

# Transforming union women: the role of women trade union officials in union renewal

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*The article investigates the nature of the increasing involvement of women in the decision-making structures of the fifth largest UK union through a study of senior women union officials. It is argued that senior union women, operating within a feminist paradigm, balance both transformational and status quo objectives in working towards union survival and renewal.*

It is uncontested that union survival depends on widening trade unions' traditional recruitment areas to include the service sector generally and specifically to increase the proportion of women in trade unions. At the same time, trade unions have recognised that women are under-represented in union structures and steps have been taken to redress this imbalance through for example, reserved seats and proportionality. Notwithstanding such potentially transformative changes, union culture has been characterised as enduringly patriarchal. It is therefore timely to reflect on the impact of senior trade union women and the part they play in union survival and revival. In particular this article explores how union women operate within a feminist paradigm juggling both transformative and status-quo objectives.<sup>1</sup> Transformative<sup>2</sup> objectives are taken to be wide-ranging strategies to build a 'woman friendly' union. Status quo objectives are those which focus on the numerical strength and survival of the union in an essentially unchanged form. It draws on a qualitative study of the roles and activities of senior union women in the trade union, Manufac-

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of the article was presented to the 'Gender Work and Organisations' Conference in Manchester, January 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The article uses the term transformative to mean being capable of altering the character and nature of the union. To transform or transforming relates to the process of character change and does not imply revolutionary change nor should it be confused with the process of union renewal which may or may not be the outcome of transformation.

turing, Science and Finance (MSF). The relevance of the study lies in the importance of women to union renewal in the context of their increasing share of the labour market and indeed of union membership.

Recruitment is now an urgent and major priority for all trade unions. Overall union membership in the UK has steeply declined since 1979 from a peak of around 13 million members to seven, so that unions now represent only a third of employees (Labour Research: 16, 1996). The 1980s saw major economic and labour market restructuring with the heavily unionised, male dominated, manufacturing industries severely contracting and the low unionised, female dominated service sector rapidly expanding. Trade unions appear to have been at a loss to keep abreast with these economic and social changes and have thus far failed to recruit new members in sufficient numbers in expanding sectors to offset the losses in contracting sectors. This article is predicated on the assumption that unions are in a position to positively redress at least some of the decline in union membership via the extended recruitment and retention of women and explores how women union officials may be of consequence in this process.

Although women are still less likely than men to be trade union members, the rate of membership decline for women has been slower than that for men. The gender gap has narrowed from eleven percentage points in 1990 to five (Labour Research, 1996). Women now make up about 40 per cent of total (TUC-affiliated) union membership (EOR, 1997). Underpinned by the organisational imperative of survival, union recruitment policies and campaigns now tend to reflect the need to attract and retain, women members. If unions are to construct a new membership base in which women are pivotal, women workers will need both a *propensity* to unionise and the *opportunity* to join a union (Bean, 1985). In the case of MSF, the units of employment in the sectors the union organises remain relatively large. This facilitates organising and recruitment as the opportunity to join the union is likely to be quite strong.

Studies on union joining demonstrate the importance of the 'to support me if I have a problem at work' reason for both sexes, but men would appear to have a greater belief and wish to take part in unions than would women (Waddington and Whitston 97, Healy 97). However, Healy's study of teachers found a much higher level of 'belief in unions . . . for women and men (although still of greater significance for men than women) than was the case in Waddington and Whitston's study of a diverse group of unions. MSF membership is made up of white collar, technical and professional workers who may share many of the attributes associated with teachers, eg. high levels of education and awareness of trade unionism. Nevertheless, earlier research (Sinclair, 1995 and 1996) has found that women have a lower propensity to unionise because of their lower favourability to trade unions. It is thought that the male dominated, patriarchal nature of union power structures may impede efforts to recruit, retain and involve women (eg. Ellis, 1988; Cockburn, 1991; Heery and Kelly, 1988; Cunnison and Stageman, 1995) thus reproducing the notion that union business is men's business. These writers argue that unions need to create a 'woman-friendly' image, an environment that reflects women's values, concerns and needs and moreover Sinclair (1995 and 1996) argues that women's *experiences* of trade unions must be improved. This is a view echoed by Cockburn (1991) who argues that unions must be seen to serve women before more will join and remain members. It has been convincingly argued elsewhere that for a union to project a 'woman-friendly' image, women must be fully represented in decision-making structures and among unions' lay and paid officials (eg. Cockburn, 1991; Heery and Kelly, 1988); hence initiatives such as reserved seats and proportional representation for women. There is evidence in unions of feminist struggle to transform the masculine culture in order to 'let women in' (Cockburn, 1991; Cunnison and Stageman, 1995). This struggle 'is not between the powerful and powerless, but rather between the more and the less powerful' (Cunnison and Stageman, 1995:5).

The focus in this study on senior trade union women is therefore important since as activists and as women, they are potentially in a more powerful position to have a significant impact on patriarchal union culture. This raises the question as to whether

women's presence in leadership roles transforms union culture and thereby shapes bargaining and policy priorities and agendas or whether women's transformative agendas are curtailed by the dominant masculine culture and by the constraints imposed by the climate in which trade unions now operate. In other words, does the incorporation of women into union decision-making result in *transformative* or merely *status quo* survival? To consider this question, the article explores the way women officials recruit members and how they encourage women's activism and it examines women's bargaining and policy priorities. Finally, it discusses the women's reconciliation of their dual identities as trade unionists and as feminists (explicit or implicit) in their orientations to their roles within the union and the constituency.

## The study

The research draws on both qualitative and documentary data<sup>3</sup>. All 20 senior MSF women were invited to take part in the interview programme in the autumn of 1996. Senior union women were chosen as they are formally strategically well placed to influence union culture, priorities, policies and agendas to ensure that unions respond to working women's needs and concerns. Senior union women were defined as those with influence in the national policy and decision-making structures of the union and the term 'trade union official' is taken to apply to paid officials<sup>4</sup> and to lay members of the National Executive Committee (NEC). Four of the women were unable (although willing) to take part due to other commitments. Sixteen in-depth interviews were carried out. Nine interviewees were NEC members, three were national paid officials and four were regional paid officials. The interview method was chosen as the most effective means of exploring trade union women's experiences in depth and was consistent with a feminist methodology which aims to give voice to women (Roberts, 1981) and to understand their interpretation of the world of trade unionism. Thus the focus of the study is on women's subjectivist insights on their lived experiences as trade union officials.

These insights were placed in the context of the policies and structures of women's participation through the use of documentary data. These data were drawn from the union's women's structures including minutes of National Women's Sub Committee (NWSC) meetings, annual women's conference reports and the union's newsletter 'MSF women today'.

## The union

*Background.* MSF was formed in 1988 as a result of a merger between the unions TASS (Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Staff) and ASTMS (Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staff)<sup>5</sup>. In 1990 the Health Visitors Association (HVA) merged with MSF introducing an overwhelmingly female membership, which retains an independent voice on the NEC. MSF is the UK's fifth largest union with about 480,000 members. Women are an important source of new members, particularly for a union such as MSF, which has half of its current membership in increasingly feminised sectors and occupations. Women's share of MSF membership has

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<sup>3</sup> The data in the article were drawn from an unpublished MA dissertation undertaken by Gill Kirton at the University of Hertfordshire (Kirton 1997).

<sup>4</sup> The term 'paid official' has been used as an alternative to the conventional form of 'full-time trade union official' (FTO), a term which reinforces the belief that this is a full-time male job.

<sup>5</sup> Within MSF, there are two main political factions, UNITY LEFT, formerly the dominant faction in TASS and representative of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and MSF for Labour, which emerged from activists in ASTMS, representing the full political range of the Labour Party. Both factions support proportionality and reserved women's seats. As a result of the merger MSF for Labour is the dominant political force.

grown from 19 per cent in 1989 to 31 per cent in 1997/8 (see Table 1); some of this growth can be attributed to the HVA merger. The union's membership consists of skilled and professional people in services and industry and although it draws its members from both the private and public sectors, it is predominantly a private sector union.

*Women's structures.* MSF has much in common with other trade unions: in particular a domination of men in decision-making roles; a system of appointed and lay officials and separate women's structures. The union's NEC consists of regional and industrial seats and four seats reserved for women. The system of reserved seats for women was established in 1988. Women can serve only two consecutive terms in reserved seats. The idea is that once women are known as senior activists, they will have a greater chance of being elected into regional and industrial seats. Women fill eleven (32 per cent) of the 34 NEC seats demonstrating that MSF, among a minority of unions, has achieved proportionality for women on its central governing body. However, when it comes to paid officials the picture is more mixed. It is relevant to note that although MSF has achieved proportionality in its small, national level, paid official corps, where there are three women (about 30 per cent), the union still has a long way to go before women are proportionately represented in the much larger ranks of regional officials. However, there has been some recent progress towards women's proportionality among this group. Only nine per cent were women in 1996, but new appointments in late 1997 – early 1998 increased women's share of the (approximate) hundred regional official posts to 16 per cent.

In addition to the four (of 34) NEC seats reserved for women, MSF has a National Officer with responsibility for equal opportunities, national and regional women's committees and an annual National Women's Conference. Membership of the National Women's Sub Committee (NWSC) is open to women only on a regional and industrial basis. The NWSC was re-established and strengthened in 1989 following the merger with TASS: it is now a sub committee of the NEC whereas the former ASTMS women's committee had had advisory status only and therefore limited power. The NWSC's constitution and activities are, however, still subject to NEC endorsement, arguably representing a persistent form of patriarchal control. Table 1 shows women increasing as a percentage of NEC members from 1989 (the year after reserved seats were introduced) and after 1994 when the union's strategy for women's proportional representation was outlined in a document entitled 'Quotas for Women'. The strategy was formulated following a motion to Annual Conference proposed by the NWSC and sets targets for women's proportional representation on

Table 1: Women in MSF as members and activists 1989–1998

Year	Women members* N=	Women as % of members	Women as % of NEC	Women as % of TUC delegation	Women as % of regional paid officials	Women as % of national paid officials
1989	126,000	19	10	17	na	30
1990	140,000	21	21	25	na	21
1991	131,000	23	23	21	6	21
1993	147,000	27	24	33	6	22
1994	141,000	27	24	33	6	18
1995/6	130,000	27	32	29	9	33
1997/8	133,000	31	32	45	16	30

Source: Labour Research, various editions 1990–98

\*figures rounded up or down to nearest thousand

na – figures not available

NEC sub-committees and advisory committees, regional councils, branch committees and all conference delegations. The data in Table 1 suggest that the positive action strategy is having some impact.

The four members of the NEC who occupy the reserved seats for women represent the NWSC. It is these women who bring NWSC recommendations to the NEC and they thereby perform the function of mainstreaming women's equality structures by providing a direct link between the NWSC and the locus of power. Over the past couple of years the NWSC has been active around the issue of women's representation and has produced recommendations and guidelines on the recruitment and selection of paid officials and on women's representation on all union platforms. Union women's activism led to the increased status of the women's committee; thus the relative strength of MSF's NWSC exemplifies feminist efforts to give a voice to the female membership as an oppressed social group (Cockburn, 1995).

*Recruitment in MSF.* The union's strategy on recruitment is to return to a traditional 'member to member' organising approach 'using the methods which built unions in the first place' (MSF, 1996/7). Specifically this involves 'identifying leaders and educating them to recruit and organise in their workplaces and industries'. The strategy is supported with an educational programme aimed at lay activists. The programme emphasises 'worker to worker, one to one organising' and operates under the slogan 'every member a recruiter' (MSF, 1996/7). This strategy is consistent with the views of those who argue that trade union renewal will result from local trade union activism (Fairbrother 1996, Fosh 1993). Women officials and their inter-relationship with workplace representatives and members are key actors in this process.

The shift from a 'servicing model' to an 'organising culture' is consistent with the TUC's major New Unionism project (IRS 1997) and signals a new and concerted effort to tackle the problem of union membership decline. More recently (January 1998), the union has established a national level working party to develop a strategy to recruit and involve women. The group's mission will be to disseminate through the regions information on issues of concern and interest to women; to identify and develop 'regional experts' who will head local campaigns and to train local organisers. In support of this broad strategy, nine new organisers (of whom eight were women) were recruited in late 1997 to train MSF workplace representatives and assist them in their role of recruiting new members. The article now turns to the orientations and experiences of senior MSF women.

## MSF women

*Orientations to union work.* The women in this study were either espoused feminists or reflected feminist values in their beliefs; in Colgan and Ledwith's terms, they were vanguard women (1996).

Of the sixteen MSF women interviewed, twelve considered themselves to be feminist<sup>6</sup>, but interestingly during the interviews all MSF women displayed feminist beliefs and values. The woman's self-identified orientation to feminism is shown in the analysis when quotations are used. Half of the feminist group were paid officials and the other half lay; this left one non-feminist paid official and three non-feminist lay officials. Curiously, one of the two occupants of reserved women's seats described herself as non-feminist, indicating that it is not only espoused feminists who are prepared to use feminist practice to get elected to leadership positions. Non-feminists and feminists expressed differential views on union strategy. Nevertheless, they consistently supported strategies to achieve women's equality within trade unions whether or not they were self-identified feminists. For example, an overwhelming majority (15) of MSF women believed there should be special measures in the union to help women get elected to leadership positions and the same majority (15) would

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<sup>6</sup> A feminist is defined as 'a woman whose values, knowledge and understanding informs female 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).

vote for a woman in an election in preference to a man of equal ability. As with Colgan and Ledwith's study (1996), the women not only tended to demonstrate a feminist (explicit or implicit) perspective but also a broadly left political orientation to union work.

The literature is rich in identifying the constraints faced by women in trade unions. These include the inconvenient timing and location of union meetings, sexist language and behaviour, unfamiliar trade union jargon and procedures, a male defined bargaining agenda (for example Beale, 1982; Cockburn, 1991; Cunnison and Stageman, 1995, Rees, 1992), all of which are underpinned by a masculine culture permeated by patriarchy. Women's trade union activism is also constrained by traditional gender roles, which result in (lay) union women typically juggling three 'jobs': paid work, domestic labour, union activism. This is likely to be particularly problematic during the 'second phase' (Cunnison, 1987) of a woman's working life when children are young.

The consequence of these constraints is that union women, especially those in senior lay or paid official positions, are often 'atypical' (Ledwith et al., 1990; Cockburn, 1995). Most lay women in this study were 'atypical': that is they had no children or grown-up children, they were over 40 and they were in supervisory, management or professional full-time jobs. In this sense they conformed to the 'masculine' job model (of a senior trade union official) with a long, unbroken record of union activism and paid, full-time employment.

*Becoming active: significant gendered events and significant collective events.* Women's overall position in trade unions mirrors their position in the workplace, in particular their under-representation in decision-making roles. For this reason, it is important to consider the characteristics of the women who rise to senior union positions, their influences, their activism and the similarities and differences in their routes to activism.

Both paid and lay officials in the study had histories of prior local level union activism, for example workplace representative, shop steward, branch secretary etc. MSF women's entry into trade union activism conforms to Watson's (1988) model of activism as being influenced by 'significant others' and by 'significant events'<sup>7</sup>. Significant others featured strongly; the women typically came from family backgrounds with a leftist political orientation. For four of the women, the influence of significant others was so strong that they became active trade unionists in the absence of a significant event, it being the 'natural thing to do'.

In terms of significant events, we develop Watson's (1988) model further by suggesting that for union women significant events are often *gendered*, so that we can distinguish between '*significant gendered events*' and '*significant collective events*'. '*Significant gendered events*' often arise in the workplace where women are inspired into union activism by, for example, disputes with management around pay inequalities between men and women; by unequal treatment of part-time women, by the existence of sex discrimination and sexual harassment. Such events are likely to raise gender consciousness among women who may take the step into activism in the first instance by attending women's trade union educational events. '*Significant collective events*' on the other hand, lack a discernible gender dimension and these include arbitrary management action (for example dismissals, redundancies, disciplinaries) against colleagues.

Five interviewees became active because of '*significant gendered events*' and this group was more likely to be feminist. Interestingly, one non-feminist woman had become active because of a *significant gendered event*: unequal treatment of women and men in her (male-dominated) workplace. She had since attended women-only day-schools and found these highly supportive environments which spurred her

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<sup>7</sup> Watson (1988) provides a useful model of entry to trade union activism by classifying significant others as those who play an important part in raising awareness of the trade union movement, creating a commitment to it and predisposing those exposed to trade union activism; and significant events as those events which trigger union activism.

activism, but nevertheless did not wish to label herself a feminist. Among MSF women, seven were motivated to become active in the union by a 'significant collective event' such as those cited above. These women were both feminists and non-feminists. Not surprisingly, of the four women who said they were not feminists three were propelled into union activism by *significant collective events* and gender consciousness had not been the primary underlying motivating factor.

Further insight into senior union women emerges from consideration of a central aspect of their role, bargaining. The next section explores how women gender the bargaining process.

*Women bargaining for women.* Underpinned by the organisational imperative of survival (that is the need to attract women members), the argument to have 'pro-women policies' and 'women's issues'<sup>8</sup> included on national union policy agendas has been won, at least in white-collar unions or unions with a substantial female membership. Evidence of this can be found in abundance in union recruitment literature. However, the extent to which in the largely decentralised bargaining context of MSF such national union policy commitment is translated on to local bargaining agendas is arguably contingent on the commitment to equal opportunities of national and regional paid officials and of lay union officials involved in bargaining. There is empirical evidence to support the belief that women have different bargaining priorities to men. For example, according to a survey of around 3,000 new union members (IRS, 1994), women are twice as likely as men to support union negotiation of career breaks and three times as likely to support union backing for job sharing, reflecting the ongoing reality of women's caring roles. This reflects the different life experiences women bring to union membership and is exemplified in the following quotation:

Their life experience is broader than men's simply because of the role they're cast in as women. There's a very positive side to women's life experiences – it gives them a different perspective on tackling problems, in dealing with people. (Paid official, feminist)

This is not to suggest women and men do not also share bargaining priorities, for example the eradication of low pay. Bargaining priorities are also shaped by employment conditions, as highlighted by one MSF woman representing the craft sector. She believed there to be no clear distinction between women and men's bargaining priorities, arguing that low pay and health and safety are the most critical issues for all craft workers, overriding equality issues. It is true to say, however, that there are often gendered dimensions to seemingly traditional union bargaining agendas. For example, women and people from minority ethnic groups are over-represented in low paid and low status jobs and may be disproportionately disadvantaged by organisational change (see for example, Escott and Whitfield 1996, Wilson 1994).

Sustaining a gendered awareness of bargaining issues is a ceaseless aspect of women officials' work; one interviewee illustrated the relentless nature of this consciousness raising:

Women's issues are more likely to be raised where women are directly involved in bargaining. Lay union negotiators need constant reminding about women's concerns and particular problems. (Paid official, feminist)

This resonates with Heery and Kelly's work (1988, 1988a) which found that paid officials' bargaining and policy priorities reflected the gendered beliefs and values women bring to the union; that is where female paid officials are involved, bargaining agendas are not purely membership driven. Accepting that women and men's bargaining priorities differ, membership-led bargaining in male dominated environments is unlikely to pay sufficient attention to gendered workplace issues, for example, an interviewee argued that:

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<sup>8</sup> Pro-women policies are policies adopted by trade unions to address women's distinctive needs (Cockburn, 1995). Women's issues is a term commonly used as shorthand for issues of particular concern to women resulting from the roles they tend to assume in labour market and domestic spheres, eg. childcare, flexible hours, career breaks.

It's very difficult in a male dominated environment to get some men, not all, to understand women's way of looking at things. It's not just about negotiating a pay rise. I mean there are other issues such as childcare, flexitime, sexual harassment. You need to get these issues across to employers — it's not all about pay. (NEC, regional seat, feminist)

This woman speaks from experience of representing a male-dominated region and underlines the role senior union women play in drawing attention to women's issues in such environments.

As a group, MSF senior women provided a critical mass of support for the pursuit of women's equality initiatives in bargaining. When asked the question, 'Would you only vote for a union agenda which contained women's issues?' fifteen out of sixteen interviewees answered positively, providing further evidence of union women's commitment to ensuring women's issues are kept high on the agenda, and this irrespective of their orientation to feminism. In addition, half the women interviewed said they believed women's equality to be the most important bargaining issue in the union today. The importance attributed to women's issues on the union policy agenda was also evident in Colgan and Ledwith's study (1996:178). Paying greater attention to women's issues provides evidence that the union works for women (Cockburn, 1995) which theoretically will in turn lead to the union's ability to recruit and retain women members, thus creating a virtuous circle.

*Women recruiting women.* MSF women were asked whether they attached a particularly high priority to recruiting women members. Although the responses were mixed, they nevertheless demonstrated a considerable degree of activity around organising women as in the Heery and Kelly (1988) study. Women who represented female dominated workplaces naturally made women the target of recruitment campaigns, for in these circumstances high union density depends on the active recruitment of women. High density, in turn, enables the union to strengthen its bargaining power thus ensuring *status quo survival* and this was clearly an objective shared by MSF women. However, MSF women were also mindful of the necessity of meeting women's needs in order to *retain* women members, suggesting recognition of the need for *transformative survival strategies*. For example, one woman spoke of the need to ensure that women are not marginalised:

It's my job to ensure that material that's attractive to women is prominent in all our literature so that we're not marginalising women — for example we put a breast feeding woman on the front of a finance sector magazine. (Paid official, feminist)

This action had apparently caused a few 'raised eyebrows' among male colleagues, but the message was clear: women, mothers, are part of the union, part of the workforce and are entitled to expect visibility of all their roles.

Some women believed that their own gendered life experiences enabled them in their role as trade union officials to identify more easily issues of concern to women. One woman went further and said that because she had experienced discrimination and harassment she felt more 'highly tuned' to such issues and worked to raise consciousness in others:

I think my life experiences help me identify these issues. I continually ask members if they feel that such and such a problem is a race or sex thing — I think I provide them with an opportunity to look at things slightly differently. (Paid official, feminist)

Gender consciousness can imbue in women a sense of group solidarity, which can act as an important trigger to union activism, as was highlighted by the earlier examination of MSF women's entry routes into trade union activism where *significant gendered events* were shown to inspire activism. It is also the case that women's gendered life experiences may politicise and 'toughen' women activists leading to the structural impact of significant gendered events paradoxically creating the conditions where some women will adopt creative and transformational strategies to overcome and survive disempowering conditions:

I have experienced all kinds of discrimination when I was trying to build up my career and it's very difficult. You have to find a way of overcoming it and surviving and I think this helps you to become a good trade unionist. (NEC, industrial seat, feminist)

The above quotation also highlights the incremental nature of significant gendered events that are met throughout a career and how women may make adjustments that strengthen their collective resources; equally of course it is the incremental nature of significant gendered events that may disempower and disable women's agency, and specifically their activism.

Although most MSF women expressed a strong desire to spend time actively recruiting women, many also highlighted how the strong organisational imperative to 'recruit anyone' had risen to prominence as a result of the defensive position of trade unions in the 1990s. This to some extent constrained union women's ability to engage in a positive agenda to recruit women. In other words the organisational imperative of numerical survival may constrain gendered transformative efforts.

Nevertheless, one woman described her region's efforts to encourage women to attend union meetings:

We don't meet in pubs, we pay for childcare—all MSF branches are supposed to do that, but some don't tell the membership, they're just supposed to know, whereas we actively advertise it. We also arrange lifts to meetings for women without transport. Women can bring their children with them—some women don't want to use babysitters, they don't want to leave their children in the evenings—we go out of our way to let women know they can do these things, we don't rely on them asking. A lot of men around wouldn't dream of including these things on meeting notices, but you have to let women know. (NEC, regional seat, feminist)

This exemplifies women's greater understanding of women's needs and demonstrates how women are prepared to adopt strategies with the objective of ensuring that women's needs are met. It also contrasts with the practices of many union branches, which wait for individual women to make known their individual needs and thereby suppress women's trade union activism.

Perhaps the most important issue arising from the inquiry into women's role in recruitment was MSF women's strong belief that women place greater emphasis than men on recruiting new female activists:

As a woman, I'm keen to mobilise other women and get them involved. I don't think that can be left to men. (NEC, reserved seat, non-feminist)

I think that one important thing is that when you get one woman active, she will attract others to get involved. (Paid official, feminist)

Interviewees generally talked of being keen to identify potential women activists, support them and encourage them to seek election. The following quotation illustrates the resultant incremental nature of union transformation:

As a woman I feel it's important that there are other women coming up behind you, to take over later so that things don't go back to the way they were with men dominating everything. (NEC, industrial seat, feminist)

One of the ways of encouraging new women activists supported by MSF women was to promote educational events such as 'Women's Week' or 'Women's Weekend Schools', held at the Union's college in Hertfordshire. These events are promoted in the union women's newsletter 'MSF Women Today'. Attendance at a 'Women's School' had propelled at least two current women NEC members into activism, and they were keen to share their experiences.

Women's active role is supported by their presence as role models, viz.,

I think I've made a difference, even if it's only by being on the NEC, holding that position—it encourages other women. (NEC, reserved seat, feminist)

However, women officials also felt (to some extent) disempowered by the hostile climate in which unions now operate:

It's frustrating trying to get women active: it's seen as too stressful and they're worried about victimisation, about being seen as militant. (NEC, reserved seat, feminist)

This comment further demonstrates that efforts to recruit women activists need to be determined and sustained over time (Kirton, 1998). The difficulties involved in recruiting new activists concern not only issues external to the union, but also issues surrounding internal democracy, in particular the oligarchic tendencies of the leadership, which make it problematic for women to be successful in elections in male dominated branches/regions:

It's especially difficult for women to become senior reps, and workplace reps tend to remain invisible to the higher decision-making levels of the union. Senior reps get re-elected by default—people will continue to vote for someone they've put their trust in, so it's difficult for women to get elected. (NEC, reserved seat, feminist)

In these circumstances it is especially important for aspiring women activists to have the support and encouragement women officials provide.

*Confronting union culture: long hours, union government and networking.* The article now turns to the transformative objectives women have in respect of the features of union culture that disempower women.

*Long hours culture.* Horrell and Rubery (1991) argue that established patterns of working time might act to inhibit processes of desegregation, a view as relevant to trade unions as other organisations. Untypically, there were two women paid officials in the study with young children who provided insights into individual survival strategies and examples of feminist strategies of transformation. When these women were asked about the difficulties involved in combining motherhood with a job involving high level temporal commitment, one woman commented:

I drop my daughter off at 8am and unless I make special arrangements, I pick her up at 6pm. I'm disinclined to make special arrangements because I think she deserves some of my attention too. I think the job should be do-able by people with these responsibilities. I think I owe it to other women to try and contain my work within those hours. (Paid official, feminist)

The diverse messages that flow from this practical resistance to the long hours culture may empower other women to see the time structures of an official's job as constrained and manageable; but they may also shape negative perceptions of the official's 'commitment' to her work, thus simultaneously challenging and enforcing processes of segregation. Another paid official (whose children were adult) conceded that she had heard gossip about women colleagues who refuse to 'put in the hours'; men seemed to regard this as a signal of lack of commitment. She commented that she considered herself lucky to have started her paid union career at a stage in the life-cycle when 'her time was her own'. She supported these women by arguing that paid officials should be able to structure the job so that excessive hours were unnecessary; she also believed that:

There are lots of colleagues who don't work very hard between the hours of nine and five and then stay late. (Paid official, non-feminist)

So the 'need' to work long hours was dictated as much by culture and tradition as by the demands of the job itself. This clearly presented difficulties to women, not faced by men:

Male colleagues who have children generally have domestic arrangements that mean they go out and stay out whenever and for as long as they like. (Paid official, feminist)

The feeling, expressed above, of 'owing something to other women' is indicative of feminist solidarity, as is the avowedly non-feminist paid official's support for her female colleagues' position on long working hours. The above highlights how women's presence in a male dominated environment can help draw attention to women's gendered roles and life experiences and provide a challenging force. Men's apathy surrounding efforts to combat the long hours culture can be attributed to the fact that because of the gendered division of domestic labour, women experience long hours as a problem whereas men typically do not. It is also indicative of the tendency among men to individualise the difficulty of reconciling multiple roles, to separate the public from the private and to encumber women with the problem of

seeking individual solutions. Conversely, union women believed that partial, if not total, solutions could be initiated by the union.

Women paid officials were eager to look at alternative ways of working to avoid the necessity of long hours: they were prepared to consider the possibility of team-work so that skills and resources could be shared, thus conserving time and energy. For women this was regarded as a necessary survival strategy. It was also a way of encouraging other women into the job. For men the underlying imperative (that is the need to juggle multiple roles) seemed to be missing and therefore men were deemed to be most resistant to change, in the words of one woman paid official they 'guard their autonomy to the death'.

*Union government.* The structure of union government provides further evidence of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between union and work career (Rees, 1992). This advantages men and disadvantages women, since it is men who are disproportionately represented among professionals and management and who are concomitantly disproportionately represented among senior trade union officials. The reasons for this reciprocity are many, including higher level workers' greater control over their jobs facilitating taking time off to fit in with union duties (Lawrence, 1994) and their greater experience of meetings and conferences (Rees, 1992). Most important is the inner resource of self-confidence which tends to grow with authority, status, power and familiarity with union discourse, and which can be drawn upon in union elections, meetings, negotiations and so on. The effect of the lack of these resources, in particular union discourse, is illustrated by one MSF woman's experience as a newly elected NEC member. At her first meeting she was surprised to hear colleagues discussing the Russian author, Chekhov; she had 'not had the nerve' to ask the relevance of this for fear of attracting derogatory remarks and exposing her inexperience and was left bewildered by the discussion. She later discovered (by asking another woman) that the discussion was on the subject of union 'check off'.

Women's sustained participation in union government is threatened not only by the particular discourse but also the mundane and uninteresting nature of meetings. Echoing Walton's (1991) study of NALGO shop stewards, women complained that too much time was spent arguing over procedural matters and too little discussing policy issues. Many women spoke of losing interest in participating, revealing a fundamental difference between women and men's union activism: women with domestic commitments invest much-prized spare time in union activism and are not prepared to do so unless their experience of meetings is positive.

There were other ways in which women found union meetings a negative experience, for example, many commented on the unwelcoming, alienating and even objectifying environment:

There was a new woman, it was her first meeting last month. She came into the room and sat next to me because I was the only face she recognised and I heard some men at the end of the table saying, 'who's that, where's she come from?', but they didn't make any effort—they could have come up and said something friendly. (NEC, regional seat, feminist)

Sexism would appear to be a significant gendered characteristic of union government. Women were concerned about the offensive behaviour of some union men. There were many examples cited of sexist behaviour, including: sexual harassment, the assumption, as one woman put it, 'that all women are fair game'; harsher criticisms of women than of men; a blatant disrespect for and disregard of women's contribution:

A lot of the men are hecklers, especially when women are talking. They also use obnoxious body language to undermine women when they're talking. (NEC, reserved seat, feminist)

Union culture was characterised by an NEC member as an enduringly 'drinking, smoking' one with 'lots of male camaraderie on show', a culture which can be defined as masculine and which serves to exclude women, acting as a deterrent to women's involvement. But at the same time women's presence enabled men to:

... start to understand the effects of their behaviour and language on women and this chips away at their deep-seated attitudes. (Paid official, feminist)

Women therefore were prepared to use their agency to challenge male union culture, finding support in their collective presence and their networking activities. Such action becomes all the more significant given that trade unions can be characterised as gendered oligarchies, as reflected in the following quotation:

When there's been a man holding a union position for a long time, women become put off from becoming active—it can seem that he knows everything, has this God-given knowledge. (Paid official, feminist)

*Networking.* One example of informal, internal networking raises three pertinent issues: it underlines the importance of union women having access to other women for support, it highlights the existence of men's networking which often excludes women and it shows how men are often suspicious of, and feel threatened by, women's collectivities:

It's very important to have other women around—even if it's only at the end of the 'phone. Men have always networked—in the pub! Women's networking makes men nervous—I remember once some women colleagues gathered in an office after a meeting to talk about things, have a chat, and 'Y' (a male colleague) got wind of it and came straight up to see what was going on. (Paid official, feminist)

The existence of informal networking notwithstanding, efforts have been made to formalise networking among women paid officials. It was intended that a small group of women would meet quarterly to discuss issues of mutual concern and to offer support to one another. Women agreed that these meetings had proved very useful, but they had been abandoned due to pressures of work, underlining once more the disempowering nature of the 'long hours' culture'.

Some paid officials found an external model of networking valuable in that it offers an opportunity to look beyond the confines of MSF and compare and contrast experiences and coping strategies with women from other unions. External networking is also beneficial in that it takes place in a social environment, free of the tensions and stress of the organisation.

As far as NEC members are concerned, women's networking is multifarious. There were examples in MSF of internal and external, formal and informal networking including involvement in the Women's TUC Advisory Council and informal efforts to forge links with women at TUC conferences. Internally, women described how NEC women typically gravitated towards one another, to make friendships among women, to forge alliances and to support each other at meetings, believing there to exist a:

... mutual understanding of what it's like to be a woman doing trade union work—it's something men just can't relate to. (NEC, regional seat, feminist)

The formal vehicle for lay women's networking is the NWSC, which can be said to institutionalise efforts to support and empower women activists. Most NEC women attend NWSC meetings if only infrequently, providing testimony as to its utility. Nevertheless, not all MSF women were wholly committed to women's networking. Given that networking can be characterised as a feminist strategy, perhaps surprisingly, there was no clear feminist/non-feminist divide. One NEC, non-feminist woman was emphatic that she had no need of support from other women, neither formally nor informally, as she was 'there in her own right, as an individual, not as a woman'; whilst other non-feminist women were highly supportive of the NWSC and its activities. Some feminist women revealed ambivalent attitudes towards women's networking fearing it undermined unity. Indeed, one woman cast doubt on the ability of women's structures to transform union culture

In the eyes of men, it's detrimental to be in a reserved seat – you're seen as fighting for women's issues. I'm often argued down for just representing women. (NEC, reserved seat, feminist)

Conversely, when asked if she has made a difference in the union, another interviewee said:

Where I feel I've made a difference is on the NWSC, for example we (NEC women) fought to get the women's conference to have more bite and this was agreed. (NEC, reserved seat, feminist)

Women, then, reveal solidaristic attitudes to other women. These find expression in women's networking collectivities, formal and informal, internal and external.

Women's formal networking undoubtedly empowers women, by providing a forum in which they can draw strength from one another to counter the assault on confidence and sense of isolation women so often experience in male dominated environments. Yet, there remains doubt as to how seriously union men regard women's structures and therefore to what extent such structures alone can influence decision-making in a patriarchal organisation.

## Conclusion

The article has shown the increasing importance of women's membership to the trade union, MSF. The statistics provide a picture of a union that has over time significantly improved the influence of women in its decision-making structures leading to proportionality among paid officials, the NEC and a higher proportion of women than men as delegates to the TUC. By going behind the exterior of proportionality and exploring the experiences and strategies of senior union women in MSF, the article has provided a study of the gendered tensions between transformative and status quo objectives to ensure union survival.

Cockburn's (1991) view that the ideology of feminism has had an important influence on women's trade union activism and at the same time on union agendas, structures and to a lesser extent culture has relevance to this study. The findings indicate that the women who characterised themselves as 'feminist' were more likely to be propelled into union activism by significant gendered events. Whereas those who said they were not feminist were moved into union activism by significant collective events where gender consciousness had not been the primary underlying motivating factor. Whilst a consideration of factors triggering union activism can undoubtedly shed light on differing attitudes underpinning motivation, union women when faced with a male dominated environment nevertheless exhibit cohesive tendencies informed by a feminist paradigm.

The senior women studied were working to create a 'woman-friendly' image, a union environment that reflects women's values, concerns and needs and to improve women's experiences of trade unions, echoing the views put by Sinclair (1995 and 1996). Whilst women (feminist and non-feminist) as bargainers demonstrate some of the same characteristics as male bargainers, they also present a different approach informed by a feminist philosophy characterised by the feeling of owing something to other women. Thus they start by empathising with the needs of the membership, then become active agents in translating this empathy onto union agendas and in the process raise gender consciousness among other women.

MSF's shift to an 'organising culture' is complementary to the approach women officials take to recruitment. The study provides further evidence of women's gendered role in the recruitment of women members (Dorgan and Grieco 1993, Watson 1988), and in particular it has highlighted the fact that women officials strongly encourage other women to become active. Women officials consciously adopted a gendered strategy in the recruitment of new women members, which they argued was more likely to elicit success. At the same time, it emerged that MSF women held a strong belief that women place greater emphasis than do men on recruiting new female activists. In respect of recruitment, the study draws attention to the interplay between status quo and transformative survival; unions need all the members they can get and efforts aimed especially at women are likely to have the numerical goal of status quo survival. Whereas efforts targeted at developing women's activism are likely to have transformative effects.

The women were also prepared to use their agency to challenge the masculine union culture. There was evidence of resistance to the long hours culture, the recip-

cal nature of support in women's collective presence and their networking activities. It was also the case that some feminist women revealed ambivalent attitudes towards women's networking, fearing it would undermine unity and one woman cast doubt on the ability of women's structures to transform union culture. But in general, networking was an expression of women's solidaristic attitudes to other women. Women's networking activities, arguably represent the first blocks on which to build transformative union survival, in that an environment and culture which is supportive and encouraging of women is thereby created thus empowering acts of resistance and challenge to the male culture. The study also provides support for the 'role model effect' (Heery and Kelly, 1988a) of women's presence in senior union positions. Arguably the visibility of women in positions of power has a multiplier effect on future women's representation. Further, the presence of women in leadership positions may temper gendered oligarchic tendencies of the leadership.

The woman conscious strategies adopted by the union women in relation to the patriarchal culture dominant in trade unions suggests that there is a dialectical relationship between women's activism and union transformation. Whilst union women informed by feminist values work towards transformative survival, the dual nature of their strategic orientations (as vanguard women and senior union officers) also contributes to satisfying the union imperative of status-quo survival. Further, the participatory leadership style of the women is wholly congruent with the view that union renewal is contingent upon increased member activism at the level of the workplace (Fosh, 1993; Fairbrother, 1996). Whilst union renewal does not rest on a transformation of the trade union's patriarchal culture, it is likely that where women are active agents, renewal and transformational effects will inter-relate.

It is not suggested here that women's involvement in senior trade union roles will inevitably have transformative effects. Within the union, the organisational imperative of numerical survival may constrain gendered transformative efforts, and as demonstrated the culture may disempower. External to the union, a hostile labour market and/or employer may provide a constraining environment for women who actively set out to transform members into activists. Whilst women talked of being keen to identify potential women activists, support them and encourage them to seek election, women members may be fearful of the consequences that an increased visibility through union activism might bring.

Nevertheless, the article has provided evidence of women's increasing involvement in MSF and the nature of that involvement. It has shown that the senior union women were encouraged to become activists by either significant gendered events or significant collective events, and further how they in turn become significant others for future activists. Importantly it has also shown how incremental significant gendered events reinforce feminist perspectives among the vanguard women and underlined the dynamic and complex nature of women's union identity. The dual nature of the women's strategic orientations, to women and to the union, contributes to both an incremental transformational effect and to satisfying the organisational imperative of status-quo survival, and it provides insight into the gendered nature of potential union renewal.

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