turn disseminate to stewards and members. According to the director of education there is a question mark around how effective the various methods are. For instance, if announcements are made at meetings about forthcoming courses, and membership attendance is low or perhaps male-dominated, there is a large risk that women members do not get to hear of courses available to them. The union's national officers are aware of this problem and seek to

address it by using multiple publicity methods and continuing to monitor attendance.

Table 5.5 shows how students heard about the National Women Members' School. Whilst a narrow majority heard about the course via written materials, a substantial minority did so via word of mouth, suggesting that a sizeable proportion of students are in the 'communication loop' within TGWU.

Table 5.5: How did you hear about the National Women Members' School? (TGWU 1999/2001)

Publicity Method	Number of Respondents (%) N = 99
Literature/publications	50 (51%)
Word of mouth	34 (34%)
Other	14 (14%)

Women-only courses

Women-only courses have been provided at regional level by TGWU since 1979, when the union's conference took a policy decision to do so. This was around the time the TUC introduced 'bridging courses' for women (discussed in Chapter Three), but as the TGWU education provision had already broken away from the TUC there was a perceived need to provide its own women's courses to keep apace of women's demands. According to interviewees there has been no serious assault on the principle of women's courses, although they might meet disdain and ridicule in some union arenas. They now operate at three levels: regional and national courses for women shop stewards and the National Women Members' School open to any woman member. The establishment in 1997 of the National Women Members' School extended the women-only provision. The director of education described its aims:

'The course creates a space for women in which they can share experiences. Without a doubt it promotes greater female participation. The course puts women in touch with the union and with each other. Importantly it puts newer women in touch with successful women'.

The existence of women's courses has to be situated within gendered patterns of course attendance. As seen earlier, overall women are proportionally represented at mixed-sex courses, but given small group sizes, actual numbers of women attending each course can be tiny and this constrains the likelihood of women's experiences being at the forefront of discussions.

The National Women Members' School is a biennial event. It began in 1997 following observations by union officials that women appeared very reluctant to attend mixed member schools (which are heavily male-dominated). The school attracts 50-70 students and offered four parallel courses in 1999: 'Women at Work' (TGWU 1999a), 'Women beyond the Workplace' (TGWU 1999b), 'Women in Europe' (TGWU 1999c), 'Recruitment and Organisation for Women' (TGWU 1999d). In 2001 a new suite of courses was offered: 'Understanding the Union and Maximising Women's Involvement' (TGWU 2001), 'Public Speaking' (TGWU 2001a), 'Campaigning and Bargaining for Women' (TGWU 2001b), 'New Employment Rights and Organising Women Workers' (TGWU 2001c), 'Women and Pensions' (TGWU 2001d). The new courses were developed to give a fresh look to the school to encourage previous participants to attend again; in response to new ideas from education department staff; the concern that women were very poorly represented on some mixed courses, particularly pensions.

Interestingly, there originally existed a rule, made by the General Executive Committee, that once a woman had attended the National Women Members' School, she would not be permitted to attend again for a period of five years. Instead, she would be encouraged to take advantage of other courses the union offers – either mixed-sex members' schools, or stewards' courses if appropriate. The stated aim was to ensure that the school continued to attract new women and did not become dominated by experienced stewards and activists. This blanket rule was opposed by the director of education on grounds that some women may prefer women's courses and in practice, some women (vetted by the director of education) were permitted to return within the five-year period. This rule was abandoned by the time of the 2001 school, although its introduction in the first place reflected a dominant belief in TGWU that women should not confine themselves to the comfortable space of women's groups. It also possibly pointed to an underlying suspicion of women's separate organising as a long-term strategy, seeing it more as an interim measure.

Reflecting the centralised structure of TGWU, recruitment to women-only courses is a bureaucratically structured affair, fraught with political power struggles. The RWOs had secured the 'publicity rights' but the director of education was concerned that RWOs tended to recruit women who have already been on previous courses rather than women new to the union. He also said that one in three regional women-only courses are cancelled

because of lack of take-up, signalling to him that the RWOs are not altogether successful in their efforts to recruit students. Believing it was important to reach newer women in order to extend the number who participate he obtained the general secretary's agreement to use, in addition, the alternative channel of the union's regional industrial structures. However, there are internal political problems between RWOs and RIOs (who are mostly male), with the latter group feeling threatened (according to the director of education) by the former, hindering co-operation.

Arising from the RIOs' involvement, a new development in women-only education at regional and national levels has been the provision from 2000 onwards of national, sector-based women-only schools: Women in Transport, Women in Manufacturing, Women in Food and Agriculture, Women in Services open to both active members and stewards. The intention is to provide two courses per year, rotating the sectors. The idea behind this development is to link women's education with the work of RIOs and to encourage RIOs to think of women's involvement as their 'problem'. There are signs that this strategy is having some positive impact, as the courses held in 2000 and 2001 reportedly recruited well. It is not clear whether healthy recruitment levels are a function of the publicity channels or the fact that the courses are sector-based and therefore appeal to a narrower set of common interests, in contrast to the general women's schools, which of necessity have a broad curriculum.

Course Content

The analysis in this section is informed by course materials collected in the periods of observation and by interviews (with the director of education, education officer, tutors) and observation. The courses can be characterised as student-led: they emphasise active student participation based on small group discussions and feedback. However, while relatively little time is given over to tutor input when compared with, for example, certificated courses in further and higher education, there is typically more tutor input on TGWU women's courses compared with MSF. For example, the 2001 course 'Public Speaking' (TGWU 2001a) (see **Appendix Nine** for full course programme) contained two lecture style presentations by TGWU national officers, each lasting approximately two hours. These sessions are not entirely passive: students can and do interject. It is also the case that during the rest of the course tutor input is at a similar level to MSF women's courses.

The education department produces course handbooks and tutors are expected to follow the programme using materials provided, because the director of education strongly believes that certain areas of information and knowledge must be imparted on the courses. In practice though tutors do introduce alternative activities if they feel that the ones provided are too complex or uninteresting for the particular group of students, but an important observation is that tutors do adhere to union issues. Therefore course activities, whether devised by the education department or by tutors, are always explicitly situated in work/union contexts focusing on issues such as rights at work, grievance/discipline handling, bargaining, steward duties, participating in a branch. These issues are generated by a combination of course materials (an example of a campaign of equal pay (TGWU 2001a), tutors' interpretations and students' contributions. For example, from the course programme in **Appendix Nine** it can be seen that the first day is spent exploring how to run a campaign. The discussion was focused on union campaigns and in the activity students were asked to invent a union campaign that they would consider initiating at their workplaces. These included equal pay, workplace cancer screening, childcare issues and domestic violence. Similarly, the emphasis on union issues is taken forward to the second day when public speaking skills are developed and to the third day when students begin writing a press release.

Importantly, the school closes with four women from each course delivering three-minute speeches in the conference hall, which they have written and rehearsed during the week with the help of a small group and of tutors. In this way the school provides an opportunity to enact a union conference scenario.

To summarise, as in MSF the bulk of the learning hours are given over to active student participation, organised and facilitated by the tutor. Thus the emphasis is on facilitation of learning rather than didacticism, even though it is more explicit in TGWU that the union wishes the students to learn about trade union participation. Therefore it is important to ask again if the role of the tutors is not to teach students, what is their role?

The role of the tutors

The union believes it has a 'reasonable' number of women tutors, but there are 'few' black tutors. The result is that women-only courses do not always have a woman tutor and black member-only courses do not always have a black tutor. The union is taking steps to address these imbalances. For example, one tutor-training course (in May 2001) was made available only to women and black and ethnic minority members. In the meantime, the director of education is comfortable with the present need to occasionally use male tutors for women's courses, as are most of the women tutors (this is discussed further in Chapter Seven). This arrangement would no doubt strike most feminist readers (and pro-feminist men) as odd, given the conceptual and ideological underpinning of women's separate organising (see discussion in Chapter Two).

The above notwithstanding, most women's school tutors are women. However, having been drawn from the ranks of activists, tutors are inculcated in the arguably masculine culture of the union and this is reflected in their attitudes towards women's separate organising and feminism discussed further in Chapter Seven. Nevertheless, in response to the question 'what do you think makes a good tutor for women's courses?' TGWU tutors emphasised similar attributes to the MSF tutors, namely empathy with women and the ability to create a high trust, mutually supportive learning environment:

'You need to be able to relax and be able to relax them. Not an academic, but someone they can relate to, someone who has similar life experiences to them. You've got to remember that for some women, this could be their first educational experience since leaving school. They need to be supported and encouraged.'
(Miriam)

'You need to be able to understand their problems. The tutors shouldn't be seen as academics; we need to share our students' problems. For example, there are as many problems for women in the home as there are in the workplace and I think it's good if the tutor shares some of these problems.'
(Sarah)

'Someone you can trust not to gossip about them. Often they want to sound out someone as to how they can juggle union involvement with various other things going on in their lives, so in the course of these conversations some very private stuff will come out.'
(Debbie)

The TGWU tutors also emphasised that tutors should share the class characteristics of students. This seemed to be of at least equal importance for them as gender, reflecting the

strong working class culture of the union, when compared with the more (academically) highly qualified profile of MSF members, officers and tutors.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide an overview of education provision in the two case study unions – MSF and TGWU. This material is previously undocumented in the literature and in this respect constitutes a fresh perspective on a significant sphere of trade union activity and an important form of women’s separate organising. Thus the above account provides localised contexts in which to situate the interview findings, but it is also integral to the primary research presented in the thesis. In conclusion the main points of comparison and contrast in the two unions’ provision are summarised.

First, the unions share broad aims and objectives for education generally and specifically through women’s courses they hope to encourage women’s participation. Women’s courses though are only a small part of total provision, indicating that both unions expect women office holders at least to participate in mixed courses. In other words, women’s courses complement mixed-sex representatives’ training.

Second, the two unions recognise that (male-dominated) branches can act as a barrier to dissemination of course publicity to women and both have developed measures to overcome this.

Third, both unions are overall achieving proportional participation of women in their mixed-sex courses, albeit that this is by no means achieved at all levels or on all courses. The existence of women’s courses against this points to an acceptance of the ideology of women-only courses, even when it could be argued that there is no longer a strong instrumental rationale. It is also significant that despite a weaker feminist orientation among TGWU tutors, all the women’s school tutors in both unions shared a belief in the ongoing value of women’s courses.

Fourth, as a point of contrast, the TGWU’s system of lay tutors has gendered consequences, not least of which is that it allows for men to tutor women’s courses when ‘necessary’. It is ‘necessary’ to use male tutors when the union has decided that women

need to learn about a topic for which they have no female tutor, e.g. Europe, pensions. This arguably dilutes the value of the women-only space and suggests that union or perhaps class issues override gender ones. In contrast, MSF engages freelance women tutors in order that women's courses are always taught by women: if the union could not provide a woman tutor, it would not offer the course. The self-defined feminist director of education thought it laughable that a man should teach women's courses. More fundamentally, this discussion over the gender of tutors also reflects an underlying tension surrounding the purposes of women-only courses.

Finally and importantly, there are significant differences in course content. TGWU's approach is prescriptive and directed by the national education department, which has a very definite view of what the women should learn. Meanwhile, MSF sets out to be more flexible and indeed requires tutors to be flexible in their handling of the learning materials so that the women participants are able to shape the course. The content of MSF women's courses is decontextualised to broaden their appeal to women who are not presently or not interested in becoming active. In contrast the content of the TGWU courses concentrates on work/union issues. However, it is important to emphasise that the *processes* of the courses are similar, being characterised by participative discussions and student-centred activities, which seek to validate and legitimise women's lived experiences of work, union and family and in this way reflect feminist beliefs and values. Whether the unions intend it or not, this pedagogic approach allows the students to shape the direction discussions take and therefore what is learnt from them. It is the course processes and the influences on the women that the thesis explores as part of its investigation into the social construction of their union participation.

In conclusion, the above discussion reveals an evolving and dynamic context of both gendered enablement and constraint where key actors (particularly female officials and tutors) have played an active and central role in shaping the educational offering. It is clear that their actions and behaviours are informed by feminist beliefs and values and by an acknowledgement of the patriarchal nature of union organisation.

Before exploring women's experiences and perceptions of women's courses, Chapter Six examines the interviewees' routes to participation and involvement.

Chapter Six

Routes to Participation and Involvement in MSF and TGWU

‘One of the guys I work with is one of the senior stewards. So he, along with Beryl, approached me. I think I was almost coerced into it at first, but they said ‘We think you’d be quite good at it’. I’m not quite sure whether I should be here or not. But that’s how I became a women’s rep.’ (Hilary, TGWU)

Introduction

This chapter begins the analysis of how women’s union participation is socially constructed. It presents an account and analysis of the interviewees’ routes to union involvement, examining the people, experiences and influences that stimulated participation. The women’s forms of participation and the structural barriers and constraints to becoming (more) active, which they encountered in the family, work and trade union environment, are also examined. The analysis draws on the first interviews and the retrospective, reflective accounts of how the women first came to union participation. This chapter is important for understanding the women’s individual and collective experiences of participating in women-only courses and in their unions more generally, and the trajectory of their union careers discussed in Chapter Seven and Eight.

Chapter Two set the scene for this discussion by highlighting the dominant patterns of women’s employment, particularly occupational sex segregation and part-time work. This context both produces and reinforces gendered labour market inequalities and also creates gender-specific experiences of employment, which are relevant to understanding women’s relationship with trade unionism. The historical male domination of the trade union hierarchy was also considered to be an influence on women’s perceptions and experiences of trade unions. These factors are relevant to this chapter in so far as the consequence of gender specific work and union experiences is that routes to participation are also gendered.

‘Significant others’ and ‘significant experiences and influences’

The interview questions used to gather data for this section invited women to reflect back on how and why they became active in their unions. As discussed in Chapter Two, the provenance of willingness to participate in unions is the subject of much interest. This chapter draws on the ideas of Nicholson et al. (1981:116) who contended that the origins of union participation may be explained in terms of prior needs and values, emergent goals and beliefs, and ‘significant others’ in the social environment. Similarly, Watson (1988) employed the concept of ‘significant others’ and ‘significant events’ to discuss how union orientations and routes to participation can be shaped by a complex interaction of previously held values and engagement with new discourses or exposure to ‘unfair’ conditions.

These authors studied predominantly male trade unionists, however, since research has found women less willing than men to become involved especially in office holding, (e.g. Cockburn 1991; Metochi 2002), a gendered analysis of participation stimuli is critical. This thesis seeks to understand how a group of women came to attend a national trade union school and whether significant others and events would have or had had any influence on their union career trajectories. In order to conceptualise the nature of such influence the chapter employs Bradley’s (1996) notion of passive, active and politicised identities (see Chapter Two).

Mostly, the events related were of a cumulative, rather than one-off, nature, and were often gendered or racialised experiences of workplace injustice. Therefore, the term ‘significant experiences’ is used to capture *processes* rather than imply a one-off catalyst event. In addition, the chapter considers feminism as a possible ‘significant influence’, that is, whether women had a prior feminist orientation, which acted as a (contributory) stimulus¹. As discussed in Chapter Two feminism has been influential on union women, even if it is no longer as obvious as in earlier decades (the late 1970s for example).

¹ Throughout the thesis I indicate the women’s self-defined feminist orientation as either ‘feminist’ or ‘non-feminist’, wherever it is relevant to do so. That is where it seems that feminist beliefs and values have

Significant others and influences in the family

The influence of family on trade union membership is a matter of interest for some commentators on the future of trade unionism (e.g. Waddington and Kerr 2002). The premise is that trade union values are 'passed down' through generations, but that the corollary of the decline in union membership is a decline in the number of families with trade union presence, hence the 'passing down' might falter. Indeed Waddington and Kerr's findings from a quantitative study suggest the diminishing influence of family as a means of transferring unionisation (2002:303). Although a qualitative study of a small group of women trade unionists cannot prove or disprove this argument, (and indeed this is not the intention) it can offer more in-depth insight into the range of factors that push and pull individuals into activism. Although family background in no way determines propensity for union activism among the interviewees, it does have an influence, although not always in the direction one would imagine. (From **Tables 6.1 and 6.2** (below) the influences on participation can be connected to actual forms of participation.)

In the group of interviewees there are fewer women who described their family background as union-minded (three MSF, six TGWU) compared with those who said it was non- or anti-union (11 MSF, nine TGWU). The differential class composition of the two unions probably explains the inter-union differences, suggesting that other factors account more strongly for the MSF women's membership and activism, which will be explored later.

Among the women with non- or anti-union families, several described their parents as holding conservative values, sometimes aligning themselves with the Conservative Party. This was not always related to being from a middle class background. These women typically laughed when asked if they felt there had been a family influence on their union joining and early activism. Some of this group described their background as anti-union whilst others said their parents were simply indifferent to unions and politics in general. Two MSF women, Vera and Sarah, had fathers who managed their own businesses during the 1970s period of industrial unrest and they were exposed to anti-union discourse during

influenced action and behaviour regardless of self-identification, or where it is important to mark a distinction between the action and behaviour of self-identified and non-feminist women.

their adolescent and young adult years. They both started work in the highly unionised public sector after university and joined their union 'because it was the thing to do', rather than from any prior belief in trade unionism. Sarah, in particular, said that even though she joined the union she thought at the time that trade unionists were 'trouble-makers', a view which was to change later. The thesis follows Sarah's story, which begins with a pen portrait below and indicates through her own words Sarah's recent intention to become formally active in MSF.

Sarah's Story

Sarah is 43. She completed a degree and then trained as a speech therapist. She is partner-free and childfree. She comes from an anti-union, middle class background. She is a self-defined feminist. At the first interview she was participating informally at workplace level.

Sarah joined MSF about fourteen years ago when the union took up a claim for equal pay on behalf of speech therapists. She wanted to show support for the union. Around that time she attended a women's committee weekend school on equal pay and more recently one on pensions. She has also attended Women's Week on two previous occasions. She feels she has learnt a lot about unions and believes they are really important.

Sarah has never considered being a workplace rep. She is more interested in the professional issues that MSF takes up on behalf of members. But, she is also encouraged by the way that the union seems to have done something for women as evidenced, in her view, by its fight for equal pay for speech therapists.

'I'm very keen to become a learning rep. I mean I would never have thought of doing it without going to Women's Week. I wouldn't have had the confidence, I would have thought that you needed to know more about the union. Now, having learnt all about the union, what the people are like and some of the developmental stuff, I'm very keen. I'd also like to develop some more links outside my workplace.'

Other women brought up in anti-union households described themselves as rebels. One TGWU woman, Hilary, characterised her family as working class, but 'true blue' and said that as a 'stropy' teenager in the early 'Thatcher years' she argued with her parents about 'social justice' issues. She felt that this had influenced her to 'stand up for herself and for others' rights' in the workplace. She did however stress that she was not interested in unions as political organisations and felt that union leaders were too involved with issues that should be left to government: perhaps the lasting grains of influence from an anti-union family.

Interestingly, but unsurprisingly given the British union movement's poor record on representing black people (Lee 1987; Phizacklea and Miles 1987; Virdee and Grint 1994), all of the black women (four MSF, two TGWU) described their family background as non-union. However, some of these women had fathers who were politically active and for most a discourse of racial injustice was present in the family context and this had clearly influenced their view of the world as an unfair place, but one where activism could help. One MSF woman, Kamaljit, said that her father had been a community activist involved in black groups, a path, which she had followed, describing herself as 'a very political person'. Similarly, Bernadette a black woman of TGWU, said that 'dad was a solid labour man', but it was race politics, rather than union, that were the topic of discussion in the family. Encouraged by her father, she was involved from an early age in black and ethnic minority groups. Afsana of MSF, on the other hand, also had a politically active father, but she said that coming from a traditional Pakistani Muslim family it had never occurred to her as a child or young adult that women could become involved in unions or political life generally. She had married and become a mother at sixteen and it was only after her divorce two years earlier that a 'new world' opened up to her. Therefore the influence of her father was present, but dormant until she reached her thirties because of her domestic circumstances, combined with a gendered ideology, which had influenced her in her formative years.

Other women from union-minded backgrounds understandably took those influences for granted and said that they always assumed they would join unions even if they did not become active. For example, Barbara of MSF was brought up in a working-class community in a family with a long history of trade union membership and activism:

'At the end of the day that's where you're from, that's your roots. I mean I don't think unions are wonderful or anything. I mean I can see the negative as well as the positive, but for me personally I have to be in a union, I believe in the Labour movement.'

At present she participated informally (see **Table 6.1**), but she could see the possibility that in the right work circumstances she might become a representative – she was employed at the time in a voluntary organisation, which recognised UNISON and not MSF. She had retained her MSF membership (originally from a previous job) as a tactical decision,

because she did not envisage staying in that job for very long and wished to have continuity in her union membership so that she could participate in a branch structure.

All the women from union-minded backgrounds were also working class; hence the greater family influence on TGWU women. Even though some women had through their education and current occupation shifted their own class status, they retained their affiliation to their working class roots and with that support for trade unionism. Most of these women emphasised their father's occupation and trade union membership, indicating that fathers had had more influence on their thinking.

Table 6.1: Influences on and Forms of Participation of MSF Women

Name	Influences on Participation	Form(s) of Participation on Attendance at Women's School (2000)
Fiona	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Formal participation: workplace rep; branch chair
Deirdre	Union minded family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Formal participation: branch chair; regional council member
Elizabeth	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Formal participation: workplace rep; branch chair; SERTUC Women's Committee member
Kim	Non-union family background; significant other in the union; self-defined feminist	Formal participation: branch women's rep; branch committee member
Helen	Non-union family background; significant other in the union; significant experiences at the workplace	Formal participation: workplace rep; branch committee member
Linda	Union-minded family background; significant other in the union; self-defined feminist	Formal participation: 'women's rep'
Kate	Anti-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Formal participation: workplace rep; health and safety rep; branch committee member
Kamaljit	Non-union family background; significant other in the union; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Formal participation: workplace rep, branch committee member
Vera	Anti-union family background	Inactive member
Susan	Non-union family background; significant others in the union	Informal participation at workplace level; informal participation in national race committee
Sarah	Anti-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Informal participation at workplace level
Barbara	Union minded family background; self-defined feminist	Informal participation at branch level
Afsana	Non-union family background; significant others in the union	Inactive member
Christine	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Formal participation: workplace rep, branch committee member

However two women, Deirdre of MSF and Evelyn of TGWU, said that their mothers had been shop stewards and at 'tea time' they would talk about the problems they were dealing with. These women had strong female role models in contrast to the majority whose mothers were rather shadowy figures in their stories. Early exposure to a positive union discourse had left the women from union-minded backgrounds believing that joining a union was the 'right thing to do' irrespective of the particular work context.

The above discussion of family background shows that in a minority of cases positive family influence on union joining and participation was very strong. However, the larger group from non- or anti-union backgrounds shows that there is nothing entirely deterministic about family influences. This is brought into sharper focus by the fact that of the twenty women in the group who currently participated formally, only six were from union-minded backgrounds. Therefore factors other than family account for the participation of most of the women. Also, not all the women from union-minded backgrounds currently held union positions and some had never done so. Thus women schooled by the family in the importance of trade unionism, whilst likely to retain an affiliation to the movement, are not necessarily the ones who are its future female representatives. Thus, it is important to consider other, possibly more important sources of influence, including the work and union contexts.

Significant others and influences at work and in the union

Interviewees were asked to reflect back on whether they could identify anyone in their workplace or union who had encouraged or inspired them to become involved. Some of the women who had been positively influenced by family background, ironically, participated despite being deterred by perceptions of 'others' (often men) in the union, indicating that the influence of 'significant others' could be negative. This is discussed further in the 'barriers and constraints' section with regard to the internal union context.

This avenue of enquiry is particularly illuminating in the case of women where there was little or negative family influence and for whom more positive embodiments of union values proved persuasive. Watson's (1988) study emphasises the importance of sponsorship from inside the union, but since the vast majority of her interviewees were men, she offers no gendered analysis of the issue of sponsorship, for example are women

Table 6.2: Influences on and Forms of Participation of TGWU Women

Name	Influences on Participation	Form(s) of Participation on Attendance at Women's School (1999)
Sally	Non-union family background; significant experiences at workplace; significant other in the union	Formal participation: shop steward; branch committee member
Melanie	Union minded family background	Formal participation: shop steward; branch committee member
Jane	Non-union family background; significant other in the union	Formal participation: shop steward; 'women's rep'; branch committee member; regional and national trade group and women's committee member
Delia	Union minded family background; significant other in the union	Informal participation: at workplace and branch levels
Judy	Non-union family background; significant experiences at workplace	Informal participation: at branch level; plus formal participation: regional disability committee member
Evelyn	Union minded family background; significant experiences at the workplace; significant other in the union	Inactive member
Beryl	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Formal participation: shop steward; 'Women's rep'; branch committee member
Hilary	Non-union family background; significant other in the union	Formal participation: 'women's rep'
Mary	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Formal participation: shop steward; branch chair
Julie	Union minded family background; significant experiences at the workplace; significant other in the union; self-defined feminist	Formal participation: shop steward; branch committee member; deputy convenor
Suzanne	Union minded family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Formal participation: shop steward; branch committee member; regional and national trade group committee and women's committee member
Bernadette	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Informal participation: at branch level
Mandy	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; significant other in the union	Formal participation: shop steward
Molly	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Formal participation: shop steward
Diane	Union minded family background; self-defined feminist	Inactive member

more likely to be sponsored by other women? Certainly Ledwith et al (1990) and Kirton and Healy (1999) highlight the influence of 'significant others' in the workplace and union, particularly women who act as role models for other newer, less experienced female activists. It should, however, be noted that some of the interviewees in the present study

worked in male dominated contexts (for example the bus drivers and those in technical jobs), whilst others described their union branches as male dominated. In these instances female role models, at local level at least, were scarce.

Sometimes 'significant others' were actively on the look out for female and/or black members to bring on as activists. For example, Susan, a black woman from MSF with a non-union family background, attended an event hosted by the union's National Race Equality Committee (NREC) after seeing it advertised in the union magazine. She went out of interest and because working in a predominantly 'white' environment she felt that the local union did not tackle race issues. A black paid official noticed her, because although these events are publicised and open to all, in practice they mostly attract well-known black activists. The official kept in touch with her by telephone and persuaded her to attend another NREC event and 'Women's Week'. Susan acknowledged that without the official's persistence, she probably would not have gone to any other union events, because as a new woman she had felt uncomfortable. Afsana of MSF had a similar experience when she attended a regional forum for voluntary organisations at which two black MSF activists were present: they talked to her about what the union was doing for women and black members, signed her into membership and persuaded her to attend 'Women's Week'. Thus, these two black women's experiences of 'others' in the union were both gendered and racialised. Similarly, some TGWU women had been encouraged to become more involved by a Regional Women's Officer (RWO), who acted as a female role model for some of the interviewees, several of whom spoke of the influence she had had on them.

Other women felt that they had benefited from the union's explicit attempts to deliver on gender equality within the union by recruiting more female activists, for example as 'women's reps'. In this sense there was a gendered dimension to their experiences of 'others' in the union, even if such 'others' were men. Jane and Mandy of TGWU, for example, were both bus drivers in the male-dominated transport industry. Their male branch secretaries recruited them as shop stewards following a national union-led campaign to increase the number of women activists. Similarly, Kim of MSF, had been a member for many years, but working in a non-union company she had very little contact with the union. However, following a chance meeting with her male branch secretary at a

(non-union) social event, Kim joined her composite branch committee as ‘women’s rep’ finally acting on a longstanding feeling that she should be involved.

‘Significant others’ could also mean groups of people, especially in the same workplace, who have a less specific, but none the less important influence on individuals. Union active friends, for example, could constitute a collective group of significant others. Nicholson et al’s (1981) study of union activism found that having or acquiring union-active friends increases participation. Working in a unionised environment where it is the norm to be a member increases the likelihood of exposure to and engagement with positive union discourses and of course of making union-active friends. Some women had first joined their unions when a closed shop existed. However, over time they had mostly come to value their membership although in one case, Vera, this was largely for ‘insurance’ purposes. The effect of a collectivity of ‘significant others’ was particularly apparent in the case of some of the women from non- or anti-union backgrounds. They spoke of how they came to see unions in a different and more positive light after working in a unionised environment among trade unionists. This was especially pronounced among, although not unique to, the MSF women, who were less likely to come from union-minded backgrounds. This then overturned the negative image they had acquired through socialisation within the family. Elizabeth, for example, had been employed by MSF for ten years. She started there as an office ‘temp’, knowing very little about unions except the negative stories she had read in the press:

‘After two or three weeks in the office here I went home and I thought ‘I want to be part of that’ and I’ve stayed ever since’.

Not only did she stay, she went on to become a workplace representative for GMB (the union recognised for MSF staff) and later chair of the branch committee. She said that prior to this if anyone had suggested she worked for a union she would not have considered it – ‘no way!’

The foregoing discussion underscores the influence of both individuals and groups of people outside of the family in pulling women into participation, indicating that family background cannot accurately predict union activism, but also that some women seem to need a positive pull to actualise their willingness to participate. It is also important to note

that 'significant others' often appeared at a critical juncture in the woman's life. Susan, Afsana, Kim and Mandy had recently ended long term relationships and Jane's children had grown up and left home. They all felt that they now had spare time and energy to give, suggesting that if the 'significant other' had entered the woman's life at another time, their influence might not have been the same, highlighting the inter-relationship between significant others and significant events.

Significant events and experiences at work

Some women were able to recall specific experiences, which they felt had had a major impact on their becoming actively involved in their unions primarily by stimulating a sense of general injustice. Combined and over time these experiences activated a class-based collective identity. Linda of MSF, for example, said:

'Workers need to do it for themselves. Management don't give anything away, do they? If you want something you have to be prepared to stand up and demand it, don't you?'

Similarly, reflecting on the gradual heightening of her class-based awareness, Kim of MSF said:

'As you go through your career you see a lot of injustice, you see decent people being treated like dirt and you think this isn't fair, there's got to be another way. '

If willingness to participate is to be translated into actual participation it is important that there is a belief in the effectiveness of collective methods of representation and action (Kelly 1998; Metochi 2002). Some of the women's significant experiences had occurred in a unionised context, where they were able to see how the union handled the situation and if it had been successful, this had a positive influence on their perception of the union. Judy of TGWU is an interesting example. A bus driver, Judy had informally participated by attending workplace union meetings for many years, largely because it was the norm at her workplace to go to union meetings, but had not formalised her involvement through a position or committee participation, for example. In 1996 Judy suffered an industrial accident which left her permanently disabled and a wheelchair user. Until that point she felt that she had been treated fairly well as an employee and had had no grievances, but she

felt that her employer handled the accident poorly. This profoundly changed her view of management, triggering a stronger sense of 'them' and 'us' (Kelly and Kelly 1994), and a class-based identity. The union supported her personal injury claim and she retained her membership despite being unable to work: she was subsequently encouraged by her branch to become involved in the union's disability and race committees, since which time she had developed more politicised race and disability based identities.

However, just as there is nothing deterministic about family influences, a unionised work environment does not necessarily improve perceptions of unions, as survey data and case studies such as Waddington and Kerr's (2002) and Walters' (2002) respectively show. Neither is there any necessary relationship between strong union presence and the collectivisation of all employees. One MSF woman, Vera, had worked in the unionised NHS all her working life and her local union branch was very active, holding regular membership meetings, distributing literature and encouraging members to go on courses. Vera came from an anti-union background and despite being exposed to the more union positive work environment she remained ambivalent about the purpose of trade unionism:

'I must admit that in more recent times I have questioned my membership, the point of it, I mean. On balance I still think it's a safeguard, but I'm not really sure that I believe in unions as such.'

What is interesting is not so much that this attitude exists in the membership, but that someone who has chosen to participate in a course should display it. This suggests that various motivations, including individualist and/or instrumental, could lead people to participate in a union's educational activities aside from a desire to become union active. This theme is explored in Chapter Seven. It is quite obvious that those who have become active for the most part will have come to believe one way or another in trade unionism, whilst the more ambivalent members are likely to be inactive.

The interviews also sought to uncover significant gendered experiences that might activate a gender identity; that is experiences of sex discrimination rather than simply of general unfairness. When asked about this some women said that they had no personal experiences, but had witnessed instances and this seemed enough to have engendered a general sense of anger at the way women are treated, especially by employers. However, when asking people about personal experiences of discrimination it is always worth

treating their answers with caution because recognition of discrimination requires a prior awareness or gender consciousness, which not all women have (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996). For example, Mandy, a lesbian from TGWU, reflected on the way that discrimination is not always recognised as such by the ‘victims’. She said that after attending the women’s school she was able to identify many instances of discrimination on grounds of sex and sexuality from her own work life, but she said that as they had occurred she had simply accepted them and had not seen them as discrimination. Thus Mandy had made sense of significant experiences retrospectively, and a previously passive gender identity was activated. She was visibly excited about this process of illumination and was eager to raise other women’s consciousness. Mandy’s story illustrates the intersection of class, gender and lesbian identities.

Mandy’s Story

Mandy is 40, she left school with two ‘A’ levels and against her father’s wishes she started a degree in law – he thought that she should earn some money and not waste her time in higher education. After two years under emotional and financial pressure from her father, Mandy dropped out of university and went to work in a local factory for a few years before becoming a bus driver and TGWU member fourteen years ago. Her background is working class, non-union. Mandy is partner free and child free, although she now cares for her elderly mother. A long-term lesbian relationship broke down about a year ago.

Mandy has been a shop steward for about a year, and has recently completed a shop steward training course. There is only one other woman among her 120 members. Mandy feels she has a lot to give. Her priorities are women’s and lesbian and gay issues, although she does not self-identify as a feminist.

Mandy is very enthusiastic about union participation, which she was clearly finding very rewarding:

‘I’m not somebody who will run before they can walk. I don’t set my goals too high. I look at my next step; otherwise I’d never set off. I’d like to go further in the union, yes, but I wish I’d started younger. I mean I’m 40 now. But watch this space!’

Kamaljit of MSF had active gender, lesbian and race identities. She said that as a black lesbian she had experienced a lot of racism and homophobia in her working life and felt that working in a unionised organisation provided the opportunity to try to tackle these issues at workplace policy level. Similarly, Fiona and Helen of MSF worked in an organisation, where many women had experiences of sexual harassment, including Helen, and where women were badly paid. Management’s ineptitude and complacency at dealing

with these 'women's issues' eventually led a group of women to leave the staff association and join MSF, with Fiona and Helen emerging as 'natural' leaders. As Fiona said, 'I've always been bolshy', but it was significant gendered workplace experiences that had activated a collective gender identity and pushed her into investing her personal abilities in collective organisation. Fiona's pen portrait below reveals a strong attachment to the union.

Even the ambivalent Vera talked about being aware that sexism and discrimination in employment existed and she displayed an individualistically oriented active gender identity, in the sense that she was acutely aware of the problems her gender had caused her in her own career. But unlike other women, she was vague in the attribution of blame and was not convinced that the problem could be tackled through collective organisation. She felt it was a 'reflection of society in general' and could not see what unions could do on gender inequalities and therefore could not see the point of participating. In contrast most other women felt that collective organisation could help, in that there was practical work for unions to do at local and national levels on representing women and their concerns. In addition their own shifting class and gender identities meant that they wanted to participate in collective organisation.

Kelly's (1998) work on mobilisation theory provides a framework for understanding the importance of a sense of injustice combined with attribution, which is relevant to the discussion of significant others and experiences and links with the concept of shifting identities between passive, active and politicised. Kelly suggests that grievances are necessary for employees to become collectivised, however it is also essential that workers blame the employer for their problems (1998:45). Some interviewees clearly had grievances with their present employer and they very clearly placed the blame on management as in the case of Judy, Fiona and Helen above for example. For these women there was a direct relationship between the grievances and previously passive identities becoming activated or politicised and their getting (more) involved in the union. Similarly, Sarah of MSF became active when MSF first took up an equal pay claim on behalf of speech therapists. She was already a member, but for her, the equal pay issue was a turning point when it struck her that, as a woman, she was being treated unfairly and that the union could make a difference.

Fiona's Story

Fiona is 34, Irish and she left school at 16 with a couple of 'O' levels. Her background is working class, non-union. She is married with two very young children – a two-year old and a ten-week old baby. She is currently on maternity leave from her job as a clerical worker in a baby food factory, where she has worked for the past eight years. She intends to return to work part-time.

About a year previously Fiona was one of a small group of women who led an exodus from the company's reportedly weak and ineffective staff association to form a branch of MSF. She had no previous experiences of unions, but felt that the female administration workers had received a raw deal from the company in comparison to the unionised male factory workers. She is now a workplace rep and the negotiating committee chairperson, one of three female reps with a wholly female membership of about 80. She feels that where the workforce is female, the union reps should be women. Fiona is a self-identified feminist.

Fiona perceives family as a constraint on her union participation:

'I'd really like to be a full-time official. I love it so much, I love being involved, it's wonderful. But at the moment time is the main factor holding me back. With two small children to care for and a self-employed husband that I help out with the books and that sort of thing, I just couldn't afford the time. Maybe when the kids are older. For the moment it'll be enough just to carry on being a rep – I think I might stand down as chairperson.'

However, there were other women who had no specific grievances at their workplace, but they still became involved and still had a clear sense of (gendered) social injustice. Susan and Linda of MSF are good examples. Both women worked in large unionised organisations, Susan in the private sector and Linda in the public. Both women considered their employers to be 'good' and could think of no particular problems that either they or co-workers had experienced, but their lived experiences beyond the workplace had caused them to identify racism (in Susan's case) and sexism (in Linda's case) as societal problems. Kelly (1998) largely confines his analysis of how employees are mobilised to the level of the workplace, therefore identifying grievances and blaming the employer or management are essential preconditions of collectivisation. Shifting the analysis to the more general labour market context, it is possible to see how individuals who perceive very few problems in their own workplace can identify wider social injustices and place the blame variously on the capitalist-labour relation, patriarchal relations or racism. For some women then, the existence of a sense of injustice combined with attribution at a

macro level was sufficient to stimulate a desire to be involved, or to activate class, gender and/or race identities, as in the case of Susan and Linda.

The discussion of 'significant experiences' reveals that both a general sense of workplace/social injustices and a range of gender specific workplace/social injustices activated identities which engendered in many of the women a willingness to be involved, especially where there was a sense of attribution. Importantly, the diversity of the interviewees allows for a consideration of crosscutting identity-based experiences of injustice including race, disability and sexuality as being influential.

Feminism: a significant influence?

As discussed in Chapter One, feminism provides the conceptual tools for explaining patterns of women's trade union participation and at the same time an analytical framework for interpreting the voices of women trade unionists. Further, consideration of the influence of feminism on trade union women is relevant to understanding the nature of women's participation; for example, do women speak *as* and *for* women or as individuals in a sex category (Cockburn 1991)? Indeed, many of the strategies aimed at increasing women's participation, especially those based on women's separate organising (Briskin 1993), are rooted in feminist beliefs and values. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, feminism has suffered an ideological assault by a range of social actors in the 1980s and 1990s, so that fewer women are now comfortable with the label.

Nevertheless, because of its aim of gendered social transformation, there is considerable interest in whether feminism still informs the practices of union women (for example, Cockburn 1991; Colgan and Ledwith 1996; Cunnison and Stageman 1995; Kirton and Healy, 1999; Healy and Kirton 2000). Put simply, this is crucial to answering the questions 'do women make a difference?' and 'does it matter who gets elected?' or is the pursuit of women's equal participation in unions, simply borne of a concern for the liberal democratic principle of proportional representation?

Colgan and Ledwith (1996), for example, developed a typology of trade union women's consciousness seemingly derived from types of feminism (e.g. Walby 1986; 1992). Their research found that regardless of self-perception, trade union women's primary attitudes

seemed to be in agreement with what can be termed feminist principles and strategies (1996:176). Thus, it has to be recognised that not all women who display feminist beliefs and values will now (if ever they did) self-identify with feminism, although those prepared to adopt the label are probably likely to be most committed to and comfortable with feminist practices.

Bearing this in mind it is not particularly useful conceptually to classify women as either self-identified feminists or non-feminists, because this binary divide will not reveal very much about women's beliefs and values. However, there are conceptual and methodological difficulties surrounding the researcher attaching labels, which interviewees themselves dissociate from, i.e. some women are feminists, but do not know it; invoking connotations of false consciousness. To avoid this quagmire, an alternative approach is to explore *orientations* to feminism, rather than simply describe women as either feminist or not. This captures a spectrum of beliefs and values, without requiring unequivocal self-identification². For example, women who support women's separate organising in theory and/or practice, in doing so arguably display a relatively strong feminist orientation, whilst women who do not support women's separate organising, yet show a concern to tackle women's inequality using liberal measures show a weaker feminist orientation.

As a starting point for the discussion with interviewees, women were asked whether or not they considered themselves to be a feminist. Only a minority (six MSF, three TGWU) self-identified as feminists. This resonates with Colgan and Ledwith's (1996) study of predominantly branch level activists, whereas Kirton and Healy (1999) found that the majority of senior women in MSF self-identified as feminists. The latter perhaps a function of their seniority, possibly indicating that feminist women are more likely to seek upward union careers or that as they move upwards, women begin to adopt a stronger feminist orientation. The other women revealed differing degrees of feminist beliefs and values³, that is, weaker or stronger feminist orientations.

² Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity and simplicity in order to distinguish women who self-identify as feminists from those who do not, in subsequent chapters 'non-feminist' is used to describe the latter group. It is then possible to see whether those who are ambivalent or reluctant to adopt the label are equally equivocal with regard to feminist practices.

³ These can be defined as embracing 'strategies of challenge and change towards the transformation of patriarchal structures and obstructions in women's attempts to participate and progress' (Colgan and Ledwith, 1994:14).

The self-identified feminists were far more likely to be highly qualified women (seven) and white (eight), possibly reflecting the argument and criticism that feminism has most appeal to white middle-class educated women (e.g. hooks 1989). This was recognised by one MSF woman, Barbara, a self-identified feminist, with a politicised class identity:

‘Feminism has been very white and very middle class and has ignored a lot of groups that are under-represented. I mean you can talk all you like about women being strong, about getting out of oppressive relationships, but it’s not that easy for some women. We haven’t all been brought up in this privileged position that a lot of feminists have.’

The larger number of self-identified feminists in the MSF group than in the TGWU is probably a reflection of the class and occupational composition of the group, but possibly also indicative of the prevalent discourses in the unions. This will be explored in Chapter Seven in the context of the content of women’s courses.

Diane of TGWU typical of the self-identified feminists spoke as and for women using a feminist vocabulary:

‘If women can get together and develop an agenda then it will bring out women’s issues, because there are still barriers. So at least if we can get our agenda clear, then we can get through the barriers that are set up by men.’

Diane, like the other self-identified feminists, indicates support for women’s separate organisation as a strategy for overcoming the barriers associated with male domination.

In contrast, the majority of women who were reluctant to self-identify as feminists expressed concerns about what the concept meant. As Hilary of TGWU understood it, feminism demanded ‘preferential treatment’ for women, which she was uncomfortable with. However, she did display an active gender identity:

‘Whilst I agree that some women have a really rough time just because they’re women, not for any other reason, then yes, I’m very against that. On the other hand I don’t think that women should have any preferential treatment just because they’re women.’

Some of the women reluctant to label themselves as feminists used phrases such as ‘man hating’ and ‘bra burning’ to describe their doubts about feminism, suggesting they had been influenced by prevalent anti-feminist discourses, as with Christine of MSF:

‘Feminist? I just see someone, like, burn your bra kind of thing. I believe in justice, in equal rights for women, but feminist? No, *I don’t think so*’ (said with emphasis)

Similarly, Melanie of TGWU:

‘Feminist? Not in a bra burning sense, but I do think women should have equal rights with men’.

There were also some allusions to the perceived incompatibility of femininity with feminism, as suggested by Elizabeth of MSF:

‘No I’m not [a feminist], but I very much feel that if women are doing a job equal to a man’s they should be paid the same. But at the same time I quite like it if a man opens a door for me and the courtesies that go with being female: I enjoy that. But women can do just as good a job as men, so if that makes me a feminist, then I’m a feminist.

However, all the women were clear that the struggle for women’s equality was far from won and they were agreed that ‘something had to be done’, but they did not all associate the gender equality project with feminism.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that feminism influences the beliefs and values of trade union women, and that an understanding of feminist orientations is useful to thinking about women’s trade union orientations. However, only a minority of women self-identified as feminists and therefore had a prior feminist consciousness. Most women who did not self-identify as feminists were eager to stress their commitment to ‘equality for all’ or social justice generally, seeming to view feminism as a ‘single issue’ project and indicating that they privileged their trade union identity, as with Deirdre of MSF:

‘You what love? Me, a feminist? No, I think of myself as an individual person, not as a category. Everyone should be equal, not the same, but equal, but it is true that men often look down at women.’

The women's feminist orientations are returned to in subsequent chapters.

Forms of Participation and Involvement

Having explored how and why the group of women first came to join a union or, where applicable, to participate, this section examines where the women were in terms of their union careers when they were interviewed for the first time shortly after attending the women's school. As discussed in Chapter Two, there are different definitions of participation: the one employed here is multi-dimensional and includes a range of activities from office holding to attending union meetings, voting in elections or taking part in industrial action (Fosh 1993; Flood et al. 1996; Kirton and Healy 2001). This approach fits with the objectives of this study, which are to explore the varied ways in which women participate. However, it is important to distinguish different forms of participation so that the gendered push-pull mechanisms can be more effectively unpacked. Thus, a distinction is made between informal and formal participation⁴.

The women in the study were at different stages of their union careers when they attended the women's school as shown in **Tables 6.1 and 6.2**. Only four women (two from each union) were inactive, whilst five (three MSF, two TGWU) participated informally in their workplace/branch. The majority of women, however, were office holders (nine MSF and 11 TGWU) of workplace and/or branch positions and one TGWU woman participated in a regional disability committee, although their levels of experience in and training for their roles were more varied than their office holder titles might suggest.

Significantly, particularly for the discussion in Chapter Eight, but also for the discussion below of barriers and constraints, only five women (two MSF, three TGWU) participated in structures beyond the workplace/branch. The workplace context of women's activism has been the subject of research interest (e.g. Cunnison and Stageman 1995; Munro 1999). Some research (e.g. Lawrence 1994; Cully et al. 1999) has found that women are more likely to hold office when women constitute the majority of the members. Interestingly,

⁴ This is discussed in Chapter Two. However, to reiterate, informal participation means active engagement with the democratic processes and structures of the union, for example, interacting with union representatives, actively seeking information, voting in elections, attending union meetings: in short, taking an active interest in the union, rather than simply paying membership dues for 'insurance' purposes.

this is not entirely reflected in the present study. Nine of the office-holders represented mainly or exclusively women, three had gender balanced constituencies, whilst seven represented predominantly men. However, of the latter group three were 'women's reps' and it seemed that none of these women had any meaningful roles in that capacity, aside from taking the minutes at branch meetings, which they all did and providing a female presence, in an otherwise all-male branch committee. This contextual discussion will be returned to in Chapter Eight.

Barriers and constraints to participation

The majority of women did not participate beyond the workplace/branch; thus even with a relatively active group of women it is worth considering the factors that 'confined' them to the lower levels of the union hierarchy. This section explores what at this point in their union careers the women perceived as barriers and constraints to participation⁵, focusing on home and family, work and union and personal confidence issues.

Home and family

In the absence of a revolutionary re-negotiation of the gendered division of labour in the home, it is inevitable that some women will perceive their domestic responsibilities as impeding their union participation. That said a substantial minority of twelve interviewees had dependent children and eight of these were office-holders, denoting a high level of formal participation among the mothers in the sample. This is interesting and could either indicate that the sample in the study is itself atypical in this respect, or that childcare responsibilities are perceived by women as less of a barrier to participation in political life than formerly⁶. Rees' (1990) study of more than a decade earlier, for example, of women in NALGO found that female activists had fewer domestic commitments than the female membership. In contrast here, even of the four lone parents who one would expect to be most 'time poor', two held union positions, although the other two felt that time constraints would prevent them from getting involved beyond attending workplace meetings. One

Meanwhile, formal participation involves participating in the union's committee structures or holding a workplace union position.

⁵ Chapter Eight follows this up two years after the women's schools.

⁶ It is difficult to answer this question based on a qualitative study, but it is nevertheless worth flagging up as noteworthy. A quantitative survey could usefully address this issue.

single parent though, Afsana of MSF, said that if she could take her younger children to union forums, she would get involved. She had taken two of her children to residential schools, including the women's course, but there was no childcare available at her local branch meetings. This points to the utility of union interventions (e.g. provision of childcare) for encouraging greater participation among at least some women.

However, it is not possible to read from the high level involvement of mothers in this study that fundamental social change has occurred, such that women no longer experience motherhood as constraint. It must be remembered that overall mothers of dependent children are among a minority of women involved in political life (Walby 1997).

Nevertheless women have always made individual decisions about how to juggle their different roles and there have always been exceptions to the norm. However, the high level of involvement of mothers in this study does indicate that gender relations are never cast in stone and that there is scope for negotiation within households over childcare and other domestic duties. Mirroring other research (e.g. Lawrence 1994) some mothers emphasised the importance of a supportive partner prepared to take on practical tasks such as collecting children from school/day care and cooking the family meal. Just as important though was that the partner had sympathy for the union movement, so that there was a shared understanding that what the woman was doing in the union was important and worthwhile and therefore her time and effort were well spent. In this regard some of the women mentioned that their partners were also union members.

However, as a caveat to the above optimistic picture of women successfully combining motherhood, paid work and union participation, it should be noted that there was only one mother-office holder whose activism extended beyond the workplace. Typically this group of women said that time constraints would not allow them to get involved at regional or national level. When asked to explain their union roles and activities, they appeared to perform the bulk of their union duties during normal working hours, rarely taking union work home. They had sufficiently generous 'facilities time' to render this unnecessary and most emphasised that weekends and evenings were family time. The exception was Helen of MSF, a divorced mother of three small children who would often spend the evenings on union business: she liked to keep busy, she said. Generally it was clear from interviews that the mothers' union roles rarely intruded into the domestic domain, typically only one week per year when they attended a residential course and it became necessary for partners

to 'help out' with domestic duties. In this regard a couple of women mentioned that they had spent the weekend before the school cooking meals for the freezer which their husbands could reheat for the family during the week.

The one notable exception to this general pattern was Suzanne of TGWU. She had been a shop steward for twelve years and was a delegate on a range of regional and national committees, which entailed using her three days' per month facilities time, seven days per year of annual leave entitlement and many evenings and weekends. This level of participation had been arrived at over a period of years, with initially a reluctant and then later a supportive husband. She described herself as 'lucky' to have a supportive husband and compared her own domestic situation with that of one of her female union colleagues, whose husband had not 'let her' attend the women's school in Eastbourne. Suzanne's aim now was to become a paid official therefore it was important to 'be seen'. The above indicates that despite increasing involvement of women with dependent children at the lower levels of the union hierarchy, women union leaders outside of the workplace are still likely to display 'atypical' characteristics. Equally it is possible that some of the women active at workplace level only when children are young, will expand their activism later and that they will take with them the store of knowledge and experience they accumulate from juggling three roles.

As noted above active women trade unionists are generally atypical. There is no doubt that managing a family and household is a time consuming task if added to the demands of paid work. Nevertheless, some women did manage to successfully juggle three careers: work, family and union. On the other hand other women perceived their family circumstances as incompatible with union activism, indicating that traditional ideology continues to influence some women. Walton (1991), in her study of union women, found that women who said children were the main reason keeping them from being involved, did not have very young children. She concluded that their reluctance was more to do with how they *saw* their role in the family than the practical constraints of finding and paying for a babysitter, for example. In the present study some women became active fairly soon after the breakdown of a long-term relationship, whilst others became active once their children were older, both groups saying that they would not have had time to become involved before. This is perhaps reinforced by the fact that a narrow majority of interviewees were partner-free, including a minority of the office holders. The partner-free women typically

emphasised that their time was their own and that they were not answerable to anyone in the domestic setting.

Work and union

In addition to the domestic context, the work context could stand in the way of women's involvement in unions. Generally speaking women are less likely to work in unionised settings⁷. However, the vast majority of interviewees worked in union recognised organisations. Those who did and who held workplace union positions were all in receipt of what they regarded as fairly reasonable and flexible facilities time. Further, although asked explicitly, the interviewees rarely reported practical problems around getting paid time off for union activities such as attending courses. Interestingly, in the overall context of diminished union presence and influence, this indicates that there was no overt employer hostility to union organisation in the contexts concerned.

Those who did not work in unionised organisations were involved to different extents, but perceived the fact that they did not belong to a workplace union to be a barrier to further involvement. Most people's first point of contact with a union is through their workplace, although a minority joins as individual members (Waddington and Kerr 2002). Given the arcane nature of unions as organisations it is hardly surprising to find that the workplace is the primary route to activism. The workplace is also probably the place where individual activism is sustained, with people who change jobs to non-unionised employment likely to give up their union membership (Woodland and Cully 1997). Delia of TGWU, for example, was now employed in a non-unionised organisation, having recently left the transport industry. Although she was determined to remain involved, she was beginning to question the point of being a member in her present work circumstances. Afsana of MSF and Diane of TGWU knew very little about the union's structures and the opportunities for participation for someone not employed in a unionised workplace, although they both expressed an interest in finding out more. Meanwhile for Judy of TGWU, disability intersected with unemployment as a dual constraint. First, she was unable to work and felt this would limit her involvement to participation in committees outside of the industrial structures. Second, she faced transportation difficulties. She described how on one

occasion she arrived at a union meeting, which was on the top floor of a building with no lift. Determined to get there, she climbed the stairs 'on her bottom' and was then carried into the meeting by another participant. She reflected on how humiliated and exhausted she felt. Third, she was not in good health, her accident having triggered a degenerative condition requiring constant medication. For someone like Judy the 'pull' to participate would need to be strong enough to overcome these enormous barriers.

On the other hand, the absence of a union organised workplace did not have the same impact on the more experienced activists such as Bernadette of TGWU and Deirdre of MSF. Bernadette had stood down from her position as senior shop steward in a local authority when she became a local councillor. Deirdre was now unable to work because of disability and ill health. She no longer had a workplace union position, but she was chair of her local voluntary sector branch. Because of their former union roles, they both had extensive contact networks within their unions and whilst the nature of Bernadette's involvement was now less formal than Deirdre's, they sustained participation in structures outside of the workplace.

The other major work-related barrier to involvement mentioned by MSF women was heavy workloads and long hours. Three women, Christine, Barbara and Sarah, were managers and professionals in the public sector, working with vulnerable people. Christine, for example, was a senior workplace representative and manager of a day care centre. She said that her professional commitment to her clients would prevent her from getting involved beyond the workplace because unforeseen work crises could occur at any time and she needed to be able to respond by staying late, going in at weekends and so on. Interestingly, although Christine was a single mother, it was her work that she emphasised as constraining. Kim's job entailed extensive travel and she was often away from home, so she felt that she would not have the necessary commitment to take on further union roles, than her position as branch women's representative. There is a gendered dimension to these women's experiences to the extent that although men typically work longer hours than do women, this is not generally reported as a major barrier to male union participation (e.g. Lawrence 1994), because men are more likely to have partners taking care of the home and family (e.g. Watson 1988).

⁷ This is partly because of women's propensity for part-time work, which has lower union density rates than

The literature on women in unions (discussed in Chapter Two) often identifies the internal union context as a barrier standing in the way of women's participation (e.g. Cockburn 1991; Cunnison and Stageman 1995; Franzway 2000). This is a theme returned to in Chapter Eight, but it is also relevant to the discussion of how and why women came to be active. The main thrust of the arguments concerns the conceptualisation of unions as patriarchal organisations (Cockburn 1991) with masculine cultures adapted to the needs and norms of male trade unionists.

Some women worked in female dominated occupations or organisations and it was women who dominated the local branch. Other women accepted that men ran the local union and they did not problematise this because they had not experienced male domination as disempowering. Kate of MSF was the only female representative in her branch. Her occupation (laboratory technician in a university) and work environment were male dominated. As a consequence she said she had never identified with other women or with feminism. She got on with men and could not understand the need for separate women's forums within the union. Kate's story will be revisited in subsequent chapters because after attending the women's course she had changed her views on feminism and on male domination of unions, suggesting that the dominant masculine discourse of the local union had obscured her gender identity and its salience. Jane of TGWU on the other hand was among a number of women who felt constrained by the attitudes and behaviour of a male-dominated branch. Although Jane was recruited as a 'women's rep', in practice the male-led branch had no role they were prepared to give her. Jane was very frustrated by this:

'It's always been male-dominated. I mean I don't do any disciplines or grievances or anything like that, even though I've been going to the education programmes to try to improve my understanding. But no matter how much I learn I'm not going to get anywhere because it's always been male dominated and always will be'.

When asked what her union duties were, Jane said that she kept an eye on the ladies' toilets because there were lots of complaints from the few women members about vandalism. Her job was to report these problems to management. Jane's story suggests that although male branch officials might comply with national union edicts, they are able to actively limit the impact that gender equality strategies have in practice, thus consolidating the

position of the gendered oligarchy. Beryl's story bore similarities to Jane's in that she was originally recruited as a 'women's rep' and given very little to actually do by her male-led branch. However, she recruited other women representatives so that they could stand together to ensure the culture of the branch changed. Beryl thus consolidated and strengthened her position using a gendered strategy. Although now very active at workplace and regional levels, Beryl's time for the union was constrained by multiple domestic responsibilities, as her story below shows.

Beryl's Story

Beryl is 47, she left school at 16 with a couple of 'O' levels. Her background is working class, union-minded. She is a self-identified feminist. She married and had children young, working part-time to fit in with the children. She is now a grandmother of four and helps her daughter with childcare. She also has an elderly mother and elderly father-in-law to help care for. She started working at Luton airport doing clerical work in 1990.

Beryl joined TGWU in 1991 and has been a shop steward and women's rep almost since she joined. She is now one of three female stewards out of about eighteen, representing 500 members, predominantly men. She spends a lot of time on union business, including participating in some regional committees, and she is also active in the Labour Party. Beryl has attended a lot of union courses and she values the education she has received through the union very highly.

'I wouldn't have thought I'll take on any more at the moment because I've got a lot of family commitments. I think if you're going to go further in the union you've got to ... I mean you can have commitments, but not the sort that I've got at the moment.'

Personal confidence issues

The other major issue, which arose as a barrier was lack of confidence in personal skills and abilities, which had various dimensions and clearly intersected with other barriers in the home and family and work and union contexts. For example, when talking about their pasts many women qualified their work histories with the word 'only', i.e. 'for years I was *only* a cleaner', or 'when the kids were young I *only* worked part-time', etc. This was particularly the case with the women who had left school with no or few qualifications, indicating that their gendered work experiences and class positioning had taught them to think of themselves as non-achievers.

Privileging the roles of wife and mother can often result in a devaluing of self and low self-esteem in women, but there are also more sinister threats in the domestic situation. Deirdre and Helen talked about low self-esteem when they had lived in the shadow of violent domestic abuse. In addition to domestic violence, Helen had also experienced sexual harassment at her workplace, feeling that she had become marked as a 'victim'. After leaving their husbands both women described how getting involved in the union had represented a turning point when they gradually came to value themselves. As their gender identities shifted to become more active, the women realised that they were not to blame for their predicaments. Both women said that they would never again allow a man to treat them the way their ex-husbands had done, neither in a verbal or physical sense, indicating that union involvement can teach women to construct images of themselves as powerful agents, rather than victims.

Lack of confidence was also often related to women's unfamiliarity with the workings of trade union organisation mirroring earlier research (e.g. Cockburn 1991; Rees 1992). Some women felt that they had to learn more before they could become more active or even consider taking a position, whilst other women felt they lacked the confidence to go further in the union: hence their participation in the courses (see Chapter Seven for a fuller discussion). Interestingly this dimension of lack of confidence was less related to class in so far as many highly qualified women also talked about feeling unconfident to take on a union role. In common with other women, Hilary a TGWU steward situated her own lack of confidence firmly in the context of male-domination of the union. She commented:

'You tend to think you can't compete with them [the men] because they've been involved in the union for years and years and years'.

Susan (MSF), a black woman in a work context with few other black people and no black or female union representatives, made similar remarks, for example:

'All the reps in work are quite outspoken and basically I just think I need to have the confidence to do that, which I don't have at the moment.'

The discussion of barriers and constraints underscores that the women's material circumstances in the home, work, and union contexts have an influence on union participation. Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals instances in which individual women

successfully overcome or simply live with the barriers. There are also indications that gendered ideologies continue to have some influence on women, especially on how they perceive and interpret their familial roles. Further, some women's life experiences incline them towards a devaluing of self, which for the purposes of the discussion of union participation engenders the self-perception that they do not have the skills and experience to usefully contribute. The confidence-building capacity of women's courses is one of the primary motivations and outcomes, underlying women's participation as will be discussed in Chapter Seven (see also Greene and Kirton 2002).

Conclusions

This chapter has introduced the reader to the group of interviewees who are at the centre of this study, exploring their routes to participation and involvement in their unions. In summary, the chapter has explored the various influences and orientations the women 'took with them' to the women's schools and outlined where they were in their union careers at that time. In summary, it is clear that union participation and union careers are gendered from beginning to end: there are gendered stimuli to participation in the first place, which are reinforced by gendered experiences and roles over the life course, which combine to shape women's relationship with trade unionism. However, as a caveat, and reflecting the theoretical underpinning of the thesis discussed in Chapter One, this does not mean that women have an entirely common and uniquely female experience. They also share experiences with men in their families, communities, unions and workplaces, such that there is a large class-based element to their social identities. They are also divided by other identity characteristics such as race, sexuality and disability.

Significantly, the analysis shows that union involvement for women is possible irrespective of domestic circumstances (mirroring other recent research, e.g. Munro 1999). However, the consideration of barriers and constraints highlights the importance for a woman-centred gender analysis of exploring both the public and private domains, without which women's problematic relationship to trade union participation cannot be properly understood. In particular, Afsana reminds us that the social organisation of trade unionism has not evolved with carers in mind:

‘Barriers? Children and time. It’s all very well for me to go away for the odd week; that can be arranged. But for lone parents like me, it’s very difficult to get more involved. I need to think about the children. If I could take the children with me to meetings I would get more involved.’ (Afsana, MSF)

The next chapter explores women’s experiences of women-only trade union courses.

Chapter Seven

Perceptions and Experiences of Women-only Courses: The shaping of gender and trade union orientations

‘It just felt safer, more relaxed, not having to explain yourself. Having women understand your experiences. Being with like-minded people, equal. We were more relaxed and it was much safer’. (Helen, MSF.)

Introduction

Following from the investigation of women’s routes to participation and involvement in the previous chapter, this chapter continues to explore the social construction of women’s trade union participation by examining perceptions and experiences of women-only courses. The unions’ aims in providing women’s courses were discussed in Chapter Five, where course content was also briefly described. Primarily, the intention of this chapter is to ‘voice’ the experiences of the women students themselves; therefore the analysis focuses on findings from the first interviews with MSF and TGWU course participants. However, the views of tutors are also addressed, because they are bound to influence the experiences of students. Additionally, the chapter presents data from the larger population of the ‘snapshot’ surveys and draws on observation of the courses. Use of multiple data sources allows for analysis at the levels of ‘situated activity’ and ‘self’ (see Research Map, Chapter Four, **Figure 4.1**).

As background to the discussions in this chapter it is relevant to note that most women (10 of each union) received paid leave to attend the women’s school. Those who did not were, with two exceptions, either currently self-employed, unemployed or in non-unionised employment contexts. Regarding the two exceptions, Sarah of MSF felt it inappropriate as a part-time worker and non-office holder to ask for paid time off. Mandy of TGWU was the only representative denied paid leave. She had recently attended a shop stewards course and her employer said that the women’s school was not relevant to her union duties, as there were only two women in her branch. She took annual leave. The other office holders reported no problems in getting ‘reasonable’ paid time off for union courses. What

was ‘reasonable’ was determined by a combination of the woman’s perception of job constraints and management’s willingness to endorse paid leave. In this respect the findings mirror those of other studies in well-organised contexts, where there is often little sign of major detrimental changes in union-management relations (e.g. Bradley 1999:194) despite an overall context of union decline.

It is also worth noting that many of the women (eight MSF, 11 TGWU) had prior experience of at least one union course. Some of these had also previously attended at least one women’s course (four MSF, five TGWU). From **Table 7.1** it is possible to see that the interviewee sample’s prior union education experience closely resembles that of the larger group of ‘snapshot’ survey respondents.

Table 7.1: Have you attended any other MSF/TGWU courses in the last 2 years?

	MSF 2000 and 2002 (N = 67)	TGWU 1999 and 2001 (N = 98)
Yes	38 (57%)	67 (68%)
No	29 (43%)	31 (32%)

Therefore, overall a majority of interviewees (and women’s school participants) in both unions were not newcomers to union education, suggesting that the aim (discussed in Chapter Five) of attracting less experienced women is not being fully met in either union.

Motivations for attending women’s schools

Before exploring perceptions and experiences of women’s courses in MSF and TGWU, this section considers interviewees’ motivations for attending the women’s schools. As explained in Chapter Five the national women’s schools of both unions are open to ‘ordinary’ members as well as activists and office holders, therefore it is likely that women attend for a variety of different reasons. We cannot fully understand how their union careers develop after the school (discussed in Chapter Eight) without knowing why they attended in the first place.

Although some women had multiple motivations, which emerged during the course of interviews, most were able to articulate their primary reason when asked explicitly. Three broad reasons emerged, which related to the woman’s perceptions of her learning needs and her expectations of the content of the course: union reasons, work reasons and personal

reasons. The interviews addressed the women-only dimension of the course as a motivator, but most women had to be prompted to talk about this. Therefore the simple fact of it being a women's school was not in itself articulated as a motivator, although it was often bound up with other motivators to the extent that it was difficult to disentangle as discussed below.

Union reasons

The women who cited 'union reasons' expressed an explicit desire to gain/improve skills and knowledge related to office holding or to developing a union career (including contacts and networking). The majority of interviewees (eight MSF, 13 TGWU) expressed 'union reasons'; although there was a greater variety of motivations among the MSF interviewees and a more explicit prior union orientation or commitment among the TGWU women. About half of the women who were motivated by 'union reasons' were (relatively) new workplace representatives or inexperienced members. These women typically emphasised their need to gain skills and confidence to carry out their present union roles and/or their desire to learn more about the union and the types of involvement and paid careers possible. Linda as a new MSF workplace women's representative was typical. This was her first course, suggested by her male branch secretary: she felt that before she could begin to participate in workplace negotiations and representation she needed some training so that her skills would 'match' those of management.

The more experienced women who gave 'union reasons' for attending the women's schools typically stressed the importance of the opportunity to network with women in the union and the importance of keeping abreast of changes in the employment relationship, particularly legal aspects. For example, Bernadette and Mary of TGWU commented:

'You get to meet your sisters basically and there's a sense of solidarity and a sense of support. There's an element of networking involved as well. If you've got a problem you can talk with other people and try to resolve it. Plus, it's also about keeping up to date with current issues, the law etc.'

'It helps a lot you know because you get to know where to go for help. I mean you've got all the handbooks, so you know where to look, but you also need something more. Once you've met people that you can relate to and contact, it's so much easier.'

Work reasons

Only two MSF women (and no TGWU women) emphasised their wish to gain/improve skills related to their present paid work or to developing their paid work careers. Kim was seeking promotion in her paid work:

‘It was something I knew was on my training plan. I’ve wanted to go on a negotiating course for ages because that’s part of what I do. I also thought it would be useful for my personal life.’

Nevertheless, Kim was also actively involved in her union branch as women’s officer, although as this was a composite branch and her workplace was not unionised, her role did not involve negotiating. Her case does, however, highlight that union activism and wishing to move upward in a paid work career are not mutually exclusive (see Healy and Kirton 2002). She indicated that she preferred to do the union’s negotiating course, rather than a management course selected by her company. Susan was in a similar situation, in that she had recently begun to participate in union affairs and expressed a desire to increase her involvement. But, her primary reason for attending the women’s course was that promotions were coming up at her workplace and she thought a negotiating skills course might equip her with the skills to successfully apply. Kim and Susan both received paid release from work, but this does not necessarily indicate a generous or pro-union employer, but perhaps a cost-conscious, astute one. Union courses are after all free of charge and the union reimburses travel expenses. If work skills are developed, the employer’s costs are minimal compared to the prices charged by staff/management training organisations, which could be one reason why they received paid leave.

Personal reasons

Six women (four MSF, two TGWU) cited ‘personal reasons’, expressing a general interest/curiosity in the women’s school and sometimes indicating that they were bored with their lives/work, or that they had a desire to socialise with like-minded people. With one exception these were hitherto inactive members or they participated informally. The exception was Kate of MSF who held two local positions, which she was about to resign because of impending redundancy. She attended ‘Women’s Week’ because after a long period of high union involvement she felt quite negative about the union and under stress.

She thought that a ‘quiet week’ would help her reflect and make sense of her present situation. Similarly, three other women were in need of a retreat for reflection. Barbara of MSF and Delia of TGWU were informally active and had, supported by their unions, recently been through stressful Employment Tribunal cases of sexual harassment. Evelyn, an inactive member of TGWU had recently suffered the death of her young son and was persuaded to go to Eastbourne by her branch secretary as a temporary distraction from her grief¹.

The significance of the women-only setting

In context of a discussion about the role of women-only trade union education, it is relevant to explore why women opt for women’s courses when there are a plethora of mixed-sex courses available (especially to activists and office-holders), some with ostensibly similar content. In many cases, as stated above, the fact that the courses were women-only events intersected with the interviewees’ primary motivation to attend. Over half the interviewees (nine MSF and nine TGWU) admitted, sometimes reluctantly, that part of the reason they had chosen the course was because it was women only.

Half (six MSF and three TGWU) of these women had no previous experiences of women-only courses, but their prior belief, in some cases (six) based on their experiences of mixed-sex courses, was that it would be a more comfortable environment. These women had active gender identities: they were conscious of the male-dominated nature of their unions and believed that they would escape the ‘macho’ context by attending a women’s school. It is undoubtedly significant that most (seven) were also self-defined feminists², therefore it seemed that feminist values, which see the importance of women-only spaces had underpinned their motivation or in Briskin’s terms (1993) that they had ideologically bought into the ‘politic of separate organising’ (see Chapter Two). Diane of TGWU, for example, had recently completed a degree in women’s studies and had no experience of trade union courses. Even so, as a self-defined feminist her prior belief was that a women’s course would be ‘less macho’ than a mixed-sex one and that consequently as a complete

¹ As an aside, the tutors had been made fully aware of this woman’s situation and the compassion they showed her was very touching and served as a reminder of the broader role that a union can play in the lives of its members. She was immensely grateful for the support and kindness she received during the week.

² See discussion of the women’s feminist orientations in Chapter Six and a broader discussion of feminism in Chapter One and Two.

novice she would feel more comfortable. One black woman from MSF, Kamaljit, a self-defined feminist, was a firm believer in separate spaces for women. She argued that some Asian women had a preference for women-only forums, but equally she thought they were important for lesbians. She said that from her experience heterosexual women were 'more tolerant' of lesbians than were heterosexual men and therefore she had anticipated that she would feel more comfortable at a women's school. I asked her whether she had thought instead about attending a black member school and she remarked:

'When I was 18 I went to this black only group and I was told I wasn't black. I know the definition of black has changed in ten years, but that was my starting-point, so that wasn't very positive. I think there are different issues for black women than for black men and I would be more interested in black women-only.'

Another black woman, Afsana of MSF, who was not a self-defined feminist, but who had an active gender identity, also felt that as an Asian woman she would be more comfortable in a women-only environment on religious and cultural grounds:

'Speaking from an Asian background, when women get together they sort of come out of their shells and they can talk about anything. But when you're with males you tend to be a bit quieter.'

Other women had been influenced by previous positive experiences of women-only union courses (three MSF and five TGWU). Two of the MSF women in this category had no experience of mixed-sex courses. For example, Helen was not a self-defined feminist and had no prior value commitment to women-only spaces, and in 1999 when she first attended 'Women's Week' she had been indifferent to the women-only dimension of the school; the dates had been convenient and the content was relevant. In 2000, however she consciously chose a women-only course, indicating a shifting gender identity:

'The first time I just liked the idea of a negotiating skills course. I felt that was what I needed and it just happened that Women's Week was offering the course at the right time for me. But I got so much out of it. It was so great that I wanted to go back this year and never really considered doing any other course than Women's Week. I think that we're representing nearly all women and we have no men on our negotiating committee, so it just seemed appropriate that I would do a women's course.'

Fiona's 'story' below reflects a self-defined feminist's very similar orientation to women's courses.

Fiona's Story

This was Fiona's second time at 'Women's Week'. When she became an MSF rep about a year ago she was very conscious of the need for training, so she immediately obtained course information from her regional officer. She said she 'never dreamt that MSF would pay to fly us over to England and pay for childcare expenses too – it was brilliant, amazing'. Fiona has no experience of mixed-sex union courses, although she would like to try one in order to practise the skills she feels she has learnt in the comfort of the women-only environment in the 'cut and thrust' of a male dominated context. As a relatively new workplace representative and union activist, she said that she felt happier going to a women-only course; she felt she could be more relaxed and open and 'let her guard down', which she thought important for the learning. She felt that the most important thing the course had taught her was that:

'You can learn to be a good union rep, how to negotiate, how to organise. These are not skills you're born with, you can learn them and you can get better and better and improve your skills, by regularly doing courses.'

In keeping with her identity as a self-defined feminist, Fiona felt strongly that there is a place for women-only courses, but that mixed-sex courses also needed to appeal to women. I asked her whether she was so enthusiastic about 'Women's Week' because it was so enjoyable or because the women-only dimension was important for the learning. She said emphatically that the two could not be separated. She believed that 'Women's Week changes people's lives.'

Judy of TGWU on the other hand, in common with other TGWU women influenced by previous experiences of both mixed-sex and women-only courses commented:

'It did appeal to me that it was women only because then you get no sort of macho business coming through. It was really good seeing them enjoying themselves, you know like you're let off the leash. You get that comradeship that you don't seem to have when you're on mixed courses.'

Judy's remark about 'macho business' was typical of these women's perceptions and experiences of mixed-sex courses, which undoubtedly coloured their decision to opt for the women's school. The case of a small group of TGWU women contradicts Walton's (1991:168) finding that women who have been on several courses are less supportive of women-only courses because they are less sympathetic to the forms of women's oppression that less successful women experience. It suggests that some 'successful' union women continue to see the relevance of women's groups for themselves and other

women. It is also worth noting that two of these women did not self-identify as feminists, indicating support from some non-feminist women for feminist practices. Thus, a gender identity can become a base for action without an espousedly feminist identification.

As a motivating factor some women had not attached any significance to the women-only aspect of the course. They generally said that they had not given any thought at all to the fact that all students would be women. These women typically said that the school was on convenient dates, that the course content appealed to them, or that someone else (a paid officer or a branch official) had 'put their name down for it'. For example, in Evelyn's case (above), her branch secretary felt that the women's school would be less threatening in view of her recent bereavement, whilst Evelyn herself had not thought about it in advance of the course. Some of these women were quite surprised to be asked whether the fact that the school was women-only figured at all in their decision to attend, but usually they did go on to describe their course *experiences* in gender aware terms, as will be discussed later. The comments below reflect this view of the insignificance (as a motivator) attached to the women-only status of the courses, the first is a woman from a female-dominated workplace and the second from a male-dominated:

'It's no different from what I normally come across, because the majority of office workers are women anyway, so that's normal for me. It wasn't an issue for me as long as I get on well with everyone.' (Susan, MSF.)

'I don't care what the course is, as long as it helps me, whether it's with male, male and female. It doesn't matter, it's totally irrelevant, I don't just go on women's courses.' (Jane, TGWU.)

Susan displays an active, but not politicised gender identity, whilst Jane displays a passive gender identity. There was one other group of women who expressed in principle opposition to women-only courses. None of these women were feminists, although later in the interview they talked in gender-conscious terms and demonstrated at least partial and contingent support for women-only courses. For example:

'I wasn't interested in feminist issues. I felt that just because I'm female it doesn't mean that I'm going to go on a female in the union course. I really thought they were going to be men bashing, slagging men off the whole week and I thought that it wasn't right. I went down there absolutely determined that if anyone started slagging men off in general, then I would object, because I felt that that is anti-

union and just because we get together with women, we shouldn't use that as an opportunity to start insulting our brothers in the union.' (Kate, MSF)

Kate displayed a politicised class identity and her fear seemed to be that feminism, by 'blaming' men, stood in opposition to class politics. Elizabeth also appeared concerned that the concept of women's separate organising undermined the commonality of purpose on which trade unionism is built:

'I can see why some women would like it to be women-only, but I think it is actually very discriminatory, because we don't have a men-only course. The workforce is made up of women and men and men have similar problems to women. Men have sexual harassment, men suffer from bullying, men have carer problems and I don't see why that should all be women's issues.' (Elizabeth, MSF)

Elizabeth was prepared to be pragmatic: she found 'Women's Week' useful and enjoyable, plus it was convenient for her to attend. In the course of her union career, she had attended a number of women's schools and also participated in other women's forums within the union movement. She did not entirely approve of their existence at an ideological level, yet she believed them to be doing valuable work in pursuit of women's equality. Mandy of TGWU, as can be seen from her 'story' below was also uncertain about the rationale for women-only forums.

Mandy's Story

Mandy was persuaded to attend the women's school by a TGWU regional paid official as part of her training for her role as shop steward. She was not very interested at first because she assumed the course would be inappropriate for her in her heavily male-dominated work context. Mandy does not identify herself as a feminist and like many non-feminist women she felt ambivalent about the concept of women-only forums:

'I always said that I don't want preferential treatment, so I didn't want to get involved (in women-only forums). I wanted equality not preferential treatment. But then coming here I realised it's not about asking for preferential treatment, it's equality we're after and that is all they want to give us.'

Mandy had recently attended a shop stewards course where there had been just one other woman, who she said was very quiet, although she stressed that she did not personally find the experience intimidating:

'They (the men) weren't funny or anything, but they were all like 'we've done this and we've done that', talking about what they'd done over the years. I'm used to working with

men so I had no problem getting straight in there, but I suppose if I'd worked in a factory with just women I would have felt different'.

As a non-feminist Mandy was uncomfortable with blaming men for women's discomfort in male dominated settings. Instead she preferred to see women's lack of familiarity with masculine cultures as the cause. However, she found the experience of a women-only course more beneficial:

'I would say I've got a lot more from this one. There's more inclusion certainly from all women and you see other women who started where I am now and you see that you've a chance to do it yourself'.

From this it seems that Mandy had found talking and listening to 'role model women' encouraging and inspiring. Nevertheless, she felt that it was important for women to attend mixed-sex courses, because they could learn a lot from men:

'I mean men have been at it a lot longer than we have and they've been through a lot more. They're just letting us in, but only letting us peep round the door at the minute. We're just sticking our heads into the room; that's how I see it, we're not in the room yet. They know the rule-book back to front and you get valuable experience from that. They do it with their heads and we do it with our hearts, I think.'

Christine's concerns stemmed not from a politicised position, but reflected a belief held by some (generally non-feminist) women that women-only environments were 'unnatural' and therefore strange:

'I'm not used to being in a women-only environment for longer than a couple of hours. I had kind of a little anxiety about it, but the fact that Jane (a work colleague) was going to be there helped me calm down about it. I'm not used to being with a crowd of women, it makes me freak, I just don't like it, because you know the bitchiness will start.'

In summary, whilst there are three broad reasons which drove the interviewees to attend the courses, the majority of the TGWU women were primarily motivated by 'union reasons', whilst there was greater variety of motivators among the MSF women. The reasons for this can only be conjectured. It is possible for example that the publicity material influences members' perceptions of the relevance of courses. MSF highlights the 'life skills', which 'Women's Week' seeks to develop and therefore its relevance to *all* women members and activists. TGWU places more emphasis on union skills and therefore attempts to appeal more to women, who are or who wish to become active/office holders.

Most women pointed to both the form and content of the courses as being important: that is getting together as women and/or trade unionists to learn from each other, but also the desire or perceived necessity to acquire knowledge generally underpinned the motivation to attend. Some women ended up on a women-only course more by accident than by design. If by accident, it was only afterwards when reflecting back during interviews on their experiences that they attached any significance to the women-only dimension, as we shall see later. If by design, there were a variety of reasons primarily related to gender, but at times intersecting with race and sexuality.

The chapter now turns to the participants' experiences of the women's schools. First, there is a brief discussion of the confidence and knowledge building capacity of the courses. Following this there is a more detailed examination of perceptions and experiences. This is organised around the key elements and processes, which emerged from the data analysis: 'safe space', shared learning, and the privileging of 'women's issues'.

Perceptions and experiences of the women-only schools in MSF and TGWU

Building confidence and knowledge

It cannot be emphasised enough that according to participants increased confidence was the most significant personal outcome from the women's courses. As **Table 7.2** demonstrates, an overwhelming majority of the 'snapshot survey' respondents said that the school built their confidence, whilst the gendered knowledge gained and the opportunity to network with other union women were also hugely important for the majority of students, especially in TGWU.

Table 7.2: What purpose has this school served for you? (Tick as many as you like)

Purpose	MSF: Number of Respondents 2000/02 (%) N = 66	TGWU: Number of Respondents 1999/2001 (%) N = 99
Built my confidence	55 (83%)	71 (72%)
Provided an opportunity to network	43 (65%)	57 (58%)
Deepened my understanding of women's position in society	34 (52%)	63 (64%)
Given me practical suggestions for improving things for women at work	35 (53%)	82 (83%)
Other	8 (12%)	26 (26%)

These findings were mirrored in the interviews, where women talked about confidence levels, but also about the specificities of the knowledge and skills they had gained from the particular course they had attended. Even more experienced women perceived that they had gained confidence and some from male-dominated workplaces and/or branches felt that they needed to regularly attend women's events in order to remain confident in their roles or at articulating their opinions. The tutors also concurred that to build women's confidence was the primary aim of women's courses as well as the main outcome:

‘Confidence. That’s the main difference between women’s courses and men’s courses. Men dominate in mixed courses. Women have the space to be more vocal and assertive on women’s courses and that’s good for your confidence.’ (Sarah, TGWU)

‘Women’s courses give women a voice. They show women they have the right to a voice. They break women’s silence.’ (Ruth, MSF)

Of course it is recognised that confidence cannot be built or put to good use in a vacuum, as Elizabeth of MSF suggested when reflecting on what she had gained from ‘Women’s Week’:

‘Confidence really, apart from the knowledge that I wanted anyway. But the confidence and the backing-up of my own gut feelings, if you like. But the confidence has got to be backed up by the knowledge in the long run. But then if you’ve got the knowledge and not the confidence, then you can’t put it over anyway, not matter how much knowledge you’ve got’.

Thus, the knowledge building capacity of union courses is almost taken for granted – after all one expects to acquire information and knowledge from a course. However, the fact that an overwhelming majority of women (see **Table 7.2**) felt that they had learnt about how women's working lives could be improved is obviously significant from the point of view of achieving gendered transformation of the workplace.

Whilst the more experienced women expected to get a little more confident with each course they did, some of the newer women were quite amazed by how different they felt about themselves at the end of the course. Some were very animated and quite emotional as they recalled their feelings at the end of the women's school and described the impact the week had had on their confidence, self-esteem and sense of personal efficacy. The following quotations are cited in an attempt to capture this:

‘The women’s week was excellent, it really was. I learnt on the course how long women have been trying to be heard in unions and it’s given me strength, I’m proud to be a woman, a black woman, I’m proud to be one. It gave me that inner strength and confidence that I think I needed to be able to say ‘just because you’re a man and I’m a woman, I can do this thing just as good as you’. It gave me inner strength and confidence.’ (Christine, MSF)

‘What did I gain? Oh my God, I just gained so many things – self-confidence and regained my belief in myself, and the things I stand for really, which was wavering. Meeting so many people in different situations and some of them in more difficult situations than myself, and they’re still fighting on. I think it enabled me to really tap into my own resources. God yeah. It’s been huge, massive for me, in terms of my self-esteem and what I think I can do now.’ (Kamaljit, MSF)

‘This was my second ‘Women’s Week’ course at Whitehall and the high and the sense of empowerment I felt at the end of the week are very special. It is impossible to explain to anyone else just how special ‘Women’s Week’ is. All I can say is I am a better person for having attended and I strive to become a better organiser!’ (Helen, MSF – taken from her written assignment for credit with Leeds University.)

‘I had a wonderful time I really did. It was great, it was very enlightening and I thought the tutors were wonderful. I couldn’t believe it at the end of it there was me giving a three-minute speech in front of all those people. It just seemed like everybody was like one big family there.’ (Sally, TGWU.)

‘It gave me this enormous confidence. I don’t think I’d have been able to go on last week’s [mixed-sex] course this time last year. You get a much greater camaraderie and I think the change in people, not in their personality, but in their confidence – it grows tremendously when there’s other women.’ (Delia, TGWU.)

The interviewees talked about the women-only setting being empowering for women, but the concept of empowerment is slippery, so it is necessary to interpret what precisely this means. Young (1997:89) states that empowerment can be defined either as the ‘development of individual autonomy, self-control and confidence’ or as the ‘development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one’s life’. Young prefers the latter because she believes it has the greatest potential for social change, but from this study, elements of the former could be seen as necessary preconditions of the latter, so that the two definitions are not mutually exclusive. Chapter Eight addresses the question of how the empowered group of women sought to develop influence over their work/union lives.

The next three sections examine the main features of women-only courses that together create this empowering setting. The main elements of this discussion are also represented schematically in **Figure 7.1**. The three concepts in the left-hand column provide a way of conceptualising the women's course experiences in a way congruent with the feminist paradigm outlined in Chapter One.

Figure 7.1: Map of Concepts, Process and Outcomes of Women-only Trade Union Courses

Concept	Processes	Outcomes
'Safe Space'	<p>Women talk more openly, free from the constraints of patriarchal relations.</p> <p>Less formal arrangements (i.e. free flowing contributions, rather than ordered through the chair/tutor.)</p> <p>Women take risks and make mistakes (in their contributions), but encourage and support each other. Emotions are displayed.</p>	<p>Women develop a language in which to voice their experiences and perceptions.</p> <p>Women develop the confidence to participate.</p> <p>Women practice the art of public speaking and develop the skills of articulating opinions.</p>
Privileging of 'women's issues'	<p>In classroom activities women are placed at the centre of the trade union 'stage' and in the 'dramas' enacted.</p> <p>Personal stories of harassment, discrimination and oppression are told.</p>	<p>Women become visible as women to themselves.</p> <p>Gender identity is built/enhanced/affirmed, alongside trade union identity.</p> <p>The trade union agenda is 'gendered' to include sexual harassment, domestic violence, women's health, etc.</p> <p>Women become sensitised to the heterogeneity of female experiences and 'realities'.</p>
Shared Learning	<p>Camaraderie develops, especially in the residential context.</p> <p>Students 'talk union'.</p> <p>The more able/more experienced support and encourage the less able/less experienced.</p>	<p>Friendship groups and informal networks emerge.</p> <p>Participants become more interested in the union.</p> <p>Women's confidence and self-esteem grow.</p>

'Safe space'

Feminist writers have argued that the position women occupy in contemporary societies is one that discourages them from participating equally in mixed-sex meetings (e.g. Phillips 1991). Accordingly, forms of women's separate organising emerged as a response in order to create a space for women free of the constraints of patriarchal gender relations (see

Chapter Two). The tutors all agreed that women's courses created a 'safe space' for women to learn the craft of activism, but they revealed different orientations to the concept of women's separate organising, the principle of which was more likely to be accepted by the self-defined feminist MSF tutors.

The three MSF 'Women's Week' tutors all self-identified as feminists and although they recognised that not all women identify with feminism, feminist values nevertheless underpinned their own practice. They all used the feminist concept of 'safe space' to describe the purpose and rationale of women-only courses and talked about what they felt this meant for women, for example:

'Women-only courses are about recognising that women have specific needs in terms of confidence building. Women are more comfortable in a women-only environment, they are forced to take on dominant roles, rather than leave them to the men. They also need a safe space to concentrate on women's perspectives and issues.' (Ruth, MSF)

They were aware of the controversy surrounding forms of women's separate organising, but this did not alter their firmly held support for women-only courses. Playing 'devil's advocate' I asked them to explain the rationale for women's courses when women are proportionally represented among students of mixed-sex courses and the following response typifies the views expressed:

'Consciously making space for different interest groups is now recognised within the trade union movement. The evidence that specific interest groups are more likely to participate within their own spaces is very compelling. There can be barriers to women's learning opportunities in the male-dominated environment. Also, women often spend their time talking to the men, but not to each other – they need the space to talk to each other without the distraction of men's presence. Plus, the fact that women are there doesn't mean that they are learning as well as they can, or about the same things as in women-only courses.' (Gina, MSF)

The above signals support for a politic of separate organising (Briskin 1993). In contrast with the MSF tutors, none of the four TGWU tutors self-identified as feminists. As a possible consequence, the TGWU tutors revealed more ambivalent views about women's courses. They did show at least partial and contingent support, but this was viewed much more as a temporary strategy and only necessary as long as women continued to be heavily outnumbered on mixed-sex courses. The following quotation typifies the views expressed:

‘Sometimes when women introduce themselves on mixed courses, you can tell they feel intimidated, that’s reality, that’s how women are around men. It’s not the way I think it should be. Ideally we shouldn’t need separate courses for women, but that’s the way a lot of women feel when they’re around men, so women-only courses are essential.’ (Miriam, TGWU.)

The above is reminiscent of Briskin’s (1993) ‘deficit model’ of women’s separate organising: the idea that women are lacking in attributes necessary for trade union participation, which women’s groups can correct. This might be expressed as women needing more confidence, but the emphasis is on empowering women to *cope with* rather than *challenge* the male-defined status quo. However, it could be argued that ‘coping’ and ‘challenging’ are not ‘either or’ scenarios, rather the first is a prerequisite of the second, as many of the women in this study appeared to recognise, as we see below.

This clear ideological division between the MSF and TGWU tutors might be explained by a combination of two factors. First, the three MSF tutors are all highly educated professional workers and middle class (although two are from working class backgrounds). In contrast, the TGWU tutors comprise one current and one former factory worker (now a full-time TGWU tutor), a school cook and a former nurse (now with TGWU Education Department). This reflects the argument in the literature that feminism has most appealed to middle class women (e.g. hooks 1989, see discussion in Chapter One). Second, the internal culture of the two unions is different. To begin with MSF’s director of education is a self-identified feminist herself and her position has undoubtedly influenced the longstanding existence of ‘Women’s Week’ and continues to legitimate feminism as an ideological standpoint within the education department. In contrast TGWU has a very strong unitarist working class culture, which informs discourse and practice within the education department. This is perhaps most evidenced by the fact that men occasionally tutor on women-only courses, a practice, which would not be countenanced by MSF but which was opposed by only one of the TGWU tutors.

Interviews with the women participants indicated that the tutors’ assessment of the value of the ‘safe space’ were correct. This emerged strongly in the context of both unions.

‘Sarah’s story’ (below) recounts one MSF woman’s critical appraisal of mixed-sex courses and her reflections of her own participation, which were shared by many MSF and TGWU

women. Sarah, a seemingly confident, highly educated, professional woman, concurred with the MSF tutors that a masculine culture pervades mixed-sex courses and this inhibits women's learning.

Sarah's Story

Sarah had previously attended women's and mixed-sex courses. She was able to compare these experiences:

'I think women might open up a bit more about things they feel insecure about, which you need to do in these sorts of courses. I think a big part of the value of it being just women is that women see more value in opening up about their worries and insecurities and see being able to do that as a strength. Whereas with men you've got to shut up about your weaknesses and insecurities and they see it as a weakness, which I think could inhibit the learning. I think women just feel safer to talk about these things.'

In keeping with her identity as a self-defined feminist Sarah was comfortable making generalised comparisons of male and female behaviours (whereas, arguably, non-feminist women are uncomfortable doing so, seeing this as lapsing into gender stereotypes). In talking about what she had gained from 'Women's Week', Sarah was reminded of one mixed-sex course she had attended:

'Women found it quite hard to get a word in and the men saw that when women were talking they should interrupt and carry on with what they were saying. The tutor also noticed and said 'hang on a minute, she hasn't finished talking'. I don't know what percentage male dominated the discussion was, but it was certainly the case that women didn't speak as much as men. I think it's generally accepted that men have a right to more speaking time than women in those sorts of environment – that's how it is. I don't think you lose anything by having women's weeks – the mixed courses are after all male dominated and without women's weeks men would be benefiting from the education far more than women.'

Sarah also noticed a difference in her own behaviour on 'Women's Week':

'I found that whereas I spoke spontaneously in women's week, in the mixed courses I would think quite a long time beforehand about what I was going to say and how I was going to say it. I feared being judged. I noticed in the other women too that there was a lot more reserve, perhaps the feeling of trying to get yourself into a discussion was a bit harder, less natural. Whereas in women's week I would join in quite naturally, in the men's week I actually got quite nervous about it – I've just said 'men's week', that describes it doesn't it, how I saw it!'

Sarah's last comment about 'men's week' is of course highly significant and powerfully captures the views expressed by many women about mixed sex courses.

Thus, if male power is socially constituted (Briskin 1993) it is reflected in and reinforced by patterns of behaviour in arenas such as trade union courses. Several women across the two unions alluded to this, particularly the competitive nature of masculine behaviour, indicating that the women-only setting provides an escape or a shelter. Some women indicated that men did not intimidate them, it was more that they did not want to play out traditional gendered social relations, which would cast them in the subordinate position. For example:

‘The mixed course I went to, I felt that some of the men tried to show off and it was a bit embarrassing, whereas if I wasn’t there they probably would have acted differently or if it had been equal men to women. At the women’s school you didn’t even have to think about any of that. I was in no way intimidated, I just thought they were showing off.’ (Melanie, TGWU.)

Similarly, Kim of MSF also expressed a widely held view:

‘There wasn’t this competitive element, you didn’t have to constantly have your guard up like you do with men. Because if you’re not careful they will take advantage in all sorts of subtle, psychological ways. They do like to think they’re better than everybody else and it gets very wearing after a while.’

Kim and Melanie’s remarks demonstrate that the concept of ‘safe space’ is not simply about protecting timid, unassertive women from competitive or aggressive masculine behaviour, although it can be. It is also an acknowledgement that women do not always want to ‘play by men’s rules’ as Linda of MSF put it. For some women then, the ‘safe space’ was less of a protective zone or shelter; rather it was a space for the expression of women’s oppression. Further, as suggested by Cunnison and Stageman’s (1995) work it was a space where women felt ‘safe’ to negotiate their own ‘rules’ of behaviour, rather than adopt male-defined rules (Bradley 1999). Thus on women’s courses, women’s gender identity is not being questioned. The female-defined rules included ‘allowing’ the expression of emotion, openly supporting each other (rather than competing) something according to tutors and more experienced interviewees, rarely seen on mixed-sex courses (see also Greene and Kirton 2002), where as Gottfried (1998) asserts ‘gender displays’ are regarded as unruly practices. This analysis also fits with Young’s (2000) assertion that emotions and storytelling are examples of more inclusive modes of political communication. This is highlighted in Sarah’s story above and by Sally of TGWU, where we see the significance of female-defined modes of expression:

‘I just felt that everyone was so supportive of one another. I really felt the emotion, like when somebody went up to do their little speech in front of the class and they were struggling, you know, and they got stuck and you could see the look on people’s faces. It was so emotional where they were just going like ‘come on, come on’. The real encouragement was there.’

Shared learning

In addition to being integral to trade union education generally the sharing of and learning from each other’s experiences is embedded in feminist approaches to women’s collective organisation. This was one of the aims of the small feminist groups spawned by the women’s movement of the 1970s, which sought to create an atmosphere of mutual support to enable women to contribute to meetings, often for the first time (Phillips 1991). Thus the women-only setting, the ‘safe space’, is intended to be developmental and empowering (Reinelt 1994) for women individually and collectively (helping them to develop the intellectual and practical resources to contribute on their own terms), rather than simply remedial (equipping them to cope with the male-dominated status quo). This legacy is reflected in women’s structures in trade unions generally (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 2000) and therefore in women’s courses.

Women’s residential schools have a special character. To begin with, for many women, especially mothers, it was clear that the course represented a rare opportunity to ‘escape’ domestic responsibilities for a few days, which many relished. Many interviewees commented on how refreshing they found the experience and how being away from home meant that they did not have to think about picking up children, cooking dinner and so on.

Of course the extent to which the mere fact of being away from home shapes the learning experience is debatable. But from observation and interviews it is clear that the experience of residential courses is a very intense one and that this does impact on the learning. Living for six days in an enclosed environment with a small group of women, undisturbed by the outside world is inevitably a different experience from day release courses: union talk goes on well into the evening. Also, some reported sharing personal things about themselves that they had not thought of in a long time or that they had never talked to others about. For example some women revealed experiences of domestic violence, of poverty, of

disability and of single motherhood. Such issues only got onto the 'agenda' because the women were together for several days building up trust between them. Thus the concept of 'shared learning' needs to be interpreted broadly in the context of women's schools, for it extends beyond the taught 'curriculum' and beyond the traditional trade union agenda. Most of the women believed that this kind of personal 'opening up' and the mutually supportive environment were crucial for their learning and had a role to play in the confidence building or empowering processes of the courses. Christine (MSF) voices an opinion shared by many of the interviewees:

'I think that women don't have to wear masks then, I think that women think that in that situation [a women-only setting] they will be understood, no matter what issues they come out with, other women will understand.'

It was also clear that the telling of personal stories helped the women construct an understanding of their lives as socially conditioned and constrained by wider social dynamics, as suggested by Young (1997:91). For example, Mary of TGWU commented:

'Because you're not inhibited in any way you can really entirely speak freely and only other women can really understand because for so long women's contribution hasn't been recognised, but now that's changing.'

Related to this, the argument has been made that women-only courses are designed to reverse 'internalised oppression' where women react to their low status by undervaluing themselves (Brew and Garavan 1995). This was either implicitly or explicitly acknowledged in the women's courses. The MSF education officer responsible for 'Women's Week' explicitly articulated this goal in interview and has designed an exercise for the end of the second day of the course which seeks to foster a sense of self-worth in the women. This involves each woman in turn saying something she does well and something she is proud of in her life. On the courses observed women frequently mentioned their children as a source of pride, but also other (gendered?) positive personal characteristics, such as 'being a good friend' or a 'good listener'. Each woman is applauded and in interview many participants commented on how touching and uplifting they had found the exercise.

A similar scenario occurs at the TGWU women's school, when women in senior union positions form a panel to talk to the students in a very personalised way about how they got

where they are as women in a male-dominated union, often balancing work and family at the same time. Many interviewees talked about how inspired they were by these role model women. These types of exercise signal that women's courses are not simply about getting women to behave like men. Therefore the findings indicate that the emphasis on building women's confidence through shared learning on women's courses is not simply about 'changing women' as Briskin (1993:96) suggests. Rather, it is about valuing women as women and developing among the women a positive collective gender identity.

Another dimension of shared learning is that the tutors did not position themselves as experts. It was evident from interviews and from observation that they saw themselves more as facilitators of other women's learning than as teachers. This is in keeping with the feminist egalitarian ideal that as women we can all learn from each other by sharing our life experiences. Many women spoke with obvious surprise about how the tutors were 'just normal' or 'like one of us'. This occurred in both unions despite the possible greater class distance between MSF tutors and some students.

The mix of 'successful', experienced union women and newer women also provided important opportunities for shared learning in both unions. The more experienced union women represented role models to the less experienced, as Sally of TGWU suggested:

'It was very enlightening to see what other people are having to deal with and I must admit when it came to some of the stories – I thought my company was bad, but I just felt that also you learn that if you, if something is not going right, I think women sometimes don't want to stand up and say anything and I just felt it was nice to see women there that actually really wanted to make a difference.'

However, the more experienced women also felt they had a lot to learn from the less experienced:

'I didn't feel that I was up there because I'm Chair here. I thought that if anything they were slightly better than I was and in a way I felt slightly humbled.'
(Elizabeth, MSF.)

Without doubt for many participants the women's schools are important opportunities for personal growth. Beyond that though, how does the shared learning that occurs, contribute to the shaping of women's trade union and/or gender identities? Earlier research has

highlighted the role of residential union courses in nurturing a spirit of comradeship (e.g. (Miller 1983), which from interviews and observation certainly occurred at the women's schools: interviewees talked about the feeling of 'bonding', 'solidarity' and 'camaraderie' that the courses fostered. It was also the case that the sharing of gender specific life experiences appeared to heighten women's gender consciousness and thereby in many shift a previously passive gender identity towards an active or politicised one. This gendered knowledge base has the potential to become a powerful resource, which could contribute towards advancing women's equality in the workplace and in the unions. This discussion is returned to in Chapter Eight.

Privileging 'women's issues'

The concept of privileging 'women's issues' concerns the opportunity, rarely afforded by mainstream union democratic processes and structures (e.g. Munro 2001), for women to emphasise the issues that are particularly pertinent to them and to explore the gender dimensions of the traditional trade union agenda. These discussions might not take an explicitly feminist character, but they do seek to cultivate gender consciousness, as indicated by the following tutor remarks:

'If we want to recruit women, then the union must deal with the issues that affect women and this school is pivotal for this.' (Charlene, TGWU.)

'There's a focus on gender and gender relations, although a different language is being used to describe these things, probably with less of an explicit emphasis on feminism now. But the courses still start from the point of women's personal issues and personal problems, then move to gender relations, i.e. they are still situating the personal within a political context.' (Gina, MSF)

That said, the TGWU tutors placed less emphasis on the content of the women's school (i.e. the opportunity to privilege 'women's issues') and more on the form (the women-only setting), as Michelle indicated:

'I don't think the courses should just be about women – there should be something for everyone, even on women's courses. We're not trying to develop militant feminists. After all, they have to go back to their workplaces and bargain for everyone and they need to be able to appeal to everyone, not just women'.

Nevertheless from observation and interviews with students it is clear that the women-only setting tends to trigger discussion of trade union issues that are especially pertinent for women, in other words 'women's issues'. An alternative way of seeing this is that as women the participants address the gender dimension ever present, but rarely recognised, in the traditional trade union agenda (see discussion in Chapter Two, Greene and Kirton 2002). The latter does not necessarily occur in a self-conscious manner, although it can. Alternatively, it might be argued that in the women-only setting women talk from their gendered position because this is what they know and understand. Arguably, men also do this, except they often claim to be speaking for everyone (Cockburn 1991). This type of gender neutral or masculine discourse can shut down debate about gender issues in mixed settings and activate a class-based union identity, but not a gender identity, which then carries the risk of reproducing the masculine culture. This is without doubt one of the most significant features of women-only courses.

One example from observation of MSF 'Women's Week' was an exercise on the 'Skills for Organising' course. Students were presented with a model for encouraging membership activity – 'Anger – Hope – Action' – and had to identify issues that made them or their members angry, around which collective action might be mobilised. Now this activity could potentially head in a number of directions including the traditional trade union agenda and in fact it is an exercise used on mixed-sex courses for new workplace representatives³. One group's discussion centred on sexual harassment, which without doubt many women will have experienced in one form or another. Helen and Fiona talked about how sexual harassment had for a number of years been a widespread problem at their workplace and Helen herself had been a 'victim'. The problem had not been openly acknowledged by management or by employees and individual victims had been left to suffer in silence. The group discussed strategies for mobilising members on this issue. Although it is not impossible that this issue would have arisen on a mixed-sex course, if we accept that men typically dominate the discussions, then it is far less likely, as suggested in interview by the very experienced tutors.

An example from observation of the TGWU school was an exercise on the 'Women at Work' course, where students were asked to draw up an agenda for a branch meeting, in

³ This was ascertained from an examination of course materials for a 'New Reps' course.

which they could include anything they considered relevant. The groups produced posters containing agenda items which can be characterised as ‘women’s issues’, such as domestic violence, childcare, flexible work hours, cancer screening, as well as more traditional items such as pay. When the tutor asked if they had actually seen the ‘women’s issues’ on their local union agendas, the reply from the experienced union women was overwhelmingly no, but they wanted to try to do something about that in the future. **Table 7.2** also demonstrates the gendered nature of the course learning.

Women-only courses might be a woman’s first engagement with feminist or gender-conscious discourse and this can be a revelatory experience, in which women’s eyes are opened, sometimes for the first time to what Briskin (1993:97) has called the ‘gender specific character of experience’. This is reflected in Mandy’s (TGWU) comments on what she had learnt from the women’s course:

‘You don’t think you’re discriminated against any more. Until it hits you, you don’t realise it’s there, but it is and we’re not aware of the issues until they’re put forward to us.’

Kate of MSF in her years of union involvement, had always distanced herself from separate women’s forums; however following her first ‘Women’s Week’ she had this to say:

‘Afterwards I began to identify some of the things I was experiencing as a woman with things other women were experiencing. Before I didn’t think these were things I had in common with other women, I thought I felt that way or that had happened to me because I’m me not because I’m female.’

Kate went on to declare that she now considered herself a feminist and could now see the purpose of women’s structures, which she had previously opposed. Her engagement with a gender conscious discourse caused her to begin to explain her own life in gender conscious terms. Kate’s personal transformation underscores the capacity of women’s groups to engender new orientations to feminism and more politicised gender identities, mirroring other research situated in women’s groups (e.g. Reinelt 1994).

Through listening to other women’s ‘stories’ and participating in activities which place ‘women’s issues’ at the centre of the trade union agenda, a consciousness of women’s

collective disadvantage can evolve, irrespective of personal experiences of discrimination or disadvantage. This was particularly noticeable in the case of women who had forged 'successful' paid and/or union careers in male dominated contexts, such as Kate above. Some of these women were adamant that they had not personally experienced sex discrimination, but still engagement with the gender conscious debates of the women's schools had led them to recognise women's collective inequality.

Women's diversity and the women-only setting

The interviews with participants attempted to gauge the extent of inclusiveness of the women's schools. In general terms this was important if women were to be conceptualised as occupying multiple social locations and in order to consider the impact of these on women's experiences. More specifically it was important to be able to consider the widespread criticism of women's groups in unions as dominated by white, middle-class women and their concerns⁴ (see for example, Colgan and Ledwith 2000a; Humphrey 2002; Kirton and Greene 2002; McBride 2001). In Colgan and Ledwith's (2000) study of UNISON black, lesbian and disabled women felt marginalised by women's self-organised groups in their union. In contrast, in the present study there was very little evidence of perceptions of marginalisation at the women's schools.

The six black women interviewees were very positive about their experiences. The MSF women were all inexperienced activists and first-timers at a union course. The two TGWU women were experienced activists, who had both been on a range of mixed, women-only and black member courses. There were no reports of marginalisation, isolation or discomfort. Earlier in the chapter Christine and Kamaljit of MSF indicated that they had drawn considerable personal strength from the experience. In the quotation below Kamaljit sees the diversity of women at the school as a resource from which valuable knowledge could be gained as well as personal friendships:

⁴ As a white, middle-class, non-disabled, heterosexual, woman I was conscious of approaching this topic diplomatically. Therefore, I raised the subject once the interview was well underway and sought non-confrontational and sometimes indirect ways of raising it, depending on my assessment of the woman's willingness to engage with this question. I was aware that some black, lesbian or disabled women might not be comfortable discussing this with me, therefore it could be the case that another researcher might have arrived at different conclusions.

‘At that point in my life women’s week was almost life saving for me, it came at just the right time. I made friends with women I wouldn’t even have imagined in my circle of friends before. They worked in different areas to me. They were regionally different. They live such different lives to me. I would never have imagined that we could have anything in common, but in fact we had so much in common.’

Afsana of MSF highlighted religious and cultural reasons for her preference for women-only courses. All the black interviewees were supportive of black member-only groups as well as women-only. Bernadette, a black Caribbean woman of TGWU had been an activist in black and women’s voluntary organisations. She commented:

‘The T&G have quite a lot of ethnic minority members and I do think they need to be encouraged to take more of an interest. I don’t know what the answer is, but I think for some people going to a place and seeing people like you has to be part of the answer. For me, I’m quite open minded - you see my husband’s Indian, so maybe I’ve broken away from that cultural dependency, but I do understand why some people would find it important.’

Interviewees were not asked about their sexuality. However, two women revealed their lesbian identity, allowing for more probing questions into this dimension of diversity. As stated above Kamaljit considered a women-only setting more inclusive and less threatening. Mandy was more critical of the content of the women’s course, even though she had enjoyed it and learnt a lot. She felt that there had been too great a focus on traditional women’s issues, such as maternity leave and that the curriculum could have been more progressive and inclusive. Her comments also hint at a degree of discomfort:

‘I’m not that brave yet [to ‘come out’]. I mean I never deny that I am. I’ll tell anyone, but to stand up in a forum and say ‘what are you doing for us?’ The programme should initiate it. Not everybody’s happy to know that you are anyway. You don’t wish to offend or throw it down anybody’s throat, but that’s what I am and I’m too old to hide it now. We’re not only discriminated against in the workplace, we’re discriminated against throughout life and I think it would be a good idea for them to initiate something for us, rather than for us to have to raise it.’

There were also comments from some heterosexual women who felt that lesbian women in their group had been marginalised or isolated, suggesting that some lesbian women might have encountered some hostility, even though this was not evident from the interviews with self-identified lesbian women. Similarly a couple of non-disabled women felt that the

courses had not addressed the issue of disability, although again this was not remarked upon by the disabled women. However, it is likely that the presence of women with disabilities brought the issue of disability to the forefront of the non-disabled women's minds.

Another dimension of diversity evident in the union context is class. There is greater objective class diversity in MSF than in TGWU because of the industries and occupations the unions are largely based in. However, as Chapter Four showed the majority of interviewees in both unions were highly qualified women, who mostly self-identified as working class. Their qualification level suggests though that women who opt to attend the women's schools might not be entirely representative of the unions' membership composition. A couple of MSF women reported feeling intimidated by one or two of the more overtly 'middle-class' students and a couple of the TGWU women talked about the 'Luton airport women' in a similar fashion. However, as the groups got to know each other over the first couple of days, these feelings seemed to disappear. From observation 'middle-class' women were sometimes quicker to contribute to discussions, but this was also dependent on union experience, because there were some very experienced and dominant working class women in the groups. In some cases their experience mitigated the traditional disadvantages of class, suggesting that the union education setting is something of a level playing field in class terms, where union experience counts for more than academic qualifications or occupational status. The general consensus was that the variety of backgrounds was a resource the groups could draw upon, rather than a problem.

Julie, a highly educated woman of TGWU was conscious of the privileges of her own class position. She explained why she did not volunteer to present one of the speeches on the last day of the school:

'I'm always conscious that I've been university educated and I've had opportunities to do stuff like that and I'm always consciously thinking of people who it would be a massive thing for, to stand up and speak. It's not to say that I wouldn't be scared out of my wits too, but I always think that it wouldn't be such a big thing for me.'

Overall the women talked very positively of their experiences of the women's schools and most women felt that they 'fitted in', even if some dimensions of diversity were not explicitly addressed by the course content. However, in order to rebut charges of naivety,

which perhaps could be inferred from this rather upbeat 'melting pot' picture, it is important to add some caveats which perhaps in part explain the overwhelmingly positive experiences of a diversity of women's school students.

First, it is important to acknowledge that new activists often feel intimidated by union meetings where everyone seems to know each other and where everyone seems to be at ease with the jargon (see for example, Cockburn 1991; Kirton and Healy 1999). This can lead to new women activists feeling uncomfortable. For example, Susan, a black woman of MSF, had had a somewhat negative experience of a predominantly black forum, the union's national race committee:

'I went down to Whitehall College for a weekend and they were all reps and they were all on the National Race Equality thing and mostly knew each other. I smiled at this particular person and they didn't smile back and I was thinking 'ooh that's a bit cold'.

She was in favour of black member groups, but as a new activist she found the women's school a far more supportive setting:

'People felt more comfortable because we were all women, you didn't feel intimidated, even if you were a quiet mouse you would speak up and say something, because it was more supportive.'

The perception of the women-only setting as more supportive and welcoming might not be a function of it being women-only *per se*; equally it is possible that the feminist values underpinning the organisation of the courses render them more welcoming to inexperienced members. Susan's experience is indicative of the difficulties of feeling comfortable in taking the first step into activism and finding the appropriate forum for oneself. Women's schools are intended to assist with this process, but it is also likely that other union forums could usefully learn from the experiences. Naturally courses are learning environments where new and experienced activists come together to share knowledge. At women's schools there is no stigma attached to admitting ignorance and asking questions because so many women are in the same position and the more experienced women seem to enjoy 'helping' the newer. The tutors also play a role in rendering the environment a mutually supportive one and they were highly conscious of the need to give extra encouragement to newer women.

Second, although the students spend a week together, they need never see each other again. There is no expectation of an ongoing relationship between group participants as there is in other women's groups, such as the self-organised groups in UNISON or the women's committees of MSF and TGWU. Although students might jostle for attention and 'talking space' on courses, there is not the kind of intense power struggle between individuals and interest groups at play that is often seen inside union decision-making structures, where the allocation of resources to campaigns or other such activities is at stake. Therefore to attend a women's school does not involve making the same kind of choices as involved in deciding whether to give over time and commitment to an ongoing women's group, a black member group or a lesbian or disabled group. Therefore we cannot necessarily assume that these women prioritised their gender identity over other identities. It seems unlikely that the interviewees in the present study faced the same kind of dilemmas as those reported in other studies (such as McBride 2001; Humphrey 2002) where the research focus was on other forms of separate organising and where women had to decide which identity to privilege.

Finally, at women's schools everyone is away from their habitual environment, most participants do not know many, if any, other women and they are generally 'on their best behaviour'. The tutors are also there to manage difficult situations should they arise and as part of this they establish with the students ground rules at the beginning of courses which dictate mutual respect and tolerance. Thus, it would not be possible to conclude from a study of women's schools that some women do not or would not feel marginalised within women's groups in unions more generally.

Women's schools – a women-only ghetto?

It could be argued that by virtue of their attendance, the women supported the existence of women's schools. However, as the earlier discussion of their motivations for attending shows, support for a politic of women's separate organising cannot be assumed, although it is more likely that feminist women will support it. One of the controversial questions surrounding women's separate organising is does it empower women or does it confine them and their concerns to a powerless ghetto (see Briskin 1993 and discussion in Chapter

Two)? The interviews sought to ascertain how women positioned women's courses within this debate having completed the course.

Women who were concerned about the 'women-only ghetto' charge emphasised the importance of women 'progressing' from women-only courses to mixed-sex ones to avoid ghettoisation, thus they positioned women's courses within the deficit model of women's separate organising (Briskin 1993). For example, Deirdre, a non-feminist of MSF expressed this view, held more widely in TGWU than in her union. She said that she would have been intimidated by the thought of a national residential mixed-sex school, but that she now felt she could 'handle' a mixed course because 'Women's Week' had given her lots of confidence and strategies for dealing with men. In common with some women in MSF and most in TGWU, she felt quite strongly that individually and collectively women should not confine themselves to women's groups. The reality of the unions is male-domination and women needed to learn how to function in that environment if they were to take up positions. Also some interviewees felt women individually and collectively had a lot to learn from men, as Mandy's story earlier indicates. Beryl (see below) of TGWU, a self-identified feminist, concurred with this view that women's courses were 'stepping stones' to mixed courses, although her own repeated attendance at women's schools was not entirely congruent with this since she had considerable experience in the union.

Some women therefore did not buy into the ideology of a politic of separate organising, which would stress the importance of women organising collectively with the goal of effecting institutional change (Briskin 1993). Contrary to what might be expected this was not clearly related to their self-identification with feminism, although self-identified feminists were more likely to reveal unequivocal support for women's courses.

Beryl's Story

As a longstanding shop steward Beryl has attended many TGWU courses, including mixed-sex and women's courses. In keeping with her identity as a self-defined feminist, Beryl could see a need for women's courses, particularly for newer activists, but she also felt that women needed to learn to operate within the male dominated context and that men also needed to be exposed to women's concerns:

‘I think when you first start off I think it’s very good [to attend a women’s course]. It’s very important because a lot of women have no experience and if the workplace is mostly dominated by men and you’re not very confident, I mean there aren’t a lot of women who can stand up and not worry about what everybody thinks. There’s a lot of women who have a lot to offer the union and they need the encouragement and sometimes it does take a few years to actually build up the confidence to be a steward. So I think women do need to go on these courses, but I think sometimes you need to go a bit further, not just like a women’s week but have men and women so that women can start to stand their ground. So when women have done a few women’s courses I think we have to encourage them to go on the same level as men.’

Thus, Beryl believed that women needed to be able to cope with the masculine culture of the union, but also that the union had to change to accommodate women. Beryl saw her own experiences of union courses, women-only in particular as pivotal to getting her into the position of senior shop steward and functioning in a confident and competent manner:

‘It’s not only the education of the course, but the education of being with the other women and seeing what the other women can do and have achieved, it gives you confidence, and I think a lot of women they’re very confident at work in what they do, they’re excellent at their job, but when they have to step out of that and go into a new role, they haven’t got the confidence and that’s what the education gives us.’

Beryl was also concerned that not just women, but ‘*women’s issues*’ might be ghettoised by separate courses and she shared with other women a belief that men also needed to be educated in equality issues:

‘I think it would benefit the men [to attend equalities courses] because the men would actually hear the women’s views on what they think of the men and the things that concern them and they might understand that sometimes it’s not what they say, it’s the way they say it. I think you need the two [women’s and mixed courses].’

Other women were more comfortable with the concept of a politic of separate organising. For these women, it was not a question of facilitating women’s ‘progression’ to mixed-sex courses. Rather, women’s courses for them served a separate and specific function. Kamaljit of MSF and Diane of TGWU, both self-identified feminists, commented:

‘I would do a women-only course again and yes, it was important. I think a lot of women, myself included, need space without men, because generally men do dominate, I mean they’re conditioned to, and they do.’ (Kamaljit, MSF.)

‘Certainly I think women-only courses are important, particularly as there are things like equal opportunities and sexual harassment, which are basically

specifically women's issues, so I think it's important and it's nice that women are now being recognised and having their own separate agendas.' (Diane, TGWU.)

Kate of MSF was a new advocate of women-only groups having undergone something of a conversion to feminism following 'Women's Week':

'I always thought that we shouldn't be sisters in solidarity and we shouldn't exclude men, but now I think it's important to have these groups. You only have to look round the world to see how women are treated. It's valid for women to look at these issues together.'

Thus, some women recognised the need for the union to change, rather than for women to do so and to this end women's courses represented a vehicle for the positive appropriation of women's experiences. Generally the TGWU women were less comfortable with a politic of separate organising than the MSF women, although this was not an absolute rule as can be seen from the discussion above. The TGWU women typically saw women's courses as an interim strategy to empower individual women to operate effectively within the union, resonating with Briskin's (1993) deficit model. In other words, it is implied that gender can be *made* irrelevant by working on women's skills, even if it is recognised as relevant presently. During interview the more experienced TGWU women tended to take an objective position on the discussion, saying such things as 'it doesn't matter to me who's there', but at the same time recognising that some (newer, less confident) women might be more attracted by a women-only setting. This obviously stood in contradiction to their (possibly repeated) attendance at women's courses, but underlined their view that gender-neutral integration was the ultimate aim.

The MSF women's orientations, on the other hand, inclined more towards a politic of separate organising (Briskin 1993). They typically saw women's spaces as necessary to the ongoing development of individual women and women as a group and even the more experienced women were happy to talk about what they had gained personally, rather than what women in general gain. Whilst the psychology behind these differential views is beyond the scope of this study, it is possible to posit a socio-cultural explanation. The different cultures of the two unions play a role in socialising women into these attitudinal positions, with class-based identities much stronger in TGWU than in MSF. The tutors' position (discussed earlier) and their representation of this debate no doubt has a role in reproducing or reinforcing a 'deficit' orientation to women's separate organising and

downplaying (politicised) gender identities. Whilst it was the case that the tutors of both unions supported women's groups and women's courses, the TGWU tutors' support was more qualified: they were much keener to emphasise that women should 'progress' to mixed courses. In contrast the MSF tutors were comfortable with the concept of separate women's spaces, which women could participate in if they chose. The fact that more MSF than TGWU women students and tutors identified with feminism (see Chapter Six) also seems reflected in these orientations to women's separate organising.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined women's motivations for attending women's schools, together with their perceptions and experiences. Most women expressed 'union reasons' for attending, whilst a minority attended for 'work' or 'personal reasons', indicating a prior union orientation or commitment among the majority. The corollary of the variety of reasons for attending is that it is unlikely that all the women will increase their participation following the course and this would be an unrealistic expectation. Nevertheless, the fact that all the women clearly valued the course would point to a strengthening of their attitudinal attachment to the union. Whatever their previous experiences of trade union education, over half of the interviewees had consciously chosen a women's course, whilst for others the significance of the women-only setting only dawned on them afterwards, indicating different levels of prior gender consciousness. However, following the course most of the women talked in feminist or gender conscious terms about their work and union experiences and it therefore appeared that the course had for many women shaped a stronger gender identity.

Increased confidence was the most important personal outcome of the course and this was built in the context of the 'safe space' of the women-only setting through the processes of 'shared learning' and 'privileging women's issues'. From the perspective of participants the courses seemed able to accommodate a diversity of women, even if it was felt that a fairly narrow interpretation of 'women's issues' pervaded the curriculum. Following the schools, the participants all expressed at least partial and contingent support for women-only courses, with some women positioning women's courses more within the 'deficit model' of separate organising than within an ideology of separate organising.

Chapter Six highlighted the importance of significant experiences, others and influences for pushing and pulling women into participation. From the analysis it is clear that the courses could be characterised as a significant experience for most of the women, which exposed them to significant others and influences, which could be expected to impact on the trajectory of their union careers. The next chapter moves to explore whether and how having undergone women-only union education, the women developed their participation and involvement in the democratic processes and structures of their unions. This chapter closes with Delia's thoughts on what would happen if more women started to take up educational opportunities and then participated more in the union:

'I think the shop stewards would be challenged in their positions. So I think it could be a good thing for the union. But you've got to get through that barrier. It becomes an exclusive club, doesn't it?' (Delia, TGWU.)

Chapter Eight

Gendered Union Careers: Sustaining and Developing Participation and Involvement

'I think the men in suits have got to realise that women are committed. I know sometimes they think unless you've done all the paperwork, you're not committed. But I can't just sit down and do it for a couple of hours when I've got a pile of ironing that needs doing. But I don't like to feel that the union thinks I'm not committed. I don't think they realise what they're asking of women.'
(Beryl, TGWU)

Introduction

Chapter Seven examined the interviewees' motivations for, experiences and perceptions of women's courses. As we saw, the women felt more confident and empowered, but did this help them develop and sustain their union careers over time? This chapter continues to follow the 'stories' of twenty-four women¹ by investigating the trajectories of their union careers approximately two years after attending the women's schools using data from the second interviews. It shows that fifteen women either became active or stayed active, whilst nine women for a number of different reasons, which the chapter discusses, did not begin or ceased to participate.

There is no attempt to establish a causal relationship between attendance of women's schools and particular union career outcomes. However, the chapter does attempt to unravel the longer-term influence of the social processes the women engaged with during the courses. In particular, whether there was any perceived lasting impact from the sense of empowerment or increased confidence that the vast majority of interviewees clearly felt directly after the courses. Chapter Six discussed the women's orientations to feminism,

¹ As explained in Chapter Four, at the second phase of fieldwork six women proved non-contactable (three from each union); fourteen were interviewed in-depth (seven from each union), and telephone conversations were held with nine women who were no longer members/involved (four from MSF and five from TGWU). Additionally the continued involvement of one TGWU (non-contactable) woman was established from information obtained from another interviewee, making a total of 24 women whose union careers could now be tracked.

finding that only a minority (nine) of the original 29 interviewees self-identified unequivocally as feminists. That said all the women were supportive of the feminist goal of women's equality, but some were more ambivalent about feminist practices such as women's separate organising. This chapter explores whether and how having engaged with a gender conscious (if not overtly feminist) discourse within the 'safe space' of the women's schools, this then seemed to have shaped the women's subsequent and developing gender identity, feminist orientation, behaviour, and contribution to trade union work. The discussion is situated within the work, union and personal contexts in which the interviewees' participation takes place so as to show the interconnections between these three 'worlds' and to explore how the women navigated them. The chapter first considers the circumstances of the women who ceased or did not begin to participate and it then turns to the group of women who went on to develop a union career.

Before starting to address the question of what happened next to the group of women, it is worth revisiting in a little more detail findings from the first interviews where the women's intentions, ambitions and aspirations for a union career were first explored. This will allow for a comparison between what the women envisaged as a career trajectory and what actually transpired during the intervening two-year period².

Intentions, ambitions and aspirations for a union career

The question concerning intentions, ambitions and aspirations for a union career was put differently, depending on the woman's level of involvement prior to the women's schools. The four women with no previous history of union involvement (two from each union) were asked whether they now intended to participate and if so in what ways³. Three women expressed an interest in participating informally, for example, attending workplace/branch meetings and/or in finding out more about opportunities to participate more formally later on. Vera of MSF, was the exception: she was one of the women motivated to attend for 'personal reasons' (see Chapter Seven) and she remained resolute that she was not interested in participating, even informally.

² See Chapter Six for a discussion of where the women were at first interview, particularly in terms of informal/formal participation. Tables 8.1 and 8.2 in Chapter Eight show whether or not individual interviewees' intentions or ambitions were realised.

³ Two of these women were non-contactable for second interviews; therefore no information is available on whether or not they subsequently became involved.

Turning to the small group of women (MSF three, TGWU two), who were informally involved prior to the course, most were interested in formalising their participation by becoming representatives or participating in committee structures, or in one case in becoming a lay tutor. Most of these women felt that they needed to know more about what was involved before they could participate more formally. Significantly then, these women lacked knowledge about how to move forward, for example how to set about becoming a representative or non workplace routes to participation in branch, regional or women's structures⁴. This was surprising considering they had recently attended a union course, where one of the aims is to encourage greater women's participation in democratic processes and structures. It appeared then that the information they had received on the opportunities via course materials, discussions, tutors and other students, had not been fully digested. This might be significant for the unions as they could risk losing potential activists by not 'capturing' them whilst they are still enthusiastic immediately following courses.

As discussed in Chapter Six those who held workplace/branch/committee positions had varying levels of experience in the unions and they were asked if/how they envisaged moving forward. Some were relatively new workplace representatives who felt they still had much to learn for their present roles. Helen and Fiona, two of the relatively new MSF representatives, were mothers of young children and they anticipated that lack of time would prevent them from becoming involved beyond the workplace, although Fiona said that she would 'love to work for the union full-time' in the future.

The more experienced women were asked whether they would be interested in moving up the lay hierarchy, perhaps to the NEC/GEC. There was a resounding 'no' in answer to this question, with most women from both unions declaring a firm commitment to workplace activism. Hilary's (TGWU) comments were typical:

'I've got no desire to be a high flyer in the union, I'm quite happy at the level I'm at now because I see my role as a workplace rep, dealing with the people that I work with on a day to day basis. That's what I want to carry on doing. My priorities are at the workplace, because they're the people that elected me, so

⁴ During or after the interview I often spent time explaining the available options and routes.

they're the people I owe most to. I think even if I was single I would still prioritise the people I work with.'

Some of the MSF women were dismissive of the idea of participating at NEC level. Deirdre described the NEC unflatteringly as a 'bunch of hypocrites' a view shared by others if expressed in more circumspect language, for example Kate:

'The more you find out about what goes on at regional council and in the NEC, the more involved you get at that level the more unhappy you feel about the union, because you just think of people stabbing each other in the back, factions. All these people in high positions, they've either got some personal agenda or a political agenda. I couldn't possibly go that way, I just couldn't stand it.'

These negative views on the higher echelons of the union were confined to MSF and are possibly explained by the negative press coverage of MSF senior officials during 1999 and 2000⁵, and perhaps reinforced by personal experiences, as in Kate's case. Some women did, however, express an interest in paid officer positions. This was especially the case in TGWU where there is such a strong tradition of paid officials having a history of lay activism in the union that it is almost unheard of for an 'outsider' to be employed other than in research positions. There are therefore possibilities for employment for a small number of activists, usually with a long history of lay office holding in a variety of roles. Suzanne had already applied and been rejected for three paid officer positions. She said that there was an 'informal queue' and that an applicant stood a greater chance if they were asked to apply; she was hopeful that it would not be too long before it would be 'her turn'. Other women were possibly less realistic and more naïve about the opportunities for paid employment in the union and although they expressed an interest they did not appear to be laying the foundations to make this become a reality.

In summary, congruent with their principal reason for attending the women's schools (i.e. union reasons), most of the women who were inactive or participating informally intended to increase their involvement, mostly to formal participation within workplace or other committee structures. Whilst those participating formally were not generally aspiring to the higher levels of the lay hierarchy, they hoped to become more effective and confident

⁵In 1999 General Secretary Roger Lyons was accused by Assistant General Secretary John Chowcat of wilful misuse of union funds. The story was leaked to the press and triggered an internal enquiry and an investigation by the Certification Officer. Although neither investigation proved Lyons' guilt, the negative press coverage was very damaging for the union.

in their current workplace/branch/committee roles. In other words the latter group did see their trade union careers developing, but not necessarily in an upward, hierarchical sense. (The concept of union careers is discussed later.)

For the present analysis this is unproblematic because, as stated earlier, it is not the intention of this chapter to attempt to establish a causal relationship between attendance of women's schools and increased participation in the union. However, it is nevertheless worth mapping any objective changes that had occurred in each woman's involvement by the time of the second phase of fieldwork. This is set out in **Tables 8.1 and 8.2** from which it can be seen that the majority either developed further or sustained their participation. The text below moves on to explore the circumstances underlying these patterns of participation and also to unpack more qualitative changes in the women's involvement. First there is some discussion in the next section of the nine women who ceased to be or did not become active.

Stunted Union Careers

Table 8.1 maps the influences on and forms of participation at two points in time of nine women, who ceased to be or did not become union active. The number of interviewees in this study is too small to attempt to correlate variables such as family background with cessation or development of participation. However, there are indications that family background was less important for the women's union careers than the work, union and present family contexts, indicating that women's orientations to trade union participation are fluid and emergent, rather than fixed by prior beliefs and values.

First, the case of two women who had no previous involvement (prior to attending the women's schools) with their unions, which raises a number of interesting issues. One remained an inactive member and the other took a first step towards informal participation, but then retreated. During the two years the first woman, Vera of MSF, had not participated actively in the democratic processes and structures: for example, she had not attended any meetings, nor voted in any elections. She had, however, returned to 'Women's Week' in 2001, seeing the school as an 'excellent' personal development opportunity and time out from a busy professional job, especially as her daughter was now grown up, she was divorced, had time to spare and the course was free. Vera still had no

wish to become involved in the union either at workplace or any other level, but she did confess to taking an interest in the union magazine and she was now no longer questioning the point of being a union member (see Chapter Six). Vera is perhaps the exception that proves the rule that a previously weak collectivist orientation (as indicated by her anti-union family background and non-feminist identity) is unlikely to translate into strong union commitment by simply attending a union school.

Table 8.1: Stunted Union Careers

Name/Union	Influences on Participation	Form(s) of Participation on Attendance at Women's School (1999 TGWU, 2000 MSF)	Form(s) of Participation at 2nd Interview (2001 TGWU, 2002 MSF)
Sally/TGWU	Non-union family background; significant experiences at workplace; significant other in the union	Shop steward; branch committee member	Inactive member
Jane/TGWU	Non-union family background; significant other in the union	Shop steward; 'women's rep'; branch committee member; regional and national trade group and women's committee member	No longer a member
Delia/TGWU	Union minded family background; significant other in the union	Informal participation at workplace and branch levels	No longer a member
Judy/TGWU	Non-union family background; significant experiences at workplace	Informal branch level participation; regional disability committee member	Inactive member
Evelyn/TGWU	Union minded family background; significant experiences at the workplace; significant other in the union	Inactive member	Informal participation at branch level for a period; now inactive member
Kate/MSF	Anti-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Workplace rep; health and safety rep; branch committee member	Inactive member
Kamaljit/MSF	Non-union family background; significant other in the union; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Workplace rep, branch committee member	Inactive member
Vera/MSF	Anti-union family background; significant others in the union	Inactive member	Inactive member
Susan/MSF	Non-union family background; significant others in the union	Informal participation at workplace level; informal participation in national race committee	Inactive member

The second woman, Evelyn of TGWU, was a single parent, who felt time constrained by the combination of domestic circumstances and paid full-time work. Since the course she had nevertheless taken a first tentative step towards informal participation by attending a couple of branch meetings, but she had been deterred by male domination – ‘it’s quite a male thing, isn’t it’, she remarked. The branch met above a local pub and went down to the pub afterwards. She felt that as a woman:

‘It’s not your style, not how you choose to do things. You don’t feel included, even though you’re not actually excluded.’

Her comments point to a masculine union culture, which symbolically, although not literally, excludes women. Congruent with her union minded family background she had not been completely deterred. She said that she would remain a member and she was interested in the work of unions, but her initial reactions were that neither informal or formal participation were for her, particularly in view of the timing (evenings) and location (the pub) and nature (male domination) of meetings.

Although only concerning two women, their cases are indicative. First, unions cannot hope to win over all course participants even to informal activism: even after two residential courses, Vera remained uninterested in participating. In other words, the experience of ‘talking union’ or even ‘talking women’ for a week will not shape or shift the union/gender identities of all participants. That said, it is important that even members who are not ideologically committed or politicised trade unionists, perceive that they derive some benefit from membership and in this sense the provision of courses could be seen as an important individual membership benefit (Munro and Rainbird 2000). Second, Evelyn’s experiences suggest that even where initial enthusiasm or interest is generated by course attendance, it is the local context that is likely to have to sustain and develop that interest, which in Evelyn’s case was very fragile and weakened by her actual experiences of attempts to participate. Equally, with encouragement and support, particularly in view of her pro-union family background, Evelyn might have gone in a different direction, something she herself conceded. In the event it appeared that Evelyn was ‘lost’ as a potential activist. Her case ties in with arguments in the literature that women’s experiences must be positive if they are to attempt to juggle work, home and union roles (e.g. Walton 1991).

The analysis now turns to consider seven women (see **Table 8.1**; three MSF and four TGWU) whose union careers came to a halt during the two years following the women’s schools. A change in work circumstances was generally responsible, although for two women circumstances in their personal lives led to less union involvement. These were Susan of MSF and Judy of TGWU, who had both experienced health problems. Susan had been interested in becoming a workplace representative, but had become pregnant and had a late miscarriage, which had led to several months of sick leave. She said that in theory she was still interested in the union, but she now seemed to feel vulnerable and unsure about committing to extra activities, since she wanted to become pregnant again. Judy had

participated in the regional disability committee and had wanted to get involved in the women's and race committees. However, as a result of an industrial accident in 1996, which left her a wheelchair user, her health had deteriorated further and she now had memory lapses and concentration difficulties, which meant that she found participating in the union too strenuous. For both these women the cessation of union involvement in no way signalled disaffection with the union or a weakened attitudinal commitment to the union, rather it was a case of personal circumstances intervening to force a rethinking of priorities. Therefore, there was the possibility in theory at least of future participation, should personal circumstances become more favourable once more.

Four women left unionised employment during the two years and because their participation had been largely concentrated at workplace level this led to the cessation of their involvement in all cases and also to resigning membership in two cases. Kate of MSF became a full-time PhD student after completing an Open University degree; she felt trade unionism was about the workplace (rather than political or policy issues more broadly) and she now felt disengaged from the activities of the union and was therefore no longer involved. Kate's reluctance to embrace a more political union orientation suggests that the influence of her anti-union family background had not entirely disappeared even if diluted by positive experiences of workplace activism and the gender conscious trade union politics implicit in the women's course. The other three (one MSF, two TGWU) women moved on to what they considered to be better jobs. It is significant that they all attributed their 'success' in part at least to the increased self-esteem they felt following the women's schools. They all made comments such as 'I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for the courses/the union.' Jane of TGWU, for example, had been expelled from school with no qualifications and had been a bus driver for five years and previously a part-time cleaner whilst her children were young. She said that her experiences of union education, in particular women's courses, and her involvement in the union had made her believe she was capable of something more. She now had an administrative job in a non-unionised insurance company. She gave up her union membership partly because her company was 'anti-union' and partly because her initial request to be transferred to a composite white-collar branch had not been acted on quickly enough in her view. Jane had participated in committee structures beyond the workplace and in this sense was quite a loss for the union. However, her priority was her workplace, and in the absence of any connection to a unionised environment, her motivation to continue in her committee roles was very low.

Similarly, attending the women's schools had led Kamaljit of MSF to reflect on her life and what she wanted to do. She decided to become more involved with the Asian women's community and took a job setting up and managing a new voluntary sector organisation. She reflected back on the impact of 'Women's Week':

'The course, in terms of empowering women, is really important. I've now moved on to manage a project and that's not something I would have thought myself capable of before. It's been huge, massive for me, in terms of my self-esteem and what I think I can do now.'

She was still a union member, but working in a small non-unionised voluntary sector group, she had not remained active.

It is of course paradoxical that in the case of some women, their union education/involvement experiences empowered them in the sense of the development of individual autonomy and confidence (Young 1997). They reassessed and acted to change their work lives, which resulted in most cases in their moving away from union involvement, rather than increasing their participation. These cases also underline the fragile nature of women's participation in a context where much of women's employment remains non-unionised and where their participation is concentrated at the lower levels of the union hierarchy. If they leave unionised employment there is often no obvious (to them) arena for their activism and they might lack knowledge as to other possible arenas for activism as Kamaljit indicated. Other women (such as Jane and Kate) make a conscious decision to privilege workplace activism and when this connection was severed they lost a sense of purpose and no longer felt psychologically attached, despite a previously politicised union identity. All of these women perceived however that for them participating in union education had represented a turning point in their lives. They all felt strongly that should they find themselves working in unionised contexts in the future, they could imagine becoming active again, underscoring the fluid nature of union identities.

Sally of TGWU was a separate case as she ceased to be involved because of changes in union behaviour at her workplace. She was a relatively new representative when she attended the women's school and was very positive about the activities and contribution of her local branch. Since then the company she worked for had instituted a number of

changes at the workplace, which had given rise to ‘infighting’ among the senior stewards about how to respond. This combined with the long-term sick leave of the branch chair (interviewee Mary) had rendered the branch dysfunctional and she had ceased to participate. It was clear that after initially being highly enthusiastic about the union, Sally was now very disillusioned. She had remained a member as an ‘insurance policy’, but the possibility of her becoming involved again seemed doubtful. This underscores the significance of the local industrial relations context for sustaining activism, a theme returned to below.

What we see from the above analysis is that despite an almost universal intention to sustain or develop participation, personal, work or union circumstances sometimes interfered with the realisation of that intention, some of which were gendered, whilst others were not. These ‘stories’ of stunted union careers raise several issues. First, union participation involves individuals giving time, commitment and energy on top of other paid work and domestic roles; it is by nature then fragile, but particularly so when it is at an embryonic stage. It is therefore important that unions continue to have mechanisms (such as courses) for drawing in potential new activists and in this vein they should not be concerned if some course participants show no subsequent interest, because undoubtedly some will do so. Second, is the importance of giving women positive reasons for participating at all levels, rather than simply removing barriers (see discussion in Chapter Two) to (workplace) participation. However, the workplace/branch is usually the site for activism, especially for newcomers and if the culture of local branches remains unappealing to women, then the valued work of women’s schools will be diminished, if not lost as a union resource. The question of how to change local union cultures is of course a topic for debate/analysis in itself, but not specifically the one of this thesis. Third, circumstances relating to the workplace were by far the dominant cause of cessation of union participation. This is perhaps surprising in view of the emphasis in the literature on women’s domestic roles as standing as a major barrier to participation. However, it has to be noted that of the above nine women, eight were childfree and five were partner free; therefore domestic constraints were less pronounced than for many women. Fourth, the analysis highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of union identities and the importance of exploring identities in context. The chapter now turns to the ‘stories’ of the fifteen women who went on to develop their union careers.

Developing a union career

The various experiences and influences that contributed to developing a union career are similarly complex. For example, most of the self-defined feminists (four MSF, three TGWU) developed participation, compared with a minority of the women from union-minded backgrounds (two MSF, three TGWU), indicating once more the fluid and emergent nature of the women's orientations to participation.

For an analysis of how women's union careers developed over time, it is first necessary to consider the meaning of the concept of 'career', in particular what a union career looks like. Ledwith et al. (1990:116) define a union career as a vertical progression consisting of four positions: activist, local union leader, quasi-elite branch level officer and elite national level officer. Arguably, this definition with its implicit emphasis on continuity and explicit emphasis on linearity is a masculine construct (i.e. a model of a male career, e.g. Healy 1999) and if it is utilised, then only seven women in the present study progressed.

However, this study takes a broader and more horizontal (Healy 1999) view of the concept of career and of career progression, rejecting linear, masculine models and reflecting a more gendered analysis and interpretation of women's union careers. First, individuals can hold simultaneously several careers, for example a union career, a paid work career, a home/family-based career, to which they affiliate and commit (as in Layder 1993). These careers interconnect and overlap, sometimes complementing and at other times competing with one another. Second, women's union careers often develop in qualitative ways, which a linear model does not allow for or recognise; in other words career 'progression' might not have any objective manifestation, such as higher status or title. Indeed some women might not seek higher status, but still invest in their careers. For example, a local union leader might develop in her role gaining greater expertise through experience and education, but not seek further upward progression. It should not be assumed that her role has remained the same; that she has not progressed; that she is 'stuck' or barred from progression, (although she might be). She might have made an informed choice, possibly in view of her other careers, to remain where she is, but still grow (the role and personally). Thus, a broader concept of career allows union careers to take different shapes and allows women to emerge as active agents in the making of their own career histories, as the 'stories' of this group of women show.

The above discussion notwithstanding, it is worth mapping the objective changes in women's trade union careers over time. This is shown in **Table 8.2** together with the influences, discussed in Chapter Six, on the participation of the fifteen women. From this it can be seen that most women's union careers did not follow a linear path.

Table 8.2: Developing Union Careers

Name/Union	Influences on Participation	Form(s) of Participation on Attendance at Women's School	Form(s) of Participation at 2nd Interview
Beryl/TGWU	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Shop steward; 'Women's rep'; branch committee member	Shop steward; 'Women's rep'; branch committee member; health and safety rep; trades council delegate; regional women's committee member
Hilary/TGWU	Non-union family background; significant other in the union	'Women's rep'	'Women's rep'; shop steward; branch committee member; education officer
Mary/TGWU	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Shop steward; branch chair	Shop steward; branch chair
Julie/TGWU	Union minded family background; significant experiences at the workplace; significant other in the union; self-defined feminist	Shop steward; branch committee member; deputy convenor	Shop steward; branch committee member; deputy convenor; national women's committee member
Melanie/TGWU	Union minded family background	Shop steward; branch committee member	Inactive TGWU member; USDAW organiser (paid position)
Suzanne/TGWU	Union minded family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Shop steward; branch committee member; regional and national trade group committee and women's committee member	Shop steward; branch committee member; regional and national trade group committee and women's committee member
Bernadette/TGWU	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Informal participation at branch level	Lay tutor
Mandy/TGWU	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; significant other in the union	Shop steward	Shop steward; branch committee member; Regional and national lesbian and gay committee member
Sarah/MSF	Anti-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Informal participation at workplace level	'Learning rep'; branch committee member; national NHS committee member
Fiona/MSF	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace; self-defined feminist	Workplace rep; branch chair	Workplace rep; branch chair
Deirdre/MSF	Union minded family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Branch chair; regional council member	Branch chair; regional council member
Elizabeth/MSF	Non-union family background; significant experiences at the workplace	Workplace rep; branch chair; SERTUC Women's Committee member	Workplace rep; branch chair; SERTUC Women's Committee member
Kim/MSF	Non-union family background; significant other in the union; self-defined feminist	Branch women's rep; branch committee member	Branch women's rep; branch committee member
Helen/MSF	Non-union family background; significant other in the union; significant experiences at the workplace	Workplace rep; branch committee member	Workplace rep; branch committee member
Linda/MSF	Union-minded family background; significant other in the union; self-defined feminist	'Women's rep'	'Women's rep'; branch committee member

This section also examines the structural contexts of women's union career development; it then moves on to consider how women navigated these contexts, often at the same time as balancing other careers, in particular motherhood, i.e. how their careers had unfolded over two years. It considers one of the union roles created especially for women – 'women's reps', exploring how a small group of women interpreted and behaved in that role and whether the concept of 'women's reps' represents a step towards incremental gendered transformation of local union cultures. It also examines women as representatives and explores whether there was any evidence of feminist or gender-conscious strategies or priorities, which could also be incrementally transformative. Before concluding the chapter offers the women's final reflections on women's courses.

First, there is a brief discussion of how the women saw a union career. After the women's schools all the women talked about feeling more self-confident, yet it was notable that most of the women stated that their primary commitment was to the workplace or branch, even if they were involved beyond that level. There was little sense that increased confidence would push most of the women to move upwards in their union careers. This could be a function of a weak prior ideological union commitment, as indicated by the fact that only four women were from union minded backgrounds. However, there are other, less deterministic, ways of looking at this. Within a masculine construct of career, the women might appear either modest in their aspirations or not ambitious, stereotypically feminine characteristics. Alternatively, from a gender perspective each woman takes the decision whether or not to move upwards, in the light of the work, union and personal/domestic circumstances she faces suggesting a dialectical and dynamic relationship between the subjective career of the self and the objective circumstances of career (discussed below).

This decision, however, was not purely a time rational one rather it was also influenced by the degree of commitment to workplace/branch activism that women felt, compared with commitment to trade unionism more broadly. This ties in with debates about the nature of union commitment generally; that is do people join and participate for instrumental collectivist reasons (for support and protection at work) or for solidaristic collectivist reasons (a belief in the broad principles of trade unionism) (Healy, 1997)? Those with the former orientation are arguably most likely to achieve their union goals through local level participation where it is possible for representatives to influence bargaining outcomes. Whilst those with the latter orientation might seek to influence the union's broader social,

political and economic policies at regional and national levels. For example, Hilary of TGWU (from a non-union background) reflected on her commitment to workplace activism:

‘I suppose if people asked me ‘why did you become a shop steward?’ it would be to defend those people at work who can’t necessarily do it themselves.’

Workplace participation then seems congruent with this goal. Similarly, Sarah and Kim of MSF (anti-union and non-union backgrounds) were ploughing most of their time and energy into the concerns of their professions because they felt that the union should be pushing forward a professional agenda with local management. Congruent with this Sarah (see more of her ‘story’ below) had become a workplace ‘learning rep’, whilst Kim chose to confine her participation to her PSA branch and organised various professional activities for branch members. However, Sarah, as a NHS employee, had also become involved in the national NHS committee, indicating the overlapping nature of instrumental and solidaristic orientations to collectivism.

Linked to the widely held belief that unions should focus their efforts on workplace bargaining and representation, there was a strong view that unions are too political, as expressed by Elizabeth of MSF (non-union background):

‘I think they [unions] should have a political influence, but by virtue of being able to negotiate and discuss, through dialogue, rather than forcing issues because they’re paying so much towards the Labour Party.’

Most women felt that engagement with national structures inevitably entailed wider politics, which was a distraction from the ‘real’ (instrumental) purpose of trade unionism, as Kim of MSF relates:

‘When you go to annual conference – some of them are there because they really do care and they do want to change things, but a lot of them, you think they’re just there because of their egos and they want to be important. The politics become the point of it and I can’t really be bothered with all that stuff. To be honest I think that’s how a lot of women feel. I think we’re less interested in politics as an end in itself.’

The dominant orientation of commitment to workplace/branch participation, in one sense symbolises an instrumental, rather than solidaristic collectivism, but equally it is difficult to disentangle instrumental from solidaristic commitment, because the two are bound together, as Suzanne's remark suggests:

'People often ask me, why do you still want to be involved, but I still think things can be improved for people at work and through the union, that's the way to do it, I think.'

However, Suzanne's clarity of purpose is possibly a function of her union-minded background and solidaristic commitment. Whether borne of instrumental or solidaristic collectivism it is important to note that most of the women were interested in changing things and they thought they could make most difference at workplace or branch level. The next section examines the contexts of formal activism.

The contexts of formal activism

The context in which participation occurs is important because it structures the opportunities, barriers and constraints for activism. Most of the women (12 of 15) who had sustained or developed formal participation over the two years worked in unionised workplaces. This is clearly significant and indicates that a pro-union or at least non-hostile employer helps to create conditions conducive to participation for example time off for courses (discussed in Chapter Seven) and union duties. Only one formally active woman, Kim of MSF, reported an overtly union hostile employer. Ironically, though her immediate manager was prepared to authorise her repeated attendance of 'Women's Week' during paid working time, provided it was kept secret between them, seeing the courses as useful to professional development.

It is worth noting that Kim's commitment to participation had weakened over the two years, attributable in part at least to the structural conditions within which her participation occurred. Participation in a composite branch can be problematic with the absence of a common workplace and the shared problems that go with it. Further, Kim was still the only active woman in her branch and had become disillusioned by what she saw as membership apathy, although she could see that social changes in the home and work were at least partly responsible:

‘Getting them [members] involved is the problem. They turn up when there’s something of interest to them, but they just don’t want to go to committee meetings and get involved in actually running the branch. It’s not just us, it’s not just the PSA, it’s not just MSF, it’s everywhere. I asked one or two people, especially the younger ones, why they don’t come along and most of them said once you’ve got a home and family and you know my wife works full-time too, the weekend is the only time you have with the children and there’s always so much to do. Once you get involved with the union, because not enough people get involved, once you do one thing, you get caught up doing lots of things. Whereas in the old days the wife stayed at home and did all the housework, it’s not like that anymore, men have to do things in the home and help with the kids too.’

Kim’s comments reflect a broader political policy debate concerning ‘work-life balance’ and the problems of reconciling work, family and participation in public life (see Bradley et al, forthcoming). As a freelance worker, Bernadette of TGWU was also a member of a composite branch. At the first interview it had been three years since she had been a senior shop steward in a local authority, but she was regularly attending branch meetings and union courses. By the second interview, now five years since she had participated at workplace level, she no longer attended branch meetings, although she had trained to be a lay tutor. She too seemed to be lacking a sense of purpose in terms of composite branch-level activism. Nevertheless, in the face of a weakened behavioural commitment, she declared that she was ‘T&G through and through’ and ‘wouldn’t dream of going anywhere else or not being a member’, this despite being from a non-union minded background. These women’s stories point to the challenge which unions have in organising unorganised workers.

Kim’s and Bernadette’s weakening commitment to participation stood in contrast to those who worked in unionised contexts, whose commitment and enthusiasm seemed to have strengthened over the two years, indicating that for union identities to become politicised is at least in part contextually contingent. It is probably self-evident that unionised contexts are bound to fuel a greater sense of solidarity borne of common conditions and a common ‘enemy’ (the employer) and that for many activists this will be a necessary pre-condition for participation. This is of course problematic for unions in an era when the number of unionised workplaces has declined and raises questions about how unions become meaningful as democratic participatory organisations to (women) workers in non-unionised settings. Conversely, it also suggests that there is potential to activate union identities in more members in unionised organisations than presently.

As suggested earlier, it is probably the case that a stronger solidaristic commitment is necessary for participation beyond the workplace, especially for those employed in non-unionised settings. In fact three of the five women from union minded family backgrounds participated at regional and national levels and Melanie was now a paid organiser with USDAW, in contrast to only three of the nine women from a non-union background. For example, Deirdre, unemployed because of disability, had thrown herself into more or less full-time union activism. She confessed to feeling demoralised after attending MSF annual conference because she had ‘heard the same motions year after year and still nothing changes’, but nevertheless she battled on, always looking for new ways of generating interest in the union movement. Instead of blaming member/worker apathy, she firmly believed that the onus was on the unions to make greater efforts to render the movement more tangible to members and that trade union education was one of the ways of achieving this. She had a strong belief that unions need to be more active in the community and on behalf of her branch and regional council she was playing her part in taking the union to the community. One of her initiatives had been the provision of a course for young prostitutes organised through her MSF region. She was also in negotiations with an MSF education officer to hold a course for young, single mothers at Whitehall College to be jointly funded through a lottery grant and the regional union, highlighting the creative and active ways that women are engaging in critical appraisal of their unions.

Turning to the women employed in unionised settings, the local union context of both MSF and TGWU was generally vibrant, with examples of regular, well-attended member, as well as committee meetings. There were also examples of industrial action, including strikes, indicating a willingness and ability to mobilise members. In some cases, women had played a key role in building support for action, (as in Mandy’s ‘story’ below), challenging the traditional assumption of women as less militant (e.g. Purcell 1979).

Workplaces/branches were mostly ‘self-servicing’, that is there was little evidence of being ‘serviced’ by paid officers, indicating that the workplace/branch consisted of highly skilled lay trade unionists, able to handle negotiations and individual case work. This contradicted the picture often portrayed in the literature of the predominance of a ‘servicing’ culture in British unions (Carter 1997; 2000). There were, however, a couple of examples where union life was rather dormant, but one where a newly enthusiastic activist succeeded in re-

invigorating participation. After participating in further courses and her branch committee, Sarah felt that members should be more involved in the unions' activities and she instigated the re-convening of member meetings in her workplace, as her 'story' below recounts.

Sarah's Story

At the end of the first interview Sarah said that she was keen to become a 'learning rep' and also to develop union links outside of her workplace. Two years after the women's school Sarah had gone further than this: she had completed the first of two learning reps' courses, was a branch committee member, had participated in local negotiations and had joined the NHS National Committee. This heightened level of activism was quite significant when compared with her previous fairly inactive status for approximately fourteen years. Sarah attributed this to a combination of MSF's successful campaign for equal pay for speech therapists, her increasing frustration with her local union representative's (alleged) ineptitude and the encouragement and inspiration she gained from Women's Week in 2000 (especially from the education officer). Reflecting back on the impact of Women's Week, she said:

'I'm definitely much more assertive now. I went to management and re-negotiated my individual pay offer, which I haven't done before. It's that course, I'm pretty sure that I wouldn't have gone and renegotiated if I hadn't done that course, I'm pretty sure of that. It gave me the confidence I needed.'

With some resistance from the workplace representative, Sarah had also managed to institute some changes in the running of the workplace union by adding a union meeting at the end of monthly departmental meetings and by reporting on professional training opportunities via the monthly meeting and a newsletter. The former was important because it meant that all staff (and members) were present and had an opportunity to contribute to the union business. The latter was significant because according to Sarah management encouragement to develop professionally was severely lacking and Sarah had a strong commitment to opening up opportunities for her predominantly female colleagues and was able to accomplish this through the union role.

Participating in the national level NHS committee had been a steep learning curve for Sarah, but a role she was clearly enjoying and benefiting from: she found the discussions about changes in the NHS, the role of women in the NHS and the impending merger with AEEU intrinsically interesting.

In terms of the future Sarah expressed an intention to continue her present level of involvement, but felt that as a professional woman, she would have no more time to give to other forms of participation.

In terms of union-management relations, most representatives reported receiving respect from local management, albeit sometimes grudging, although some reported poor relationships with HR departments. The changing role of HR was significant in a number

of contexts and some women reported a changing approach to industrial relations with HR getting more involved in day-to-day matters, for example sick leave, discretionary time off, time off for trade union duties. This was problematic because the good relationships established over time with local managers were now of lesser importance. Asked whether this concerned them in any way, for example whether they felt that job security or promotion prospects were in jeopardy for union representatives, most women were unperturbed. This could suggest that their paid work careers were either of low importance to them, or that experience had taught them not to expect promotion. In fact most women were in jobs where they felt that 'realistically' there were no promotion prospects, so they were prepared to invest their energies elsewhere (see also Bradley et al. 2002).

For some a changing and more hostile industrial relations climate had led to reluctance on the part of members to get involved or stand for election. Some women talked about members not wanting 'to put their heads above the parapets'. Ironically the tougher environment had created opportunities for women who often stood uncontested for the all too familiar reason that 'no one else would do it' (see for example, Bradley 1999). Julie of TGWU, for example, laughed when asked if her election to the deputy convenor post had been contested. This climate also meant that some women, like Julie employed as a carpenter in a local authority, were representing predominantly or all men, which according to the literature has been resisted at times and in contexts when standing for union office was more competitive (e.g. Ledwith et al. 1990:120).

In exploring the contexts for activism, it is also important to examine local union culture, which research has found to be a barrier to women's participation (see Chapter Two; e.g. Cunnison and Stageman 1995). In some instances the women did not interpret certain practices as sexist, although some examples were clearly open to that charge. For example, Linda of MSF was the only active woman in her branch. Instead of filling a workplace representative seat (there were vacancies!), she was 'appointed' as 'women's rep', which meant that she could only observe (i.e. not vote) at branch committee meetings and could not get involved in negotiations. Whether consciously or unconsciously, this arrangement circumscribed women's contribution to the union. Mandy's story demonstrates the obstacles that can be deliberately erected by the masculine hierarchy, resonating with other research (e.g. Cockburn 1994). There were clear efforts to hold

Mandy back and her story suggests a reluctance to renegotiate the gendered distribution of power within the local union context.

Mandy's Story

At the first interview, when asked where she thought she would go in the union over the next couple of years, Mandy had no firm plans, but was very keen to get more involved. Since the women's school in 1999 Mandy had developed her union career considerably: she was now a branch committee member and a member of the regional and national lesbian and gay committees. She had also gained a lot of experience as a shop steward through her involvement in initiating strike action, in local negotiations and in representing members in grievance and discipline cases.

However, Mandy felt that her branch secretary was standing in the way of her going further:

'It's my branch secretary. I'm the only woman driver in my depot now – just one woman out of all that lot, which has its good points and bad points. I have to work a lot harder to be accepted, but in saying that because I'm a woman they really respect me for the things I've won for them, which they don't expect from the other one [the male branch secretary]. But every time I try to get involved beyond the branch, I meet barriers'.

Mandy had wanted to be nominated as a branch delegate to the regional women's committee, but this had been blocked by the branch secretary. Instead she went through national office to get onto the regional and national lesbian and gay committees, a route only possible because of the difficulty of locating lesbian and gay activists.

In terms of the future, Mandy had just been nominated for the TUC lesbian and gay committee and planned to stand for election as branch secretary in eighteen months time. In talking about her personal life Mandy had a new partner who unlike her earlier partners, was also very interested in trade unionism and encouraged and supported her.

Beryl of TGWU felt that her workplace union had made great strides towards gender equality within the local context, but had now taken a retrograde step:

'I feel that a lot of the men have gone backwards. Because there are a number of women around now, they feel OK about saying 'can you make the coffee' or 'can you wash up' to a woman and this sort of thing.'

According to Beryl, women's increased presence meant that men no longer felt they had to be cautious about lapsing into gender stereotypical roles and relationships.

In summary, the analysis of the contexts of the women's activism suggests that a well-organised workplace is the most enabling context and that the 'push-pull' mechanisms that

propel women into activism are likely to be weaker for those employed in non-unionised environments. It is also likely that those from union-minded family backgrounds with an associated stronger ideological commitment to trade unionism, are more motivated to participate beyond the workplace. Importantly, a changed and changing industrial relations climate has given rise to the lesser willingness of members generally to get involved in unions, and this rather ironically in turn has created openings for women. However, once there the culture of the local union is not always conducive to developing women as activists or to developing women's participation more generally.

Balancing the double or triple load

Balancing work and union is something that all union activists must do, whether male or female. However, the literature (discussed in Chapter Two, for example, Lawrence 1994) has established that women's domestic roles and relationships place extra strain on the work-home-union balance, often creating a triple load.

The double load of work and union commitments can prove arduous for some women, even before family commitments are added in. Kim of MSF, for example, was partner free and childfree and therefore without the typical gender constraints cast by the domestic patriarchal order. However, she was now seeking further job promotion, she was in a new relationship, and feeling time pressures weighing on her. She was consequently beginning to question the purpose of participation in her composite branch (discussed above):

'I really don't know why I've carried on. I mean I've just been put up for promotion at work, so I've got that coming up and then there's my involvement in the industry association and I'm trying to have a life as well. You begin to think, 'what am I doing?' I think I'll keep it going as long as possible and see how it turns out.'

Of course professional men also face competing demands on their time and they too might be faced with a choice between privileging work or union careers. However, given the gendered nature of the 'glass ceiling', women who wish to progress their paid work careers face more obstacles and to overcome them involves considerable time and energy investment. Therefore, even the double load of work and union can prove a gendered constraint.

Paradoxically perhaps, of the fifteen women who sustained or developed formal participation, ten were partnered (eight married) and six had dependent children, seemingly defying the contention that women who lead a more traditional domestic life are less likely to participate in their unions (e.g. Lawrence 1994). However, as discussed in Chapter Six, these women did emphasise the importance of a supportive partner.

Beryl of TGWU had no dependent children, but had a number of other caring responsibilities, as described in her 'story' below.

Beryl's story

At the first interview Beryl did not envisage taking on any more union roles as she felt her domestic circumstances would not permit her giving over any more time to the union. Despite an even more burdensome domestic situation, two years after the women's school, Beryl had additionally become a health and safety representative, delegate to the regional trades council and regional women's committee. Beryl describes her domestic situation:

'My daughter, who's 24, her boyfriend was killed in a road accident and she's got four little ones under seven, so that's been very traumatic. My other half's got a bad back and that's deteriorated, he's only 42 and he doesn't think he'll be able to work till 50 now. My mother's got dementia now and my father-in-law's bedridden now, so I've had quite a lot on my plate the last couple of years. So a lot's happened since I've seen you [laughs] – nothing good at all [laughs].'

When asked how she coped, Beryl described the day before:

'We had a branch meeting last night – well we start at half five, I finish [work] at half four. I had to go to the union office and wait until half five, then we never got away until half seven. Then I had to go and do a bit of shopping, so I never saw my other half until eight. He goes to bed at eight, because he gets up at four, so, God, that's the sort of thing that happens.'

Beryl also explained why she had taken on more union work:

'I was pushed into being a health and safety rep, because I'm one of those people who go to branch meetings, and if they [the members] keep moaning, I have to do something about it. We got people from the car parks and they are moaning about health and safety and I reported this and Paul [branch secretary] said, 'right, who votes for Beryl as health and safety rep?' But I'm looking forward to that, that's going to be a new challenge for me.'

Beryl clearly derived immense satisfaction from her union work, which seemed like an outlet for her energy and intellectual capabilities, which were not utilised in her fairly low-level paid work. She did not see herself taking on any more in the future.

As can be seen Beryl showed a remarkable capacity to battle on against the odds, even taking on more union duties, against a heavy domestic workload. Whilst on the one hand this might appear counterintuitive, on the other hand her commitment to the union, her union and gender identities had strengthened over time. She had become more confident and able to define and pursue a gendered union agenda of her own design, from which she could see results, such as her success in negotiating a new non-see-through uniform for female reception staff. Therefore stronger perceptions of personal and political efficacy (or agency) combined with continuing industrial relations problems meant that Beryl felt unable and unwilling to retreat from participation.

Hilary of TGWU, a mother of a young child, had also developed her role by becoming a fully-fledged shop steward as well as 'women's rep', and completing the three stages of shop stewards training. She managed to juggle work, union and home demands, by limiting her union roles and ambitions and importantly she also had a supportive partner. She said she had been encouraged by others in the branch to stand for a senior representative position, but she had decided not to, largely because it would entail regional meetings:

'Working full-time and being a mum, I mean if you're involved outside the airport you have to go off to London and here, there and everywhere and with a five year old that I don't see during the day anyway and then if I didn't see her at all during the evenings, I don't think that would go down too well at home. So it's juggling the time – if you're going to do it, you have to do it well, you can't do it half-heartedly because people are depending on you.'

Among the women who were mothers, the motivation to balance the 'triple load' appeared to reside in a combination of commitment to the union and in the immense personal satisfaction that they drew from their union work. The intrinsic satisfaction derived from union participation was emphasised by Fiona's 'story' told later and by Helen of MSF:

'I find it [union work] a challenge. It's the one thing at work that keeps me going, I have to say, because there are a lot of interesting things going on and we've done so much that you really feel you've achieved something. If it wasn't for the union work I might have left by now, I really do think that.'

'Women's Reps'

The creation of 'women's reps' is one of the positive action initiatives that workplace unions/branches in MSF and TGWU are encouraged to adopt, according to the unions, for three reasons. First the role is intended to facilitate recruitment of more female representatives, especially in male dominated union contexts. Second, it is intended to enable the union to provide better support to women members in cases of sexual harassment or on other 'women's issues'. Third, 'women's reps' should be able to contribute a gender perspective to the union's activities generally. These three reasons could be taken as indicative of an ideological commitment to increasing women's representation in order to deliver on gender democracy. Alternatively, the initiative could constitute an effort to appropriate 'women's knowledge' towards unions goals at a time when unions need female members, out of a belief that women's presence will help to plug a kind of cultural deficit.

The establishment of 'women's reps' could be an important development, which could represent one step towards gendered transformation in local union contexts. However, evidence from this research suggests that 'women's reps' was a less of a revolutionary concept in practice than in theory. The feminist orientation of the women in these roles is relevant in so far as feminist women are more likely to display politicised gender identities and be prepared to use the position of 'women's rep' to advance a women's agenda. Feminist women, critical of male dominated structures, are also more likely to recognise the limitation of the role of 'women's rep'.

As shown in **Tables 8.1 and 8.2**, five women (two MSF, three TGWU) were 'women's reps' at the first interview, three of which were self-identified feminists (two MSF, one TGWU). Four women still held the position by the time of the second interviews, whilst the fifth was no longer a trade union member. In the case of the two MSF women, this was and remained their only union position. One of the remaining TGWU 'women's reps' was also a shop steward and the other TGWU woman went on to additionally become a fully-fledged shop steward by the second interview. Two years after attending the women's schools it was interesting to explore how the remaining four women had developed in their roles as 'women's reps'. Although only a small group, their 'stories' reveal some important insights into the lived experiences of 'women's reps'.

One of the problems of creating additional positions especially for women is that there is no challenge to male authority and power, because there is no risk of unseating (possibly longstanding) male office holders. This argument is well rehearsed in the literature (e.g. Healy and Kirton 2000; Cockburn 1995). However, Beryl of TGWU, a self-identified feminist, was the only 'women's rep' who actually complained of this. She had started her union career as a 'women's rep', but quickly recognised the limitations of the role and that the way to make a difference was to become a shop steward, which she did at the earliest opportunity. She then used this position to identify and recruit other women as 'women's reps', as she had Hilary, who also went on to become a shop steward after the women's school. In their workplace union 'women's reps' were not part of the negotiating committee and therefore wielded little power or 'say' in what bargaining agendas should be pursued, something which had frustrated Beryl. Hilary, meanwhile, (a non-feminist) had a more conciliatory stance and was less critical of arrangements and practices in the local branch. She felt that the 'women's rep' position afforded her time to 'learn the ropes', for example she attended various meetings and hearings as an observer. When, after the women's school, she felt more confident, she stood uncontested for a shop steward position and was now representing an all male manual work group. Thus, these two women interpreted the role of 'women's rep' differently: Beryl experienced it as constraining, whilst Hilary experienced it as enabling, at least in the initial stages of her union career. Despite different personal experiences and perspectives, both women were in agreement that the position of 'women's rep' helped to draw in some more hesitant women.

An issue that emerges from the experiences of Beryl and Hilary is that the impact, which individual women can have as 'women's reps' is severely circumscribed by the masculine hierarchy because the more experienced men define the parameters of the role. There may not necessarily be a conscious strategy of internal exclusion to keep women on the margins, but without doubt the male oligarchy has an interest in controlling women's roles, whilst appropriating their knowledge. In practice this means that a lone and inexperienced woman activist can find herself taking her cue from a man, who does not have a clear sense of the purpose of 'women's reps' or any ideas on how to be proactive in the role. This was the MSF women's experience of being 'women's reps'. Linda, for example, was the only woman active in her branch and had been encouraged to attend 'Women's Week' by the male branch secretary. She found the course very enjoyable and said that she had learnt a

lot about the union. Two years later, however, she had done little in her role, other than publicise her existence to women members via a newsletter and a leaflet. Linda was, however, unconcerned about her lack of power and influence, saying she was happy 'to do her bit'. Ironically she was a self-identified feminist with, in one sense, an active gender identity, but she did not marshal this to develop a critical appraisal of her local male dominated branch. Linda said she had little time to give to the union with a full-time job, a dependent daughter and an active role in an environmental group: hers was less of an ideological position than a pragmatic one.

In summary, it would probably take an experienced trade unionist or a woman schooled in feminist politics and practice (via for example, participation in other women's groups in the union) to really make something of the role of 'women's rep'. Paradoxically, it is usually newer and often non-feminist women who are recruited to it. The result is that the 'women's rep' herself does not have a sense of what she should or could be doing in the role as in the case of the two MSF women. Those who are concerned are likely to have to move themselves into mainstream positions of power and influence as in the case of the TGWU women. However, Beryl retained her 'women's rep' position and as a more experienced trade unionist, fully cognisant of the gendered politics of union life, she was now able to use the position to advance 'women's issues' when her position as a non-senior shop steward otherwise excluded her:

'With all this change [in management] a lot of the men felt it was their responsibility – there were no women involved in the negotiations at all and I felt that was really bad. We're hoping to organise union visits to other airports, so I will suggest that I go as the women's rep so that I can put women's view forward, because I feel that's important. Otherwise it will just be the [all male] senior stewards.'

The above analysis indicates that the creation of 'women's reps' could point in the direction of incremental gendered transformation through a fairly subtle realignment of power, alternatively it could simply reinforce the marginalisation of women. The outcome seems contingent on the women who take up the positions actively pursuing gender-conscious or feminist strategies, rather than sitting back and waiting for the men to define the parameters of the role.

Women as representatives

This section gives a flavour of what the women representatives (three MSF, five TGWU) were doing in their unions generally two years after the women's schools. The analysis shows that there was evidence of gender conscious strategies and priorities being pursued by some of these women, although only three self-identified as feminists (one MSF, two TGWU). There were two main strands to this, the first concerned their emphasis on increasing women's participation and the second was their attention to workplace 'women's issues'. However, there were also some women who represented only or predominantly men, whose day-to-day union duties involved little consideration of female-gendered issues, but this did not necessarily result in a gender-neutral union identity.

All the workplace representatives were keen to encourage more women to participate in the union and to this end were using gender conscious, if not espousedly feminist, strategies. This involved personally identifying individual women whom they thought might be interested and developing practices to encourage them to participate. For example, Beryl of TGWU had managed to recruit two cleaners as 'women's reps' because she was concerned that the wholly female cleaning staff had never been represented among the stewards and she felt little effort had been put into trying to involve them. The cleaners' exclusion from the union is an example of the way that gender and class intersect and combine to act as constraint and Beryl's intervention serves as an example of individual women using their agency to further women's interests generally. Julie, of TGWU, in context of an overwhelmingly male membership where women workers often reported social isolation, organised monthly women's meetings to informally seek feedback from her few women members on workplace issues indicating her willingness to utilise an explicitly feminist practice (women-only groups) to engage the female membership. Elizabeth of MSF was eager to share power by encouraging local women representatives to gain the confidence to deal with issues themselves rather than referring to her as chair of the branch. Helen and Fiona of MSF, both mothers acutely aware of time constraints, had established some union roles as job share posts so as to appeal to women who were afraid of being engulfed by union participation. Once again these were all examples of the creative ways in which women contribute to incremental gendered transformation.

The literature has also highlighted the importance of female role models for encouraging women's participation (see Chapter Two and e.g. Kirton and Healy 1999). The women were generally reluctant to position themselves as role models, being modest about their achievements, but they all conceded that the presence of women encourages other women to become involved, as Hilary of TGWU suggests:

'I think because I'm female, relatively young, I'm not very tall and I sit in these meetings and when I pipe up they think 'she can do it and no one shot her down', so perhaps that's something other women may benefit from.'

Suzanne of TGWU had also identified two interested women and her experience of attempting to get them involved highlights the contingent nature of women's participation:

'One of them has become a steward, but she has children so weekends are difficult for her. The other one unfortunately has had health problems that have made her take a back seat. She had more time to get involved at weekends because her children are grown up and just as that was getting off the ground she became ill. Once things start to interfere in their home life, it's still quite a big barrier for a lot of women.'

The above examples reveal sensitivity to the realities of women's lives and how women make choices about which aspects of their lives to privilege at any given point in time. These women also show a concern to identify means of distributing union knowledge and increasing women's participation. Above all they did not position themselves as the experts on women, but were continually thinking of new ideas for involving more women. The practice of distributing knowledge is associated with feminist values (although not all these women self-identified as feminists) and is also an element of transformational leadership styles, which women often adopt in order to spread power and influence, rather than own it (Dorgan and Grieco 1993). This also demonstrates the intersection of politicised gender and union identities.

The literature on women in unions is also interested in whether women's presence in the ranks of representatives actually alters union agendas (e.g. Heery and Kelly 1988). Indeed, part of the feminist claim for measures to increase women's participation in democratic processes and structures rests on the belief that women do make a difference. There was evidence that the women used their positions to identify gender-specific issues, rather than simply respond to, membership concerns, in other words they acted to gender the union

agenda. For example, in explaining why she would like to attend the women's school again, Beryl, a feminist, highlighted that 'women's issues' were a priority for her:

'One of my main things is the women here – how they're treated. I mean recruitment and selection for example – all that [good practice] seems to have fallen by the wayside – we've got people coming in and they seem to be friends of friends and they only seem interested in promoting male graduates, instead of promoting women up from the floor. There are a lot of issues for women. The bus drivers have problems with their blouses because they're see-through and they're refusing to wear them.'

In another example, Elizabeth (a non-feminist) of MSF had instigated a job evaluation exercise for predominantly female secretaries, believing that there was significant undervaluation of the role. After two years of negotiations, this had resulted in a re-grading of most secretaries, an achievement of which Elizabeth was clearly proud.

The ability and willingness to identify pro-actively 'women's issues' and to bring these to the union agenda is highly significant. Firstly, bearing in mind generally low levels of (female) attendance, it is impossible for union representatives to rely solely on traditional consultation devices (i.e. meetings) in order to identify member concerns and to set the union bargaining agenda. Secondly, it also makes it harder for male officials to ignore women's concerns, which might be expressed in informal member-official communication, but be filtered out before reaching the union agenda. In this way, women's collective actions can help to break down women's internal exclusion.

When women represent women it is likely that they will unconsciously, if not consciously, identify with their membership and in doing so easily identify the issues of concern to the female membership, as was the case with Fiona, Helen and Elizabeth of MSF. It is interesting also to consider whether when women represent mostly men, their gender identity or feminist orientation has any bearing on the issues they take up or on the way they carry out their duties. There were three TGWU women who represented almost all men. None of these women reported any opposition to their election or to their carrying out their union duties, although as discussed earlier, this could be a function of the lesser willingness of men to become involved in unions, rather than indicating a change in union culture. It could also be that women have become more vocal in unions. Hilary (a non-feminist), for example, revealed somewhat contradictory views and presented an entirely

different picture to Beryl (a self-identified feminist) of the same workplace. On the one hand she emphasised the absence of sexist attitudes in the union and workplace, on the other hand she felt that women might have to force change:

‘Luckily we don’t have any form of sexism here. Perhaps it’s because we have a lot of female managers and female supervisors. It’s not as if all the women here are only secretaries. I suppose that rubs off on the shop stewards. I can see the difference in the last ten years – the attitudes are changing. I’m not sure if it’s that the attitudes of the senior men in the union are changing or whether it’s the women who are forcing the attitudes to change. I’m sure it’s the women who have said I’m just as good as you at doing that, just let me show you.’

Julie represented (mostly male) skilled manual workers and her interest in ‘women’s issues’ had strengthened following the women’s school such that she was now participating in the national women’s committee. However, (as a middle class, highly educated feminist woman) she was also concerned not to lose sight of what she saw as class oppression, which meant that she defined her male membership as an oppressed social group:

‘Regarding men, I mean at one stage I would have gone mad about pornography and stuff like that, but I think women have to realise that it’s not just about our liberation. I mean I think the oppression of men hasn’t really been recognised and it’s absolutely major you know, of working class men.’

In her capacity as a workplace representative, with predominantly male members, Julie was not overly concerned with ‘women’s issues’. She revealed a strong, politicised class-based union identity, but nevertheless, she did show sensitivity to issues facing women manual workers, who were usually isolated from other women, hence the monthly women’s meetings mentioned above.

Mandy’s activities as a steward representing almost all men were an example of the preparedness of non-feminist women to gender the union agenda even in the male dominated context. Mandy had negotiated the provision of smaller size footwear (as part of the uniform) with the tiny minority of women bus drivers in mind, overturning the previous requirement for women drivers to buy their own shoes. Mandy commented that her male branch secretary had felt that because there were so few women, this was not an issue worth putting effort into. Like Julie and Hilary though, Mandy was also keen to

pursue 'equality for everyone' and did not confine her efforts to 'women's issues', pointing to a possible tension between gender and class-based union identities.

To summarise, the analysis of women as representatives points to the significance of feminist beliefs and values in underpinning the strategies and practices of trade union women, although there was no clear relationship with espousal of the feminist label, (mirroring other research, e.g. Kirton and Healy 1999; Parker 2002).

Final reflections on women's courses

Two years after the women's schools, interviewees who had sustained or developed their union participation were invited to offer their thoughts on the significance or impact for them of the women-only courses. All the women recalled fond memories of their course experiences and remained convinced that women's courses build women's confidence to participate. The impact for some had been profound and they were able to pinpoint specific ways in which they felt they had benefited. For some women, the benefit had been of a very personal nature, from which they had been able to draw strength as women. Deirdre of MSF had returned to 'Women's Week' in 2001, she remarked:

'I broke down and cried at Women's Week last year, I felt that emotional. When you've never had praise in your life, it just feels so good to get it and there they are [the tutors] giving you so much. I mean I've been a battered wife and I know how women can be crushed so I want to support other women to get to where I am now.'

Mandy believed that attending the women's school, as her first union course had given her confidence not only as a woman, also as a lesbian woman. She recalled a speech she had made at the end of a mixed-sex 'Equality for all' course, a year later:

'I got a standing ovation. They said it was the first time that anyone had spoken on that [lesbian and gay issues] at Eastbourne. Everybody on that course – well actually it wasn't everybody, but it feels like that when you're in a minority – there were four blokes and they were forever putting gays down, calling them queers. After a few days it gets really annoying, so I came out and said that I were gay. Then I got chosen for one of the speeches.'

Mandy was clear that it was the women's course that had given her the confidence to publicly assert her identity as a lesbian woman. Other women felt that the experience of

the women's school had been pivotal in their development as activists, as highlighted by Fiona's 'story' below.

Fiona's Story

When asked if she had any ambitions in the union at the first interview, Fiona was very enthusiastic about union participation and laughingly said she would like to be a paid official in the future. Following maternity leave, Fiona had returned to work part-time and remained in her role as negotiating committee chair. With so many time pressures at work and at home she still felt motivated to continue:

'There are times, especially when people are whinging, that you want to give it up, you think why am I doing this? But we're so much better off since we started the union. There was never anything there for the admin people. We've benefited tremendously from having a union. It's from collective bargaining, from looking at things as a group.'

As part of the bargaining agenda the union had prioritised low pay for (women) admin workers and achieved significant increases and negotiated a job evaluation exercise, resulting in a new grading system. They were now involved in negotiations over the introduction of annualised hours.

To continue her union learning, Fiona had been back to Women's Week in 2001 and 2002 and completed all the presently available courses. She said she felt sad that for her Women's Week had come to an end, for now at least.

Fiona laughed at the thought that two years ago she had said she would like to be a full-time officer – she said it sounded arrogant and besides she could not handle the stress. Although she envisaged staying a rep, she could not imagine having the time for any other roles, but:

'I couldn't imagine not being involved in the union now. It's amazing, it does bring you out of yourself. You feel more confident in situations outside of the union too. Going to Women's Week – it's made me much stronger. We know the tactics and the tricks to watch out for and we're not half as nervous as we were before. We are now a force to be reckoned with.'

Some women had since participated in mixed courses for the first time and whilst they generally felt they had benefited from these, they were less enthusiastic. Helen of MSF, for example, talked about the different (less interactive) teaching style of the male tutor of a mixed school she had attended. She also felt that students were less open and participative and concluded, 'I wasn't impressed at all. I just felt like I didn't get anything out of it at all'. Overall, most of the women felt that women's schools served a special function, even the more sceptical supporters, because they had 'seen it with their own eyes'. For example, at the first interview Suzanne a very experienced activist of TGWU

expressed only equivocal support for separate women's courses; she reflected on this again at the second interview:

'I think having seen women coming through that route and actually taking part, I think I've probably changed my mind on that. I think what disturbed and I suppose still disturbs me is that they can become too dependent on women and not try to work with their male colleagues. I mean you do have to have a working relationship with men in the union as well. I think that some of them wouldn't go on mixed courses and that's a problem, I think. So it depends on the woman, but over these last two years, watching new women come through from the women's schools, I think they're very valuable.'

Suzanne was also now a little more comfortable with feminist practices:

'I mean I still strongly believe in women's equality, but I believe that women should be succeeding on their own ability, not because they've been given special help. Equality and fairness are important principles. I mean I'm involved in the women's committee and I will be going to the women's TUC, but the reason I go is in order to meet other women and to further my own knowledge about women's issues. I mean it is about the empowerment of women.'

Elizabeth of MSF, however, retained her serious reservations about separate women's courses, but nevertheless conceded that there was a need for them:

'I can understand why they're there – and that's not just on women, it's also on race issues – it's very difficult really, because what they're saying is that we should be equal on all things and then they have a black workers course or a women's course. It doesn't matter if they're black, male, female or blue with pink spots – people should go on courses because they're members. I know why they're there, but I don't like why they're there – I abhor the need for them to be there.'

In summary, those who had previously supported the concept of women's courses continued to do so and in particular they continued to emphasise the value of women's courses to novice women. Some of the more ambivalent supporters were now a little less hesitant in their support for this form of women's separate organising.

Conclusions

This chapter has followed the social construction of women's union participation over time. The putative barriers to women's participation according to the literature are the structure of women's employment, the gendered division of domestic labour and trade

union culture (see Chapter Two). Significantly, this chapter has shown that the structure of women's employment and trade union culture were far more influential on patterns of participation, than were caring responsibilities. For example, some women found the inner strength and confidence to pursue alternative paths which led them into non-unionised employment and away from union participation, whilst others had poor experiences of workplace unions, which deterred them from going any further with their union careers. Significantly, some women had heavy domestic responsibilities, but managed to balance these with union roles. There were surprisingly few cases of women perceiving their domestic situations as a reason not to participate, although juggling the triple load might have influenced them to confine their participation to the low end of the hierarchy, thus stunting a vertical union career. There were also on occasion other reasons for breaking off or not starting a union career such as illness and disability or simple lack of interest.

It also seems that sustained participation favours stability in both personal and work circumstances, as none of the women who developed union careers had changed jobs or workplaces and most had had stability in their personal lives. However, their experiences were equally gendered: they were energetic, intelligent women who were unrecognised and unrewarded in their paid work, gaining enormous intrinsic rewards from union participation. They were treated with respect by co-workers and management and they were often more important in the workplace by virtue of the union role than because of their paid work role. Thus, from a policy perspective, women trapped in low skill work could constitute a huge untapped resource for unions, whilst from a conceptual perspective the intrinsic value of participation is far more important than previously suggested (e.g. by Klandermans 1992). Over time most women from the original group of 29 interviewees became more attitudinally and/or behaviourally committed to their union: their union identities had strengthened and in many cases so too had their gender identities. Therefore it is important that the opportunity to capitalise on the enthusiasm generated by the women's schools is seized so that the investment in educating women is fully exploited towards trade union goals.

The follow-up of the women can only conclude that life is messy and complicated, women's lives even more so than are men's. Thus it is necessary to emphasise again that women's union participation is shaped by a dynamic and complex interaction of socialisation in the family, workplace and union, together with gendered structural barriers

to participation, all of which are mediated by the personal resources individual women are able to draw upon. It cannot be argued with any certainty, that the outcomes for the individual women would have been different had they not attended the women's schools. However, their perception was overwhelmingly that their futures had been influenced by their experiences of women-only courses, even if in invisible (to others) and intangible ways. Mandy has the final word:

'I think it's brilliant. I think you get a hell of a lot from it. I wouldn't be where I am now if I hadn't been on them courses. I'd recommend it to anybody.' (Mandy, TGWU)

Chapter Nine

Conclusions

Introduction

This thesis makes a contribution to the growing body of literature on women and trade unions. The broad aim was to explore women's trade union careers over time within the empirical context of women's lesser participation in the democratic processes and structures, that is within the context of the existing gender democracy deficit (Cockburn 1995). The objectives were to understand how women's trade union participation is socially constructed by their experiences of three interlocking social institutions – family, work and unions – and in particular by their engagement with one form of women's separate organising – women-only courses. The research sought to explore the social processes of women-only courses, investigating the ways in which women's gender and union identities are shaped by engagement with the gendered discourses of the courses and the influence this then has on the trajectory of women's union careers. To achieve these objectives the thesis followed women's union careers over time both retrospectively and contemporaneously. The concluding chapter demonstrates how the aim and objectives have been met by discussing in greater detail the contribution of the thesis to existing research and literature and summarising what can be learnt from the study. The discussion is divided into four main parts, (i) the implications for research on women and trade unions, (ii) implications for methodology, (iii) implications for trade union strategy and policy and (iv) reflections on the research design.

Before turning to the findings of the thesis, there is a short summary of the issues raised by the literature review, which provided the broader context for the study. The thesis has drawn upon a multi-disciplinary literature in order to locate the research in conceptual, contemporary and historical contexts. Chapter One outlined the conceptual approach of the thesis, which selectively draws on the traditions and perceived strengths of a range of feminist and industrial relations theories appropriate to exploring the structure-agency dynamic in the making of women's trade union careers. The conceptual objective was to avoid overly deterministic and abstract structural and universalist explanations (as

exemplified by early theorising on patriarchy); to allow for multiple identities to cross cut gender and gendered experiences; and to regard the exercise of 'choice' as mediated by structural constraint.

Flowing from this broad theoretical underpinning, Chapter Two discussed the contemporary empirical and theoretical contexts relevant to the micro level of the study. In particular, the discussion showed that in order to understand women's trade union participation, it is necessary to study the contexts in which prior and emerging orientations and identities express themselves through actions and behaviours. Thus the analysis established the importance of situating women's perceptions, actions and experiences in the three interlocking contexts of work, family and union. The possibility for women to act in ways which either reproduce or challenge existing social patterns and forms was evident.

The analysis of historical literature and documentation presented in Chapter Three revealed the longstanding existence of women's inequality in the union context, thus linking past and present experiences. The history of women's challenge and resistance to external and internal exclusion via various forms of women's separate organising (Boston 1987; Cunnison and Stageman 1995), places women as active agents from the birth of trade union organisation. The historical account provides a vivid illustration of the structural nature of women's inequality. However, it also demonstrates that social structures are unstable and uneven in their effect when viewed historically; that is women's inequality in unions is temporally persistent, but its forms and manifestations alter over time and can be destabilised by women's collective agency. This is evident from the experiences of the latter half of the twentieth century once women became more numerous and powerful within unions. In response to ongoing internal exclusion, women's separate organising evolved into a proactive choice of a new generation of trade union women influenced by 'second wave' feminism (e.g. Cockburn 1991; 1995; Colgan and Ledwith 1996). The qualitative, in-depth investigation presented in the thesis of experiences of one under-researched form of women's separate organising - women-only courses - and their impact and influence on women's union participation makes an original contribution to this growing body of literature.

Implications for research on women and trade unions

Before turning to the empirical findings of the research it is worth underscoring the contribution of the historical chapter (Chapter Three). As stated, there is only a limited historical literature on women and trade unions, but a dearth when it comes to women and trade union education. The thesis makes a contribution by tracing the development of women-only courses using both *primary* and secondary sources. Importantly, the analysis demonstrates the historically contested nature of gender relations in trade unions and writes women into the text as active agents directing the course of their own history in the movement. However, as stated, the historical analysis was meant to provide a backcloth for the contemporary study and was therefore limited, but importantly it calls for research, such as an oral history project, to fill the gaps in our understanding.

In the context of two male dominated trade unions – MSF and TGWU, the study offers insight into three interconnecting themes: the role of women’s separate organising, the social construction of women’s gender and union identities and the making of women’s union careers. These three themes are situated in their lived contexts; therefore the thesis also provides insights into the dynamics of workplace trade unionism. The first two themes are now prominent in the literature, while women’s union careers or their participation over time has received less attention. Further, these themes are often treated separately, as self-contained, in the literature; thus the original contribution the thesis makes is its treatment of the three themes as interconnecting.

The central site for exploring these themes was women-only courses. Education is a significant, but under-researched sphere of trade union activity, to the extent that from the literature we know very little about what unions are currently doing in education terms and why. The analysis of primary research materials in Chapter Five is then an important contribution to the literature. This analysis demonstrated that the two unions’ women’s courses have broadly similar aims, namely to increase women’s participation, but take somewhat different approaches, especially in relation to course content. MSF is more flexible in its approach to course content and emphasises the development of ‘personal skills’, which can be decontextualised from the trade union environment. TGWU on the other hand is more prescriptive about content and explicitly situates the learning in the union context, placing a greater emphasis on imparting information and knowledge than on

developing skills. However, in both unions women's courses are student-led, meaning that active student participation drives the courses, with tutors facilitating learning rather than teaching. The outcome of the student-centred pedagogical approach is that the *processes* of the courses are similar and that in practice the women shape the actual content of discussions to a very large extent. There is also no clear discernible union by union pattern of outcomes; i.e. it was not the case that the majority of TGWU women developed their union careers, while the majority of MSF women did not, as perhaps might be assumed from the former union's explicitly union-focused course content. As shown in Chapter Eight, the actual picture of outcomes was far more mixed and less union dependent, indicating that if the courses did have an influence the content was less important than the processes.

Thus, one of the interesting findings from the study of two male-dominated unions is that women's experiences and perceptions of the influence of women-only courses, and their experiences and perceptions of barriers, constraints and opportunities in the union context were broadly similar. As discussed in Chapter Four this influenced the decision to present the findings thematically, rather than union by union, although salient differences were underscored in the empirical analysis of the unions' educational offerings in Chapter Five and the women's course experiences in Chapter Seven.

Women's separate organising

The feminist literature on women and trade unions shows considerable interest in women's separate organising (e.g. Briskin 1993; Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Healy and Kirton 2000; Humphrey 2002; McBride 2001), because the strategy is regarded as key to developing what Cockburn (1989) calls a long equality agenda. However, the research focus is generally on the structures of democracy, that is self-organised groups (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Humphrey 2002; McBride 2001) and women's committees (e.g. Healy and Kirton 2000). Women-only courses are a weaker form of women's separate organising to the extent that they have no direct influence on union policy-making (unlike women's committees, for example) and therefore no direct impact on union democracy, which possibly explains the lesser academic interest in them. However, from this thesis it can be seen that the strength of women's courses lies in their potential to shape and strengthen

gender and trade union identities, which encourages women to develop union careers and then consciously or unconsciously influence the gender democracy project.

The literature review drew on Briskin's (1993) influential work, which attempts to produce a conceptual typology of women's separate organising. In summary, she argues that women's separate organising can be informed by a variety of different political approaches, classified as (i) ghettoisation, (ii) a deficit model or (iii) a proactive politic. According to Briskin, proactive forms of separate organising are preferable because they are more likely to contribute towards gendered transformation, because of the recognition that it is unions that must change, rather than women. Within this discussion Briskin (1993:96) positions some women's courses (those that aim to 'change' women by increasing their confidence and developing their assertiveness) as examples of a deficit approach because they send a message which blames the victim and assumes that being like men is the solution for women. Meanwhile, courses with a more feminist, politicised content (e.g. covering the history of women in unions, the family obstacles facing women), envisioning a transformed union movement, she places within the proactive model of separate organising.

The findings of this study show that in practice women-only courses are not either one or the other (deficit *or* proactive) in approach and content, but contain elements of both models. With regard to the deficit model, the research shows that women-only courses in the two unions do in some ways seek to 'correct' or 'change' women, for example, by building confidence and personal skills to participate. It is clear from the analysis that many women felt that the confidence they gained from the women-only courses could not be achieved in a mixed-sex, male dominated setting. Therefore they found the courses beneficial precisely because the constraint of the existing male dominated union hierarchy is a lived reality for women trade unionists (e.g. Cockburn 1991; Munro 1999; Rees 1990), which they need to learn to cope with before they will be in a position to challenge it. However, irrespective of the unions' intention to educate women to fit in or cope with the male-dominated context, the fact that the women gained personal resources such as confidence and knowledge, undoubtedly increased their sense of self-efficacy and in many cases appeared to influence the orientation of their participation and involvement. Many women went on to develop alternative, transformational approaches to trade union work and to challenge the masculine hierarchy's control of agendas and practices. Thus

indicating that the outcome of what might be deemed a deficit approach to educating women could be more radical than Briskin (1993) implies and more so than the unions intend. This is because separate organising cannot be understood as something unions do to women; it is a dynamic set of practices women actively shape and engage in and is therefore likely to be temporally and spatially sensitive. The implication then is that any single form of women's separate organising might be informed by more than one political approach and therefore that attempts to classify might in practice be futile.

The analysis has shown that the courses in MSF and TGWU also contained elements of a more proactive model. As Munro (2001) has noted, the dominant union discourse presents a limited range of issues as appropriate union business. In contrast, this research shows that discussions in the women-only educational setting take women physically, symbolically and intellectually, away from this limiting environment and provide a space where 'women's issues' can be legitimately privileged (see also Healy and Kirton 2000) and to which they bring their own gender-specific knowledge. Also the fact that many women consciously chose women-only courses over mixed-sex ones suggests a proactive approach on their part, that is women were not shunted off to women-only courses by male officers eager to 'correct' them. Women perceived the courses not simply as a shelter from the male-dominated context, but as a space where they could define 'the rules of the game' (as with other women-only spaces, e.g. Parker 2002). Thus, to some extent the women's participation in the courses represented a vote in favour of separatism for its own sake, although this did not point to their unwillingness to be involved in mixed-sex forums in the wider union.

The thesis has focused on the social processes rather than the content of the courses (although of course this is a question of emphasis), because from observation and interviews it was clear that it was the social processes that had the most profound effect on the women. Young's work (2000) provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the salience of the social processes of the women-only space of the courses. The analysis showed that in the context of the courses, the women invented what could be termed female-defined 'rules of the game'. This involved what Young (2000:56) has called more 'inclusive modes of political communication', including storytelling and expression of emotion. The significance of this is that this mode of communication constituted a form of consciousness-raising, from which it was clear that participants built

a gendered understanding of their lived experiences as socially constructed and constrained. Deployment of a gender-conscious vocabulary enabled the women to express collectively their feelings about the male dominated context, for example, frustration, anger, bewilderment, etc, without undermining their sense of self and without blaming themselves. This was an empowering process because it politicised many of the women as they came to understand the social and cultural sources of their inequality. It also encouraged many to believe that they could gain control over their own lives as well as influence their collective social conditions, through union participation. In essence the women-only courses helped many participants learn to value themselves as women because their gender identity was not questioned or secondary to their trade union or class identity, as it often is in other union forums. Thus the courses were empowering because women gained authority to speak for themselves, an authority born of knowledge and confidence, which was taken forward by many women into their union, paid work and family/marriage careers.

The analysis has shown that the women had overwhelmingly positive experiences of women-only courses, although many held ambivalent views of women's separate organising as a general principle (echoing other research, e.g. McBride 2001). This suggests a degree of discomfort with wider women's structures (particularly, although not uniquely among TGWU women), possibly influenced by anti-feminist discourses, masculine constructions of union solidarity and strong class-based union identities. Thus, support for women-only courses, a relatively weak and institutionally powerless form of women's separate organising cannot be taken to indicate support for more radical, influential forms, because it poses no direct or immediate threat to the traditional union *modus operandi*. Its power lies in what the women collectively and individually take from the course and how and if they subsequently use the sense of empowerment over time to alter union cultural practices. The nature and development of their union and gender identities is key to this.

Women's gender and union identities

The interest in this study in 'identity' was not as a self-contained concept, or for its own sake, rather in using it analytically as a means of exploring the identity formation processes of the courses, and for understanding and explaining the dynamics of women's union

participation. Congruent with this objective identity was conceptualised as mediated by context; that is individuals choose to privilege different identities in different contexts, plus different identities are more or less salient in different contexts (Bradley 1996). For example, women who in the wider union context appeared to privilege their class identity, emphasising their solidarity with *all* union members, were comfortable with privileging their gender identity in the context of the women's courses. Indeed, the interviewees in the study are heterogeneous in terms of a range of demographic characteristics and one objective was to explore how a diversity of female life experiences and crosscutting identities influence the social construction of women's union participation.

It is clear from the analysis that the courses attempt to strengthen the women's *union* identity, so that they will want to participate and will see that participation could confer collective influence on the general conditions of working life. However, it is not clear that the courses explicitly seek to develop more politicised *gender* identities, although as indicated above, this does not mean that this is not the outcome. As with any educational process, especially student-centred pedagogic approaches, the providers and educators cannot entirely control the impact on learners individually or collectively. Indeed, the analysis of the providers' and educators' objectives revealed potential tensions surrounding the question of whether class-based union and gender identities are complementary and mutually reinforcing or whether they are opposing.

The analysis shows that most women's union identities had strengthened following the course, when a strengthened commitment to the union and actual participation are taken as indicators. Further, many women's gender identities shifted following the course, so that many were conscious that they had developed a heightened awareness of women's inequality and its social causes. Through the narratives they told about their own lives during the courses and the knowledge they gained about women's position in society, many women came to see that they did count. Thus the courses constituted a safe space in which women could discover and re-discover their gender identities and recognise how this knowledge could become a powerful resource.

Activating a union identity is important to the extent that collective identification might promote/sustain participation (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996; Kelly 1998). Alongside this, activating a politicised gender identity might promote a critical stance that could encourage

women to challenge the gendered cultural practices of local trade unions in pursuit of the gender democracy project. Equally a politicised gender identity might alienate women from masculine biased union politics and organisation. However, it is important to emphasise that class-based union and gender identities are not always experienced as opposing or irreconcilable; rather it is a question of what underpins women's orientations and drives their actions in context. In this regard a number of issues emerge from the study.

First, it was apparent that more than one identity could be politicised, providing in Bradley's terms (1996) a base for constant action. For individual women, the lived experience of being, for example, a black, disabled or working class woman cannot be separated into different identity affiliations, where one might be privileged over another. It is evident that the women experienced an articulation of gender, class and race identities, rather than an additive disadvantage, pointing to the simultaneity of oppression on different grounds (Brewer 1997). However, it was also clear that a strong class-based identity could come into conflict with a gender identity, particularly when the industrial relations context is hostile and there is a feeling of needing to 'stand together'. Further, the analysis shows that taking a perspective of gender, race and class as interwoven prevents women's experiences from being essentialised and provides vivid illustrations of the heterogeneity of female lives.

Second, active and politicised gender identities became survival mechanisms for many women, imbuing them with a sense of greater power achieved through adopting a more structural explanation of women's inequality, rather than an internalised one, but one where their individual and collective actions could have an impact. Thus the courses did not simply produce a greater awareness of female 'ways of being'; rather the courses showed how women's 'realities' and women's agency could become a powerful resource with which to resist and challenge the gendered union hierarchy.

Third, it was significant that only a minority of women self-identified as feminists and this shaped, although did not determine the nature of their gender identity. For example, feminist women were more likely to have politicised gender identities, which informed the nature of their union identity and their more critical orientation to trade union policy and practice. However, feminist women were also less likely to see their class and gender

identities as clashing. Meanwhile, non-feminist women often had active, but not politicised gender identities, typically privileging their class-based union identity. Whilst these women were happy to criticise men in general, they were less happy to criticise fellow male trade unionists. All the women were conscious of women's collective inequality, agreeing that unions needed to tackle 'women's issues', but many had stronger and more politicised class-based union identities. This meant that many women were uncomfortable with the idea of *privileging* 'women's issues' in the wider union environment, even if they had found it a useful experience in the course context.

Fourth, the women's courses tend to present a limited range of 'women's issues' as salient to women's collective lived experiences, which is bound to exclude some women and some 'women's issues'. The courses tended to emphasise the material base of women's gender identities and a fairly traditional women's agenda; for example the gender pay gap, maternity pay, childcare etc. Whilst this undoubtedly politicised some women, it is a fairly narrow perspective and does not take adequate account of the diversity of women's subjective lived experiences based on other crosscutting identities such as age, race, class and sexuality. It is an approach which is therefore rightly subjected to criticism on grounds of its neglect of, for example, older women's concerns, lesbian issues, etc. At the same time it kindled a sense of injustice, which provided a basis for mobilising.

It is clear from this and other research (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 2002; McBride 2001) that for women collectively to challenge unions and to press for more action on women's internal and external inequality at workplace and branch levels involves their gender identities becoming politicised and a more constant base for action (Bradley 1996), but not necessarily at the expense of their class-based union identities. With regard to the role of women-only courses in this, the findings suggest that there would need to be a clearer agenda on the part of the unions and the tutors that this was the goal, so that a more politicised course content could be developed. At present, the *processes* of the women-only courses are on balance more important to the formation of the women's gender identities than the content. In summary, there would need to be a greater (feminist?) political will to develop a curriculum linking women's practical concerns with more strategic feminist approaches to challenging the existing gender hierarchy in the unions. Of course, even then, it is far from inevitable that women would adopt feminist strategies

in their daily lives, but such an approach might enhance their ability to be more knowledgeable agents and open up more perceived 'choices'.

Women's union careers

This study offers gendered qualitative insights into routes to participation and how women's union careers develop by examining in detail the social contexts in which women take the decision to participate and then how their careers unfold over time in those contexts. These insights make a useful contribution because the industrial relations literature often downplays the salience of gender when examining routes to and triggers for participation and involvement (e.g. Kelly 1998; Waddington and Kerr 2002). Further, although there is a limited literature on trade union careers (e.g. Kelly and Heery 1994; Watson 1988), this has focused on male careers. Whilst this might be justified to the extent that men dominate, especially in paid positions, the gendered construction of union careers tends not to be problematised (e.g. Ledwith et al 1990; Watson 1988). In contrast the thesis reveals that women's union careers are far more complex than masculine linear models suggest.

With regard to the influences that pushed and pulled women into union membership/participation in the first place, whilst the majority of interviewees were from non-union family backgrounds, after the women's schools most had intended to sustain or develop their trade union participation. Thus the influence of significant others and experiences in the union and workplace, combined with the influence of the women's schools were overall more important than family influences. That said, five of the seven women from union-minded backgrounds sustained or developed their participation over time. Thus, although the picture is mixed it does point to the fluid and emergent nature of union identities as not entirely fixed by prior beliefs and values, but shaped by work, union and family contexts. It also highlights the way that various interventions, such as women-only courses and other experiences of unions can fashion orientations to participation.

Most of the interviewees embarked on the courses intending to become or stay active in their unions and the courses appeared to have a significant positive impact on their union and gender identities, but not all the women sustained or developed participation over time. How could this be explained?

First, the group of nine women whose union careers were 'stunted': their stories uncover the complexities of women's lives and the fact that personal, work or union contexts frequently interfere with the intention and willingness to participate becoming actualised. This did not mean, however, that the women-only courses had had any less profound an effect on these women than on those who developed their union careers. In fact some of these women felt so empowered following the course that they felt able to take greater control of their lives as individuals. This involved moving to what they considered to be better employment opportunities, rather than leading to stronger collective identification and therefore increased union participation. In other words once more choices open up to women, they do not necessarily jump in the 'right' direction from the point of view of the unions. This is of course paradoxical given that the primary intention is to empower women to participate in the unions.

Another significant and ironic finding was that this group largely comprised 'atypical' women (meaning childfree, partner free) with few domestic constraints, who according to existing literature are most likely to participate (Colgan and Ledwith 1996; Kirton and Healy 1999; Lawrence 1994). This then stood in contrast to other studies, which tend to emphasise motherhood and the burden of domestic labour as major barriers to women's participation (e.g. Lawrence 1994; Walton 1991). In this research the structure of women's employment and trade union culture emerged as more important determinants of participation patterns, and more significant barriers, than the gendered division of domestic labour. It has to be acknowledged though that the division of domestic labour is to a large extent negotiable within individual households, whereas, as the study shows, an individual woman has greater difficulty acting on embedded gendered power relations within the workplace and union contexts.

Nevertheless, the stories of these nine women underscore the fragile nature of women's participation, which can easily be broken by constraints imposed (perceived and actual) by work, union, home and family. In short, the study demonstrates that women's relationship with trade union participation is complex, dynamic and fluid and likely to alter over the life course, but not necessarily in ways advanced by, for example, Cunnison's (1987) overly simplistic three-phase model with its emphasis on the constraints of child rearing. This thesis shows very clearly that women make their own union careers, but the choices and

opportunities are mediated by structural, ideological and cultural barriers found within the union, work and family contexts.

What can be learnt from the stories of the fifteen women who developed their union careers over the two-year period of the study? One of the surprising and important findings of this study was the high level of sustained involvement of mothers in the 'right' conditions, which were unionised employment, an encouraging and enabling local union culture, a morally and practically supportive partner/family. However, lest we become too optimistic about the changing nature of gender relations in the home, many of the women, especially mothers, in the study complied with the prevailing household gender regime by becoming more organised and efficient such that trade union participation seldom intruded into the domestic domain. To emphasise, many of the women talked about how 'lucky' they were to have partners who 'helped' them in the home and family.

Turning to consider whether women acted on the existing union structures to transform them or to reproduce them, the picture was mixed. Layder (1993:91) suggests that 'social forms are reproduced over time because people generally replicate the habits, traditions, rules and stocks of knowledge that sustain these social forms in the first place'. This is a somewhat pessimistic outlook for feminists seeking social change. However, as Layder (*ibid*) goes on to say 'social production takes place at the same time as social reproduction' because of the efforts of the participants involved. This points to the possibility in the context of this research of women breaking the vicious circle of gender inequality through their own individual and collective actions. There were many examples of women using their positions, power and influence to alter union practices, arrangements and agendas, but there were also some examples of the women simply complying with and unwittingly reproducing existing ones.

The study leaves no doubt that contexts structure choices and influence behaviour regardless of the strength of identity positions. The qualitative nature of this research allowed a deeper understanding of the contexts, which framed the participation and identities of the interviewees. The conclusion, which must be drawn, is that the interviewees' union participation is grounded in the particular conditions of the specific workplace, union and family circumstances of each woman. In this respect, the level of participation of the interviewees is worthy of comment i.e. most privileged their

participation at workplace/branch level, although some did participate in regional and national structures. The analysis showed that their priorities were a function of individual decision-making in the context of the perceived and actual barriers and constraints, underlining the structure-agency dynamic and the possibility for agency to both reproduce and transform.

In exploring the women's union career trajectories over time, union participation as an alternative career emerges very strongly. This is a theme neglected by the literature, which emerges in this study largely because of the multiple and life history interview method. In this regard, the intrinsic value of participation is emphasised by the women in this study, challenging the thesis that people participate largely for instrumental reasons (e.g. Klandermans 1992). Many of the women who developed their union careers over time were in relatively low level employment, which provided little intrinsic satisfaction. In contrast, their union careers represented an outlet for their personal abilities, from where they could influence the conditions of their working lives and command the respect of co-workers and management. Given women's concentration in low-level employment, there is a gendered dimension to the phenomenon of union as alternative career related to the under-utilisation in paid employment of women's skills and intellectual resources, class-based occupational variation notwithstanding. For other women, who were partner free and free of caring responsibilities, the union was also an alternative to a family or 'marriage' career, where some found a satisfying social life. Finally, there were some women for whom union participation seemed to represent a parallel career. These were professional women who saw the union as a vehicle for pushing professional issues, especially for women (see also Healy and Kirton 2002). Thus the study highlights the importance of gendering the analysis of participation and the value of qualitative methodologies for unpacking different meanings attached to union careers.

Implications for methodology

This thesis makes a significant contribution to the generally gender-blind or gender neutral body of industrial relations research, not simply because it is about women, but also because of the methodological approach. Congruent with the feminist paradigm, Chapter Four told the 'story' of the research; something rarely seen in written accounts of research projects, partly no doubt because of space constraints in the published academic literature.

But, the usual impartial and objective representations of research methods also reflect an epistemological position, i.e. what is it worth telling the reader; what is important about the research approach and what is not? Research methods sections usually recount how many, where and when questions, rather than more fundamental ones. In contrast the thesis has attempted to write the methodology chapter to capture the processes and experiences behind the final artefact in order to give the reader a greater appreciation of how the research findings were arrived at and to incorporate the role of the researcher.

Researchers such as Kelly (1998) have called for a deeper analysis of the social processes of industrial relations, which fits well with the qualitative, interpretative traditions of feminist research, but is fairly radical for recent industrial relations research, which more typically has a positivist, quantitative orientation (Whitfield and Strauss 2000).

Quantitative social research has clearly established the objective fact of women's inequality in employment and trade unions, but it has not advanced very far our understanding of its persistence in specific contexts. In contrast this study's qualitative research methods employed within a feminist research paradigm, have allowed for a greater appreciation of social processes and of the interaction of structure and agency in the construction of women's union participation. The study therefore contributes to the growing body of feminist industrial relations research, which writes women into the text as active agents, rather than simply trying to answer 'how many?' and 'where?' questions, which large-scale quantitative studies tend to tackle.

With regard to methods, the research pivoted around experiences of women-only courses in two unions, which were investigated using observation, interviews and surveys, with the analysis contextualised using documentary evidence. Significantly, the use of a short 'snapshot survey', answered some of the 'how many?' questions relevant to the research and also provided attitudinal data from a larger sample. When presented alongside the interview data, the 'snapshot survey' data further illuminated the discussion and confirmed that the findings of the qualitative interviews are indicative if not generalisable. The primary analytical emphasis was on participants' pre-course union/gender orientations and forms of union participation, their experiences of the courses and the subsequent development of their union orientations and careers, which were explored using in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Thus the study was not about evaluating the courses, or about finding out what ‘actually happened’ (Layder 1993) on the courses. Rather, it sought to discover how the women interpreted their experiences and how they saw these as subsequently influencing their union orientations and careers. Here it is important to emphasise that the thesis voices women’s *experiences* and *perceptions*, but that perceptions do not equal ‘truth’ or ‘reality’. Importantly however, the research did find out ‘what actually happened’ to the women after the courses, something rarely attempted by research centred on courses, although again the emphasis was on how the women *perceived* the influence of the course. Methodologically, this is a far more difficult task than a straightforward evaluative approach, but also far more insightful.

The research focus on union careers meant then that it was important to study the women’s interpretations of their lived contexts, that is family, work and union and not simply of union courses. Again though, it is important to stress the intention to voice the subjectivity of the women’s multiple careers rather than try to unlock their objective circumstances and thereby the ‘truth’ of their careers, or the ‘truth’ of the influence of women-only courses. The research then addressed the gap left by studies, which assess the value of union courses to unions as organisations, (e.g. Miller and Stirling 1992) but neglect the value of courses to individuals as well as the (perceived) impact/influence of educational experiences on people’s subsequent development, behaviour and orientations. The focus on the latter also fits with the feminist research approach, which is usually regarded not simply as an academic endeavour, but also as a political and emancipatory project. In this thesis the voicing of women’s experiences has been central and it is clear that the interviewees had a lot to say that the unions could usefully learn from (discussed below).

The multiple interview approach is the feature of the methodology that most stands out being rarely used in qualitative social science research although recommended as an appropriate feminist methodological approach (e.g. Reinharz 1991). The qualitative research methods literature generally has little, if anything, to say about conducting multiple interviews and no recent qualitative examples in the industrial relations field were found, prompting the question of whether this is because it is an uninteresting exercise or one that is too difficult. From the experiences of this thesis and from talking to other researchers, it is assumed that the latter is the case. There were certainly practical difficulties involved in follow-up interviews. A particular problem was that a small number

of interviewees (five of 29) could not be traced and there were difficulties tracking down one or two others. Whilst there can be no simple solution to this problem, it is certain that an attrition rate (which is likely to get larger, the more time between interviews) must be built into the design of a multiple interview project. However, it is self-evident that research projects must be completed within particular time constraints.

However, the method provided a longitudinal dimension, which complemented the life history approach, adding a distinctive analytical perspective and was therefore worthwhile. It also undoubtedly threw up some intrinsically interesting experiences and insights. For example, the prospect of seeing interviewees more than once, means a greater emphasis on ensuring that the first interview is a positive experience; getting to know interviewees more than would occur in a single interview produces a qualitatively different kind of data. However, this is not important substantively for its own sake; whether or not multiple interviews are worthwhile depends on what is being studied. In the context of this research, it is clear that the method produces insights, which could not be achieved with a single interview and allows the study to fill a research gap.

In this regard, most studies on women and unions accord primary analytic emphasis to the democratic structures, rather than to the individuals within them. The former is of course important for the study of gender democracy and equality within unions, in so far as it helps us to understand how union structures function to exclude or include certain groups. However, it does leave a research gap with regard to the social construction of individual union careers, which are indicative of the culture of unions and therefore have collective implications for democratic process. That said, some studies have, however, revisited or studied over time union structures (such as women's groups or selected branches, e.g. Munro 1999; McBride 2001), but none have re-interviewed the same women to find out what happened to them; whether, how and why their union careers developed. In this respect the thesis constitutes a significant contribution to industrial relations research generally and to research on trade union women specifically. The life history approach and the interviews at two points in time allowed for an analysis of 'the unfolding nature of social activity over time and space' (Layder 1993:108) and for a deeper analysis of the social processes of industrial relations.

The richness of the data gathered concerning the women's unfolding union careers over a two year period was illustrated by the presentation of the more detailed stories of four women. This stands in contrast to the convention for qualitative research data to be presented thematically, possibly on grounds of space constraints. The conventional approach alone sometimes leaves a feeling that the reader has learnt very little about the individuals at the centre of the study, nor really gained a sense of the depth of the data gathered. Again substantively, this may or may not matter, depending on the topic of the research. In this thesis the four individual stories provide a deeper understanding of the development of the 'subjective career of the self' (Layder 1993:76) (the meanings and interpretations the women attached to their union careers), and how women *make* their union careers in objective ways, by overcoming barriers and seizing opportunities.

As well as having considerable strengths, the feminist research approach also threw up some challenges. For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, feminist research involves the researcher investing her identity in the research process and being prepared to give something back, which, whilst gratifying, is also enormously time consuming. For example, interviews often involved 'counselling' women about their work, union and education career opportunities. This underlines the importance of feminist researchers having a prior empathy with the interviewees and a prior awareness of the issues involved in researching other women within a feminist paradigm. Investing something of oneself can also be emotionally draining as indicated in Chapter Four, especially when the researcher is 'forced' to confront experiences and fears she would rather forget. This underscores the significance of interviewer and interviewee sharing the primary identity characteristic of gender: in other words it is highly unlikely that a man researching women would have had similar experiences, because the interviewees would have been less likely to 'open up' in the same way.

There were also some tensions and contradictions to deal with, created by the feminist approach. For example, feminist research exhorts researchers to position themselves as accountable to research subjects, to develop non-exploitative, non-judgemental relationships and above all to believe what interviewees say. However, the case study approach also meant that it was necessary to maintain good relationships with the organisations (especially the gatekeepers) by not for example publishing or saying publicly anything potentially harmful even though the research was not done *for* the unions. Thus,

sometimes there was a question of divided loyalties. For example some interviewees articulated legitimate criticisms of the unions as organisations or of individuals within the unions and it was necessary to develop a ‘side-stepping’ strategy to avoid undermining the interviewee’s opinion, but also to avoid engaging with criticisms, which could compromise good relationships with gatekeepers. It is not possible to find a solution to these tensions and dilemmas in every single circumstance, but it is important to be aware of the pitfalls of qualitative feminist research.

Implications for trade union strategy and policy

If unions are to continue to invest in women-only courses it is self evident that they must meet union objectives, which were broadly defined as increasing women’s participation. This was not always the outcome for this group of women: some women sustained and developed their union careers, others did not. It is clear that although the findings of a qualitative study can never be taken as generalisable, they are indicative. This could lead unions to question the utility of women-only courses. However, it is clear from the findings that women-only courses have an enormous impact on participants, which could be taken as a sign of their ‘success’, even without firm evidence to support the fact that they increase women’s participation, particularly if the broader purposes of trade union education are still valued.

From the research it is also clear that there is a case on educational grounds for women’s courses. Looking at the alternative – mixed-sex courses – the documentary evidence showed that women are proportionally represented among participants in MSF and TGWU. In practice though with small course groups, *actual* numbers of women participants can be very small indeed and it is not unusual for a woman to be a lone female participant on a mixed-sex course. This inevitably creates a gendered dynamic within courses, which as the reflective accounts of the tutors and students showed, acts as a deterrent for some women, hindering learning, particularly those who are less experienced trade union activists, and/or those who are unused to male dominated domains. All this is recognised by the two unions and provides an ongoing rationale for women-only education, which the unions’ directors of education and tutors marshal as an argument. However, it is also a reason for not seeing individual women’s attendance of women-only courses as one-off, or as a ‘stepping stone’ to mixed-sex courses (the TGWU position).

The findings indicate that even many experienced women prefer women-only courses and believe that they learn far more in the women-only space, suggesting that separate organising is a pro-active choice (Briskin 1993) on the part of many women, which they believe strengthens them individually and collectively.

Whatever the 'evidence', it is unlikely in the current internal and external climates that the unions would cease to provide women-only courses. Indeed there is widespread rhetorical policy commitment to the principle of women's separate organising in the trade union movement even though some members construct it as divisive (e.g. Greene and Kirton 2002; McBride 2001). Despite both male and female detractors, it would be a retrograde and risky step to dismantle the structures, which have given women voice and variable degrees of power and influence in the unions over the last twenty years or so. Doing so would send the wrong signals to women at a time when unions need women more than ever.

The complexities of the gender democracy/equality project inside trade unions and extending this beyond the 'show case' of the national executive is an ongoing project. Women's courses can assist by finding ways of attracting less experienced trade unionists and cementing the trade union and gender identities of the more experienced in order to sustain their participation. The 'snapshot survey' showed that the former goal is not being achieved at present in MSF and TGWU, where only a (substantial) minority of women's school students was new and inexperienced women. In addition, despite the apparent success of women-only courses in empowering many women to participate, the contexts women return to following the courses are critical in shaping their union career trajectories. Thus, this form of intervention will always have limited success in terms of sustaining and developing women's trade union careers, while there remain cultural and structural barriers in the sites of actual participation. It is clear that the unions need to develop ways of tackling this problem.

Reflections on the research design

The study was methodologically robust and rigorously designed, although there are ways in which it could be improved or could have been done differently. With regard to the design of the research, a comparison of women's experiences of women-only courses in a

female dominated and a male dominated union would be a useful and interesting project, because the social dynamics are almost certainly different in such contrasting environments. For example, in a female-dominated union, one might find *de facto* women's courses, which then might bring into question the purpose of women-only courses, especially among men and non-feminist women. As with any research project there are pragmatic considerations in the choice of organisations. For example, the decision to study two male-dominated unions was partly pragmatic and related to the existence of contacts, which secured access of the kind needed.

However, in terms of the contribution of the study, the two unions, particularly TGWU, are less well researched, especially with regard to women, when compared to the major female dominated union – UNISON, on which there is now a relatively large body of research (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 1996; 2000; 2002; 2002a; Humphrey 2002; McBride 2001; Munro 1999; 2000; 2000a). Therefore the thesis extends the investigation of women's union participation beyond the now familiar case study of UNISON and thereby adds a fresh perspective on the debates about women and trade unions. Nevertheless it would be useful to compare a female dominated with a male dominated union because some different arguments are marshalled for and against women's separate organising in female dominated, compared with male dominated contexts. It is also possible that the processes and outcomes of women-only courses in female dominated contexts are different and that the barriers, constraints and opportunities that shape women's union careers are also qualitatively different. This would of course be a separate and different study from the present one.

Further developments of the research could also usefully include a study of mixed-sex courses similarly designed to explore the social construction of men and women's union careers. This would complement this project, allowing for comparison of the women-only effect and adding to both empirical and conceptual knowledge. A more extensive quantitative survey of women's courses would also be complementary to answer more of the 'how often' and 'how many' questions that are raised by the research questions and to see if there are any broad patterns, which have implications for union policy and practice. This is particularly important if academic research is to have an impact on union policy and practice because unions (reflecting the dominant positivist orthodoxy) tend to believe

that research should 'prove something' and therefore they favour research involving large samples.

With regard to the research methods, as indicated above there are practical problems with multiple interview studies over time, which point to the importance of giving advance consideration to ways of keeping track of interviewees between interviews. For example, interviewees could be asked to provide regular diary updates, or they could be brought together as groups for discussion to create a sense of deeper involvement with the study, or they could simply be contacted by telephone or email at various intervals. It would also be interesting to follow up the women with a third interview, perhaps five years after attending the women's school to see how their union careers develop in the longer term, but this would certainly require a stronger strategy for keeping the interviewees on board. Of course as interesting as all this would be, these ideas are also problematic because of time and financial constraints for the researcher and the interviewees.

Final comments

The study has explored the social construction of women's trade union participation within the contexts of work, union and family and shown that various significant others, events, experiences and influences shape the contours and the paths of women's trade union careers. Women-only courses emerge as a significant event, experience and influence. This is an important finding of the research because significant experiences are usually assumed to be located at the level of the workplace (e.g. Kelly 1998; Morris and Fosh 2000; Watson 1988) often relating to the engendering of the feelings of 'them' and 'us' believed necessary for willingness to participate (e.g. Kelly 1998). The research has also uncovered some of the gendered social processes of inclusion and exclusion within the union context, which simultaneously and paradoxically herald and circumscribe gendered transformation. Women trade unionists and feminist authors have been talking for more than a century about gender inequalities within trade unions: from this study it looks as though this discussion will continue well into this century.

Postscript

MSF merger with AEEU

MSF merged with AEEU, the heavily male dominated electricians' and engineers' union, on 1st January 2002 – AEEU had ten per cent female membership compared to 33 per cent in MSF. At the time of the merger the AEEU had various women's structures in place including, a national women's committee, reserved seats on the executive committee, a national women's conference and women-only courses, and in this respect AEEU looked very similar to MSF. However, the dominant belief in MSF (gleaned from conversations with various officers and members) appeared to be that the merger would be detrimental for women and gender democracy and for a grassroots, participatory model of democracy generally, AEEU being a centrally led and controlled union. By the time the fieldwork for the thesis was completed in summer 2002, there were few signs of any merger effects; the union officialdom being more occupied with the impending leadership contest.

Impact on women's education

However, following reports of MSF's financial difficulties in the run-up to the merger, rumours circulated within the union and via the media (e.g. *The Guardian*, 22.9.00) that Whitehall College would close and (voluntary) redundancies of MSF officials would occur, leaving the new union largely in the hands of former AEEU officials. At present, this remains speculation, but what is known is that AEEU has two residential training colleges of its own and the now merged union may find at least one of the complement of three colleges, surplus to requirements. It also appears that AEEU take a different approach to education when compared with MSF. MSF provision constitutes a broad mixture of developmental courses and skills-based training. In contrast AEEU (according to an MSF education officer and confirmed by the union's representation of its courses on its web site) appears to place the emphasis firmly on didacticism (i.e. delivery of information) and skills training for shop stewards and safety representatives. Despite the uncertainty surrounding what lies ahead for MSF Section educational provision, in 2002 the provision remained unchanged, although because of financial cut backs 'Women's Week' was only held once, rather than the usual twice.

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Appendix One – Summary of Fieldwork

Year	Observation	Survey Work	Organisation Interviews	Participant Interviews
1999	TGWU National Women Members' School, October	1 st Survey of participants at TGWU National Women Members' School – 57 returns.	1 st Interview with Director of Education, TGWU , October 1 st Interview with Director of Education, MSF , November	First interviews with 15 TGWU women started in November.
2000	MSF Women's Week, June and September	1 st Survey of participants at MSF Women's Weeks – 37 returns.	1 st Interview with Education Officer, MSF , February. 2 nd Interview with Education Officer, MSF , July.	First interviews with TGWU women continued and completed by March. First interviews with 14 MSF women between October and November.
2001	TGWU National Women Members' School, October	2 nd Survey of participants of TGWU National Women Members' School – 42 returns.	2 nd Interview with Director of Education, TGWU , January Interviews with 4 TGWU tutors, October.	Second interviews with 7 TGWU women between May and July, plus telephone conversations with a further 5 women.
2002	MSF Women's Week, June	2 nd Survey of participants at MSF Women's Week – 30 returns.	Interviews with 3 MSF tutors	Second interviews with 7 MSF women between May and June, plus telephone conversation with a further 4 women.

Appendix Two - Tables of Biographical Information

Table One: Individual Biographies of MSF Interviewees¹

Pseudonym/ Union	Employment Sector	Occupation	Union Position(s)	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Marital ² Status/ Dependent Children	Highest Level Qualification
Kim/MSF	Manufacturing	Sales Manager	Women's Officer	38	White	Partner free/ none	HND
Susan/MSF	Insurance	Clerical work	None	36	Black/ Caribbean	Partner free/ none	HND
Barbara/MSF	Public/ Voluntary	Advice worker	None	35	White	Partner free/ None	Masters degree
Sarah/MSF	NHS	Speech therapist	None	43	White	Partner free/ none	Degree
Deirdre/MSF	Unemployed/ Disabled	Previously care worker	Branch chair	47	White	Married/none	SEN
Kate/MSF	University	Laboratory technician	Workplace rep, h&s rep	30	White	Partnered/ none	Degree
Elizabeth/ MSF	Union	Regional centre manager	Branch chair	56	White	Divorced, partner free/ none	'O' Levels
Fiona/MSF	Manufacturing	Clerical work	Workplace rep	34	White/Irish	Married/ two	'O' Levels
Afsana/MSF	Voluntary	Community Worker	None	35	Black/Asian	Divorced, partner free/ three	NVQ 3
Vera/MSF	NHS	Medical Officer	None	46	White	Divorced, partner free/none	Degree
Kamaljit/MSF	Voluntary	Sexual health trainer	Workplace rep	29	Black/Asian	Partnered/ none	Degree
Christine/MSF	Voluntary	Day centre manager	Workplace rep	38	Black/ Caribbean	Partner free/ one	Degree
Linda/MSF	University	Laboratory technician	Women's rep	48	White/Welsh	Married/one	HND
Helen/MSF	Manufacturing	Clerical work	Workplace rep	35	White/Irish	Divorced, partner free/three	'O' Levels

¹ Data from first interviews. By the time of the second interview the circumstances (e.g. job, union roles, family circumstances) had changed for some individuals.

² Unmarried women in live-in relationships are described as 'partnered' and this includes same-sex partners.

Table Two: Individual Biographies of TGWU Interviewees³

Pseudonym/ Union	Employment Sector	Occupation	Union Position(s)	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Marital Status ⁴ / Dependent Children	Highest Level Qualification
Mary/TGWU	Airline	Clerical Work	Shop Steward, Branch Secretary	53	White/ Irish	Married/ One	'O' Levels
Sally/TGWU	Airline	Clerical Work	Shop Steward	44	White	Partnered/ None	'O' Levels
Bernadette/ TGWU	Public/ Voluntary	Policy Officer	None	37	Black/ Caribbean	Married/ Two	'A' Levels
Judy/TGWU	Unemployed/ Disabled	Previously bus driver	None	36	Black/ Caribbean	Partner free/ None	'O' Levels
Delia/TGWU	Insurance	Clerical Work	None	32	White	Divorced, partner free/ None	'O' Levels
Mandy/ TGWU	Transport	Bus driver	Shop Steward	40	White	Partner free/ None	'A' Levels
Beryl/TGWU	Airport	Clerical Work	Shop Steward, Women's Officer	47	White	Married/ None	'O' Levels
Diane/ TGWU	Catering/NHS	Kitchen Supervisor	None	32	White	Married/ Two	Degree
Jane/TGWU	Transport	Bus driver	Women's Rep, Shop Steward	47	White	Married/ None	None
Hilary/ TGWU	Airport	Clerical Work	Shop Steward, Branch Administrator, Education Officer	32	White	Married/ One	Degree
Julie/TGWU	Local authority	Carpenter	Shop steward, deputy branch convenor	39	White	Partner free/ None	Degree
Evelyn/ TGWU	Voluntary/ advice centre	Advice worker	None	45	White	Divorced, partner free/ One	Degree
Melanie/ TGWU	Union	Clerical Work	Shop steward	30	White	Partner free/ None	HND
Molly/ TGWU	School	Secretary	Shop steward, h&s rep	48	White/ Irish	Married/ Three	'O' Levels
Suzanne/ TGWU	Manufacturing	Laboratory Technician	Senior shop steward	40	White	Married/ Two	HNC

³ Data from first interviews. By the time of the second interviews the circumstances (e.g. job, union roles, family circumstances) had changed for some individuals.

⁴ Unmarried women in live-in relationships are described as 'partnered' and this includes same-sex partners.

Appendix Three – First Interviews

Discussion of Questions and Full Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

At the start of the first interview, the woman was asked to complete a 'Biographical Information Sheet' (**Appendix Four**) which provided basic details and enabled me to avoid asking some potentially sensitive questions during the interview. Questions were also asked about the interviewee's paid employment including size of workplace and whether the union was recognised and about her union involvement, including any positions held. These questions were important for basic data gathering and generating an overall impression of the woman's union activism, but were also designed to get the woman talking and to relax her. Second, a number of questions sought to explore the interviewee's union orientation. Here, I was particularly interested in exploring the impact of 'significant others' and 'significant events' (Watson, 1988) and their gendered nature (Kirton and Healy, 1999). Following Lawrence's (1994) study of workplace activists I was also looking to explore whether the woman held any gendered understandings of trade unionism. Specifically, I wanted to build an impression of women's expectations of their union both nationally and locally and whether they felt more or less positive about the activities of their workplace or local union. This was seen as a relevant area of enquiry in order to build up a broad picture of the woman's motivation for attending the course.

Questions around experiences and views of trade union education

Next the discussion turned to the woman's experiences of trade union education. If she had previously attended courses, the woman was asked to describe these and say what she felt she had gained from them. The particularities of the 1999 or 2000 women-only course were then discussed. From this I wanted to be able to form a view of how and why the woman came to attend the course, her motivation and expectations, what she gained from it. I also wanted to gain a sense of any possible barriers such as her personal and domestic situation or problems around paid time-off from work. Further I sought to gather the women's views of women-only trade union education in general based both upon their attitudes and recent experiences. In this I was influenced by the body of feminist literature (including, for example Beale, 1982; Briskin and MacDermott, 1993; Cockburn, 1991, 1995; Cunnison and Stageman, 1995;), which argues for women's separate organising.

Questions about experiences during the course

This area of questions involved the interviewee providing examples and illustrations of her in-course experiences. This often elicited some useful detailed recounting of events and it was possible from these to construct a picture of the shared learning that takes place in the trade union classroom as proffered by contributors to the Trade Union Studies Journal in the 1980s, such as Elliot, Beale and McIlroy. The focus on the women-only environment would allow this discussion to be gendered.

Questions about experiences in the workplace and union

Here the intention was to situate the woman's experiences of women-only trade union education within a broader workplace and union context in order to ascertain where the experiences might take her. I was interested in the nature of the local or workplace trade union and the possible roles for activists within it, as well as the woman's own goals and sense of barriers and constraints to their fulfilment. In a broader sense I was also interested in the nature of workplace unionism in order to explore the renewal thesis as founded on participation at workplace level (e.g. Fairbrother, 1996; Fosh, 1993).

First Interview Guide

Introductory questions

- 1) Could you tell me:
 - (a) Your job title and sector, size of workplace, is the union recognised?
 - (b) Length of TU m' ship, do you normally attend union meetings? How would you define a union activist? Would you describe yourself as active?
 - (c) Your union post (if any) and length, sector(s) you represent, rough estimate of sex/race composition of the m/ship you represent
 - (d) Whether you have held any previous union posts
 - (e) What committees, etc are you involved in
- 2) Could you tell me
 - (a) Why you are a union member?
Probe: belief in unions, for support in the event of a problem, etc
 - (b) How you first came to be interested in trade unionism?
Probe: family background
parents' occupations
educational background
workplace triggers
political beliefs
feminist beliefs
 - (c) What you think unions are for? What should unions' priorities be?
 - (d) What priorities would you say the union has at your workplace
 - (e) Do you disagree with prioritising these issues?
Probe: how important is it to pursue gender equality goals?
 - (f) Do you think these priorities are reflected in your union' s policy and agendas?
 - (g) What would you say makes a good shop steward?
 - (h) What do you think a good shop steward should do?

Experience of trade union education

- 3)
 - (a) What union courses have you attended in the last 5 years?
 - (b) Broadly speaking, what do you think you' ve gained from TU courses?
Probe: any links with activities outside the union e.g. community groups, politics?
 - (c) How do you think TU courses help you to do your job as a steward/rep?
 - (d) Why did you choose this particular course?
 - (e) If the course was women-only, would you attend a women-only course again?

- (f) If it was mixed, would you be interested in women-only courses?
- (g) What did you expect to get out of it? Did it meet your expectations?
- (h) What was the most important thing you got from the course?
- (i) What difference will the course make to the way you carry out your representative duties, or to the way to think of the union and its role? Can you give any examples?
- (j) Do you plan to attend any other TU courses in the near future? Which courses will you choose and why?
- (k) How did you hear about this course? Did anyone (if so, sex and role) in the union encourage or ask you to attend?
- (l) Did you get paid time off to attend? (where relevant) Is it generally possible for you to get paid time off for union courses? What are the problems in getting paid time-off for members in your workplace?
- (m) Do you have to make any special domestic arrangements to attend?
- (n) Do you have a partner and/or children? Are they supportive of your union activism? Do you ever discuss it with them?
- 4) (a) Did you know anyone else on the course?
- (b) Did you get to meet new people/activists? Who were they? Where were they from?
- (c) Will you keep in touch? Do you envisage meeting up again?
- 5) (a) What's your view of women-only courses?
- (b) What can they be expected to achieve?
 Probe: encouragement of women activists
 'Voicing' of women's issues
 Creating a women's or feminist agenda, building solidarity among women working towards changing union culture
 'Safe space' - issues around women's confidence to participate, speak up as and for women, mutual support, breaking down isolation, etc
 Dealing with mainstream issues in a safe environment
- (c) Can you give any examples of these things from this course?
- (d) Do you think there are any differences in the behaviour and conduct of participants and tutors on women-only courses when compared to mixed courses? Why do you think this is?
- (e) What are the disadvantages of women-only courses?
 Probe: risk of dealing with women's issues only on these courses, can the diversity of women be addressed?
- (d) Do you think other women members you know would be interested in attending

women-only courses? Would you encourage them to do so?

(e) What do you think were the main messages of the course? Which parts did you find most and least useful?

Experiences/perceptions during the course

- 6) (a) How would you rate the level of participation?
High, medium, low?
Did everyone participate?
Were some participants more vocal than others, in your view?
What did the tutor do to encourage participation?
- (b) Would you say that students supported each other? Can you give any examples?
- (c) How did you feel at the end of the course?
- 7) Improving women's union education
(a) Is there anything you think the union could be or should be doing to improve the provision of women's union education?
Probe: more women/black tutors?
More weekend courses
any childcare issues
more locally based courses
any types of additional training you would like to see for women?
- 8) (a) Are you aware of any policies, strategies or campaigns your union has on women's/equalities issues? How valuable are these?
- 9) (a) What do you see as the main barriers to gender equality in the union/workplace?
(b) How can union education help surmount these barriers?
(c) In your view, is union education contributing to this aim at the moment?
(d) How would you rate union education compared to mgt training in the equalities area?

Experiences in the workplace and the union

- 10) (a) Have you experienced any form of discrimination or harassment at work or in the union?
(b) Have any of your members reported such experiences to you?
(c) Would you personally deal with such cases, or would you pass them on?
(d) How has your participation in union courses helped you to deal more effectively with such cases? Can you give any examples?
- 11) (a) Is there an EO policy and joint Equal Opportunities Committee at your workplace?

- (b) Are union members consulted on EO issues in some other way?
- (c) Has the union had any input in the EO policy?
- 12) (a) Has your local union shop/branch ever organised meetings around EO issues?
- (b) What has been the membership response?
- (c) Do equalities issues get raised at union meetings? By whom?
- (d) Has attendance on union courses encouraged you to raise EO issues? Can you give any examples?
- (e) Do other issues drown EO issues? Eg?
- 13) (a) Do you think change is possible? (i.e. can gender equality in the workplace and in the union be achieved?)
- (b) Can unions and union activists play a role in achieving change?
- 14) (a) How important do you think it is to have women represented among stewards/ reps, on union committees/delegations, among paid officials?
- (b) What special qualities/abilities do you feel women bring to TUs?
- (c) Do you think there are any differences between the way women and men approach TU work?
- 15) (a) What are your plans or aspirations within the union? Do you think you will get involved more?
- (b) Do you think you' ll try to move upwards? Do you think you' ll try to become a steward/rep or get onto the NEC, for example?
- (c) In an ideal world, is there anything you would like to do within the union, any role you would like to have?
- (d) What are the constraints facing you? Is there anything you think will prevent you from fulfilling your aspirations within the union?
Probe: home life, union environment
- (e) Finally, would you consider yourself a feminist?

Appendix Four – Biographical Information Sheet

Name:

Age:

Ethnic Origin/Race:

Disability:

Marital Status: (married, divorced, single, cohabiting)

Family: (number of dependent/adult children or eldercare responsibilities)

Highest Level Qualification:

Current Job/Occupation:

Appendix Five – Second Interviews Discussion of Questions and Full Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

These questions sought to establish if there had been any changes in the woman's work or personal circumstances. This was important in order to contextualise the subsequent discussion of the woman's present role(s) in the union. Using a response sheet (1), I also followed up one of the attitudinal questions from the first interview, which seeks to explore trade union orientations.

Questions about experiences and roles in the union

This part of the interview centred on exploring whether the woman had become more involved in the union since attending the women's school. Here, I was interested in whether the woman had kept her union roles and positions and/or taken on new ones. But, I was also interested in what the roles and positions actually involved and therefore examples and illustrations were sought and a response sheet (3) was used. I also revisited the woman's perception of barriers in the way of becoming (more) active, this time using open questions together with a response sheet (2). The broad theme underlying this line of questioning was that of gender democracy.

Questions about experiences of trade union education

If the woman had attended any courses since the first interview, these were discussed. Questions looked at motivations, perceived benefits and outcomes and a response sheet (4) was used. I was interested here in whether the woman had subsequently chosen women-only courses or mixed courses and what the experiences of these had been. If the woman had not since attended any courses, the reasons for this were discussed. I was also interested in ways in which the woman perceived trade union education as contributing to the building of a union career.

General attitudinal questions

For the purposes of gaining a broader understanding of the woman's politics and views, a number of closed, general questions were posed. I felt this was important to a research approach which seeks to situate the lived experiences of interviewees in a proper context

and it was also important for building up a whole picture on the basis that 'the whole is more than the sum of the parts'.

Second Interview Guide

Preamble

Remind the interviewee what the project is about. Assure confidentiality and anonymity. Give a brief resume of the main themes arising from the first interviews: i.e. role of activist education in confidence building, networking, motivating, building knowledge. Explain purpose of the second interview. Mainly I'm going to ask open-ended questions, but I'm also going to show you some response sheets and ask you to tick boxes as appropriate.

Introductory Questions

- 1) Are you doing the same job and working at the same place as when we last met? If not, what are you doing now? (If the woman has changed jobs/workplaces, the questioning will move to discuss this e.g. where? Why?)
- 2) Has anything changed at the workplace?
Probe: relocation
Merger
New management
Union role/structures
- 3) Would you say that your attitude to your job and organisation has changed in any way since we last met?
Probe: more or less content/satisfied with the work?
More or less committed to the organisation?
- 4) Has anything changed in your personal or family circumstances since we last met?
Probe: care responsibilities
Partner – supportive?
House move
Access to transport
- 5) Last time we met I asked you what you thought unions were for. I wondered how you would answer that question now?

USE RESPONSE SHEET 1

Experiences/Roles in the Union

- 1) Have you become more or less involved in the union since we last met?
Probe: any new role(s)
Attendance at meetings
Reading union publications
Participation in committees
Voting in union elections
Attendance at courses or other union events
Taking part in industrial action

Has anyone encouraged or discouraged you from becoming more involved?
E.g. other union reps or activists, partner?

- 2) Have there been any barriers or obstacles to increasing your level of involvement?
Probe: work circumstances/management hostility
Family circumstances
Union circumstances/issues/culture
Lack of interest
Lack of support from other union reps/activists, e.g. how do you get on with other reps?

USE RESPONSE SHEET 2

- 3) If you're involved at branch or workplace level (or other level of the union), what difference do you feel you've made? Can you give any examples?
Probe: recruitment
Representing
Bargaining
Encouraging other women/activists
Voicing women's issues
- 4) Do you disagree with anything you see the union doing either at your workplace or nationally perhaps?
- 5) Thinking about your own involvement in the union, do you think anything about your behaviour or contribution has changed since we last met?
Probe: are you more confident at union meetings?
Are you more assertive with management?
Do you stand up for yourself more?
Are you more informed about taking up grievances?
- 6) How do you think your employer views (your) active involvement in the union?
Probe: general approval or disapproval?
Career opportunities in the organisation?
Any specific examples or cases?
How do managers react to you as a woman rep?
How much time do you get for union work and has this changed?
Would you say you have an open door with management?
Do managers know you exist as a rep?

USE RESPONSE SHEET 3

Experiences of Trade Union Education

- 1) Last time we met you said you did/didn't want to do more union courses in the future. Have you done any trade union courses since we last met?
- 2) Can you tell me why you chose those courses?
Probe: to gain understanding of new union role(s)
Legal developments
Networking opportunities
To gain more confidence in role(s)
Personal development/interest
The dates were convenient
Seemed interesting
Other union activist encouraged me
Because of workplace/members' concerns

Have you chosen women-only or mixed-sex courses and why was that? Were your experiences any different from the Women's School in 1999 (for T&G or 2000 for MSF)?

Or, why haven't you done any more courses?

Probe: paid time off

Family circumstances

No suitable courses on offer

Don't feel a need for any more courses

What did you get out of these courses?

USE RESPONSE SHEET 4

- 3) In the last round of interviews I talked with women about the barriers and limitations of current trade union education for women. These are the things they came up with: sidelining of women's equality issues in women-only courses, problems around childcare for women's attendance, communication within the union, and neglect of other equality issues. Do you have any views on this? Do you have any more recent experiences of women-only courses to draw on?
- 4) Learning the role or job of a rep/steward (or other) can also be done informally. What kinds of informal learning have taken place for you since we last met?
Probe: working alongside a more experienced rep/steward?
Being shown what to do by a more experienced rep/steward?
Attending meetings with someone more experienced?
Written information?
Women's committee meetings?
By doing/experience?
By listening to other reps' stories?
- 5) Last time we met I asked you if you had any plans or ambitions within the union – I'd like to ask you that question again.
Probe: if you're not a rep, would you see yourself becoming one in the next couple of years or so?
Involvement in women's committees?
Election to regional or national level committees?
Paid official?
Lay tutor? (for T&G women)
Attendance at conference or women's conference?
- 6) What kinds of union courses do you think might help you get you to where you want to be in the union?

General

I want to ask you a couple of questions for the purpose of getting a wider understanding of your views.

- 1) How did you vote in the last general election and how will you vote in the next?
- 2) I may have asked you this last time, but your views might have changed. Would you say you're a feminist?

- 3) It's about 18 months since we last met. Overall would you say that you now feel more or less positive about the union?
- 4) Is there anything else that you would like to tell me?
- 5) How have you felt about being interviewed?

RESPONSE SHEET 1

Trade Union Values – what would you say are the two most important values for you?

- equality/equal treatment for all
 - getting the best for members
 - fighting back/standing up to management
 - working with management for the benefit of all
-

RESPONSE SHEET 2

What for you are the three main deterrents to becoming (more) active in the union?

- concern with job/promotion prospects
- opposition from management
- not knowing what's expected
- union meetings are boring
- activism seems all or nothing
- the union is like a clique
- the union is dominated by men
- care responsibilities
- work commitments/workload/long work hours
- location of meetings
- time of union meetings
- lack of confidence

RESPONSE SHEET 3

If you're a union rep/steward, what is the nature of your contact with members in the last month?

- face-to-face at work
 - phone at work
 - by email at work
 - face-to-face outside work
 - phone outside work
 - at workplace/branch union meetings
 - via newsletter
 - via noticeboard
-

RESPONSE SHEET 4

If you are a rep/steward, what are the THREE main ways that you think union courses have helped you to do your job as a rep/steward?

- improved my negotiating skills
- improved my knowledge of legal rights
- improved my understanding of grievance and discipline
- improved my decision-making abilities
- improved my knowledge of equalities issues
- developed my organising ability
- developed my understanding of union structures
- developed my understanding of union goals and objectives
- developed my understanding of running meetings
- developed my problem-solving ability
- built my confidence to deal with managers
- other

Appendix Six – Interview Guide for Course Tutors

Background questions

- 1) Can you tell me something about your paid work?
 - find out about work history
- 2) How did you come to be a trade union tutor?
 - find out about union involvement

Your own experiences of TUED

- 3) Can you briefly tell me what kinds of TU courses you've done?
- 4) Can you describe how you feel you've benefited from participating in women-only trade union courses?

Views on women-only trade union courses

- 5) What would you say are the aims of women-only trade union courses?
- 6) Why in your view are women-only courses needed?
- 7) What kind of outcomes do you think can be expected from women-only courses?
 - for the women
 - for the union
- 8) What would you say is different about women-only courses when compared with mixed courses?
 - Behaviour of participants?
 - Course content?
 - Safe space?

The role of the tutor

- 9) What do you think makes a good tutor for women's courses?
- 10) How different is the experience of tutoring on women-only courses compared with mixed courses?
 - Examples?
- 11) What role would you say you have in building women's confidence to participate in the union?
 - How would you go about this?
- 12) Does it make a difference if the tutor is male?
 - In what ways?
- 13) Would you say you're a feminist?

Appendix Seven – Survey of Participants

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH LONDON Survey of TGWU National Women Members' School 2001

This survey is part of a research project being carried out by the University of North London. We would be very grateful for your co-operation in completing this short questionnaire. **Please tick the boxes provided.**

1. About yourself

1.1 Please describe your position in T&G by ticking the appropriate boxes

1 experienced representative/steward

2 recently elected representative/steward

3 member of regional committee

4 long standing active lay member (holding no office)

5 new/inexperienced member

6 other (please describe).....

.....
.....

1.2 Have you attended any other T&G courses in the last two years?

1 Yes

2 No

If yes, please list

briefly.....

.....
.....

1.3 How did you hear about this event?

1 literature/publications

2 word of mouth

3 it was compulsory

4 other

2. About this seminar

What purpose has this school served for you? (*Tick all the relevant boxes*)

1 built my confidence

2 provided me with an opportunity to 'network'

3 deepened my understanding of women's position in society

4 given me practical suggestions for improving things for women at work

5 other (please describe).....

.....

3. Your views on trade union education and equality

3.1 do you think women only schools are

1 essential

2 very useful

3 quite useful

4 not useful

5 divisive

Give brief reasons for your choice.....
.....

- 3.2 what is your view of the level of understanding of equality issues among *male* members of T&G
- 1 [] very advanced
 - 2 [] good
 - 3 [] quite good
 - 4 [] bad
 - 5 [] very bad

- 3.3 what is your view of the level of understanding of equality issues among *female* members of T&G
- 1 [] very advanced
 - 2 [] good
 - 3 [] quite good
 - 4 [] poor
 - 5 [] very poor

- 3.4 Trade union education plays an important role in challenging inequalities at work and in promoting equality.
- 1 [] Agree strongly
 - 2 [] agree
 - 3 [] disagree
 - 4 [] disagree strongly

- 3.5 Are there any other equalities or women's courses you would like to see T&G provide?
(Please describe).....
.....
.....

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please give it to the tutor. If you would be willing to be interviewed, please supply contact details below:

Name:

Address:

Telephone Number: (day) (Evening)

Appendix Eight MSF Course Programme Example

Sunday 24th September

- ⇒ Arrivals and registration
- ⇒ Refreshments
- ⇒ Welcome and introductions
- ⇒ Hot snacks

Monday 25th September

- ⇒ Paired introductions
- ⇒ Defining negotiation
- ⇒ Review of negotiating situations
- ⇒ The process of negotiation
- ⇒ Video presentation: *The Art of Negotiation*
- ⇒ Practising preparing to negotiate

Tuesday 26th September

- ⇒ Strengths and weaknesses of women in negotiations
- ⇒ Key areas of preparation:
 - Rights for union representatives
 - Using figures
 - Analysing the issues
 - Anticipating the other side's case
 - Planning a strategy

Wednesday 27th September

- ⇒ Video presentation: *Listening Skills*
- ⇒ Putting your arguments across
- ⇒ Threatening and non-threatening language and behaviour
- ⇒ Recognising signals
- ⇒ Individual styles of negotiation
- ⇒ The "Red Card"/"Blue Card" Game
- ⇒ Key lessons to be learnt from behavioural styles

Thursday 28th September

- ⇒ Getting ready to negotiate
- ⇒ Free time
- ⇒ Social evening in the bar

Friday 29th September

- ⇒ Group presentations in the plenary session
- ⇒ Closing session with Lucy Anderson, National Secretary Equalities.

Appendix Nine

TGWU Course Programme Example

Women's National Members School: Public Speaking Using the Media & Promoting the Union in the Community

Programme

Sunday	Session 1	5.30pm - 6.15pm All students in general assembly introduction to School and tutors Study group introductions Course aims and objectives
Monday	Session 2	9.00am - 10.30am Introductory Group Work Diana Holland: National Organiser for Women Race & Equalities
	Session 3	10.45am - 12.45pm Campaign Strategies Methods Used to Construct a Successful Campaign
	Session 4	2.00pm - 3.30pm Running a Campaign
	Session 5	3.45pm - 5.45pm Running a Campaign Activity (1)
Tuesday	Session 6	9.00am - 10.30am Principles of Effective Campaigning Pauline Doyle: T&G Campaigns & Communications Dept.

Session 7	10.45am - 12.45pm Public Speaking Techniques Activity
Session 8	2.00pm - 3.30pm Dealing with the Media Interview Skills
Session 9	3.45pm - 5.45pm 8 Dealing with the Media Interview Role Play
Session 10	7.30pm - 9.00pm All students in general assembly
Wednesday Session 11	9.00am - 10.30am Using the Media
Session 12	10.45am - 12.45pm What is News? Neil Duncan – Jordan Press & Publicity Officer National Pensioners Convention
Session 13	2.00pm - 3.30pm Working out a Media Strategy & Issuing Press Releases Activity

	Session 14	3.45pm - 5.45pm
		Panel Discussion All School in General Assembly
	Session 15	7.30pm - 9.00pm
		All students in general assembly
Thursday	Session 16	9.00am - 10.30am
		Running a Campaign Activity (2)
	Session 17	10.45am - 12.45pm
		Running a Campaign Activity (continued)
	Session 18	2.00pm - 3.30pm
		9 Making a Speech: preparation
	Session 19	Free study session
Friday	Session 20	8.45am - 9.45am
		Making a Speech
	Session 21	10.00am - 11.30am
		All students in general assembly: Presentation of Speeches
		Course ends