WOMEN'S EQUALITY IN BRITISH UNIONS: THE ROLES AND IMPACTS OF WOMEN'S GROUP ORGANISING

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Submitted for the degree of PhD

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June 2000

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on women's group organising (WG) in British unions. WGs are broadly defined as collective organising by women that responds to their concerns and need for access to empowering (social) positions. As a 'radical' form, WGs contrast with the formal liberal democratic principles underpinning much union organisation. The need for their examination is stressed by the continued feminisation of the workplace and many union memberships; growing realisation of the need for unions to connect their revitalisation to being responsive to women; and women's on-going experience of inequities in various settings.

While existing works provide insights into why women collectivise in union and other contexts, a review of the related literature in industrial relations, women's studies, political studies, sociology and social psychology revealed the absence of an integrated body of work on union WGs. Consequently, the main objective of this study is to provide an empirical and conceptual contribution by addressing the following major questions:

- What union factors influence the number and overall 'shape' of WGs?;
- What aims do WGs pursue, how do they address them and what equality ideas inform them?; and
- What impacts do WGs make on gender equality in their union?

A study of two major British unions, MSF and USDAW, examining seven of their WGs was undertaken from a constructivist-feminist standpoint. Analyses of interview, observational and documentary evidence were guided by two frameworks: i) the dimensions of Hyman's (1994) model of union organisation which were extended by this study's iterative data collection-analysis process, and ii) an independently-derived typology of gender equality ideas which could inform WGs' pursuit of their substantive aims. Criteria for assessing WGs' impact on women's situation in the union setting were developed from existing literature and the data sources.

The findings illuminated hitherto unchartered aspects of union operations, and specifically, how WGs influence, and are influenced, by them. Four main conclusions emerge from the findings. First, particular features of the union setting have a key, if not often exclusive, influence on WG arrangements. Second, different WG types emphasise different aims but there is also some overlap in their aims and the equality ideas which inform them. This stresses the complex character and relations between the studied phenomena, and their location within a wider women's structure. Third, WGs pursue a wider range of aims, via uncoordinated equality approaches, than is formally recognised. Their impacts are more extensive than is officially reported, relating to union structure and democracy, agendas, interest representation, power, and social processes and modes of operating. This emphasises how the under-exposure of women's activism can act to under-estimate their efforts and effects for women in the union. Furthermore, each WG aim is usually underpinned by a mixture of unarticulated and dynamic conceptions of gender equality though a slow shift by WGs toward more ambitious ideas about equality is identified. Fourth, while WGs pursue and achieve more than was previously realised for union women, their current operations still seem unlikely to achieve the *fundamental* union transformation that is needed to achieve 'long' equality (see Cockburn 1989). Equal power sharing by male and female unionists will require the *centring* of WGs in union strategies that question

the basis of union organisation. WGs also need to pursue *considered*, if multidimensional, approaches to gender equality. This may necessitate that WGs and unions undertake more innovative measures than is currently the case (e.g. more extensive links with community and social movements, WG organisation outside the union).

LIST OF ACRONYMS

The following acronyms are used frequently in the study:

ADM	Annual Delegate Meeting (USDAW)
AGM	Annual General Meeting (MSF)
ASTMS	(former) Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs
BWN	MSF Black (and ethnic minority) women's network
DWC	Divisional women's committee (USDAW)
EO	Equal Opportunities
FTO	Full-time official
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance (union)
(N)EC	(National) Executive Committee
NREC	National Race Equality Committee (MSF)
NWC	National Women's Committee (USDAW)
NCWC	National Conference for Women's Committees (USDAW)
NWS-C	National Women's Sub-Committee (MSF)
RREC	Regional Race Equality Sub-Committee (MSF)
RWS-C	Regional Women's Sub-Committee (MSF)
SERTUC WRC	South East Region of the Trades Union Congress Women's Rights Committee
TASS	(former) Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Staff
TUC	Trades Union Congress
USDAW	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers
WG	Women's group (organising or organisation)

1 WOMEN'S EQUALITY IN BRITISH UNIONS: THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S GROUP ORGANISING

1.0 Introduction

The influx of women into British workplaces and unions[i] over the last 30 years has not translated into equivalent increases in their opportunities, position and power in unions. Yet, this has not been of central concern in the mainstream industrial relations literature. The union movement has tried to counter some of its most serious dilemmas in recent years through a 'wide-ranging process of strategic re-evaluation' (Howell 1999:40). Women's union equality is an undeveloped part of this. Unions' slowly developing concern with gender equality has been driven by women workers' growing politicisation and union activism. Advances in women's position-holding and the raising of their concerns within unions have occurred slowly and unevenly (see SERTUC 2000) and have rarely been linked to changes in gender power relations. Many female unionists have interpreted partial advancements, however, as reason to trial and extend more proactive initiatives.

Following the women's movement's lead, one significant initiative in a number of British unions is women's group organising (WG). WGs in all settings remain under-researched and -theorised (Briskin 1993, Heery & Kelly 1989), with only a few studies made of WGs in British unions (e.g. Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Elliot 1984). This thesis aims to extend understanding of union organisation, and the purpose and operation of WGs within British unions. It responds empirically to these aims via case research, and to highlight the general arguments i) that individual unions constitute a significant if not exclusive influence on WGs' aims and impacts and ii) that relative inattention to women's union activism and WGs in particular downplays their contribution to women's equality within unions and their meaning for union effectiveness.

This chapter firstly overviews the broad environmental conditions in which British unions have recently found themselves. It then examines general trends in women's membership of and position within British unions, and constraints on their engagement with unions

which can also provide the impetus for their activism. The significance of women's relationship with unions is then considered. The chapter examines a range of equality initiatives taken to improve women's relationship with their unions and assesses their perceived effectiveness. The relevance of the related literature (Leedy 1989) is stressed by the examination of WGs within this discussion to ascertain what is known about how they address unions' under-engagement with women. The next section indicates the limited work to date on the roles of various WG types and sets out the three research questions which the thesis addresses. This is followed by a discussion of the rationale for the study and its academic contribution. Lastly, a synopsis of the following chapters is given.

1.1   British unions in context

The context of British industrial relations altered radically after 1979 when the Conservatives gained power (Millward *et al.* 1992). In the 1980s and early 1990s, successive governments were concerned with 'rolling back the collectivist tide' (Kelly & Breinlinger 1996). In response to what they saw as an abuse of union power and lack of democracy (Martin *et al.* 1993), the legal framework governing unionism was transformed. The dismantling of the 'closed shop' and limits on the scope to mount industrial action seriously weakened the unions' position. The decentralisation of bargaining over the last two decades, together with other institutional influences such as radically altered labour laws and weak structures above the level of the workplace, have facilitated growing non-unionism and 'employment practices within individual firms [that] are increasingly unbounded and insulated from external influences' (Katz & Darbishire 2000:70). Deregulation, intense international competition and changing managerial strategies similarly presented unions with some of their greatest challenges. They also had to cope with sectoral shifts in employment which saw the continued expansion of service sector employment (often part-time) and massive job losses in the traditional, heavily male-dominated manufacturing and primary sector base of unionism (Howell 1999, Jensen *et al.* 1988). These developments were compounded by policies to reduce public sector employment, where union density was particularly high, by

budgetary restrictions and privatisation (Hyman 1994). It is yet to be assessed what the impact of what Phillips (1999:4) calls 'an economically conservative yet constitutionally radical Labour Government' will be for unions though its recent raft of employment and more sympathetic union legislation may provide a basis for union consolidation and growth (Parker 1999).

1.2   Women and unions

The union has been an established research topic in sociology, political science and industrial relations since the turn of the century. Yet relatively little attention has been paid to the role of women in unions (Forrest 1993) despite the longevity of their workplace involvement and union activism. Much of the limited work on women in unions is historical (e.g. Rowbotham 1977, Lewenhak 1977, Boston 1980). Although a growing number of works emerged over the last decade which examine women's current engagement with unions (e.g. Cunnison & Stageman 1995, Lawrence 1994, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Pocock 1997, Rees 1992), this and other gender equality issues still occupy a marginal place within 'mainstream' industrial relations (Dickens 1997a). The following section examines general trends in women's membership of and position within British unions.

Women's union membership and representation

The history of women's unionism in Britain paradoxically begins with impediments to their union access. In the early nineteenth century, women were generally excluded from skilled and better paid work and from the means of organisation (Lawrence 1994, Coote 1980a). Many unions, employers and Victorian social reformers sought to restrict women's role in paid employment and keep them confined to a domestic role. In the latter half of the century, new unions developed for workers outside the traditional crafts but still 'for these, women were at best a problem, to be accommodated in some special way, and at worst a menace, to be driven out of the labour force' (Coote & Campbell 1982:154). Women's assumption of a caring role helped to resolve the tensions between a commitment to the values of a free market economy, a desire to maintain the ties of

social order, and a distribution of the gains made in a capitalist system to the main body of workers: men.

Until relatively recently, many unions openly supported the patriarchal view of 'women's work' taking place in the home and of men as the breadwinners of male-headed families, espousing the ideology of the 'family wage' (Crompton 1999, Frager 1983, Elliot 1984). This role distinction undermined women workers' claims to equal pay and helped to legitimate differential job access and lower pay. Cheap female labour (a consequence in part of women's exclusion from organisation) was seen by men as a threat to their jobs. Unions tried to control their access to the labour market as a result. In addition, historically, women often worked in the least organised sectors. Consequently, unions did not develop organising strategies for women until relatively late in the day, and approaches were rarely explicitly grounded in the differences between women and men's experiences and consciousness.

A number of women therefore looked to form single-sex unions. Lawrence (1994) claims that in the past this did not represent any feminist principle of separatism but rather a 'necessary detour' on the path to union organisation which was forced on women (see also Briskin 1998a). Others describe their early organisation as a 'separatist experiment' (e.g. Coote & Campbell 1982). Many of the women's unions soon met with decline, however, although some independent women's organisations enjoyed limited success (Milkman 1985). Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) assert that contemporary evidence from Canada, Ireland and the UK, as well as the history of women's activism in unions in nineteenth century Britain (e.g. Drake 1984), show that women's separate organisation has struggled to survive where it competes with traditional patriarchal unionism.

It could be argued that, by exhibiting a defensive pose to external threats, many 'mainstream' unions long privileged the protection of a specific union 'territory' over the long term health of the labour movement and gender equality. Coote (1980b:22-23) observes, for example, that '(w)hen short-time, redundancy and closures are threatened,

unions concentrate on saving jobs rather than promoting equality, and gains that women have made can be swept away ... there are rumblings in some quarters about the need for men to have the first claim on jobs'. In these circumstances, the potential for the marginalisation of women's concerns, and by implication union membership and activism, increased dramatically – 'it was widely accepted among trade unionists that the fight against female disadvantage was not a top priority in a period of recession' (Coote & Campbell 1982:152).

From the 1960s, however, alongside the development of the women's movement, massive numbers of women (especially white-collar workers) joined unions for the first time (Ellis 1981, Aldred 1981). In 1961 there were four male unionists for every female member. By 1980, the ratio was nearly two-to-one. Yet there are indications that it could have fallen further had unions extended their coverage sooner and more systematically. The TUC Women's Advisory Committee (1967) asserted that the imbalance was not the fault of women workers but reflected the kinds of jobs done by them, their domestic responsibilities and certain union actions. Many unions still restricted women to special sections with smaller dues and restricted benefits, for example. A number only developed a membership category for skilled women in the late 1970s. Even a recent TUC (1994) investigation found that the movement was still 'out of step' with women and young people entering the labour market.

Corresponding to the secular increase in female labour market participation, more unions have begun to re-interpret their changing environment as a challenge to reform and become more relevant to an increasingly diverse constituency. As Regini (1992:102) observes, some 'have undertaken a search for new, less defensive responses to the current challenges'. Unions have launched recruitment campaigns since the latter part of the 1980s. During the 1990s, these campaigns were targeted at groups such as women and took place at regional and local levels. Yet, despite their prioritisation in some British unions, recruitment efforts have generally failed to check the fall in overall membership or extend union organisation in either the public or private sectors (Mason et al. 1997).

Recent figures (IRS 1997) indicate that 4.5 million women are employed in union-recognised workplaces and a further 4.2 million are entitled to join a union, making a total of at least 8.7 million potential female members (see also EIRO March 1997, TUC 1997a).

However, as unions have continued to open up to women, the gender ratio of union membership has fallen further. In 1998, it was 1.6:1, with women constituting 39% of 7.1 million members (Bland 1999)[1] although they form nearly half the workforce, in line with the world-wide figure of 36% in 1996 (Trade Union World September 1999). The fall in overall union membership and rise in women's share of membership across British unions and in the 10 largest UK unions over the past decade is indicated in Table 1.1. Women's overall membership share of UK unions rose from just over a third of membership of TUC-affiliated unions (total 2,861,143) at the end of 1989 to 39% of the total membership of 6,638,986 in 1999 (Equal Opportunities Review November/December 1990, January/February 1999). Women's total membership share of the 10 largest unions in the UK rose from 24.3% in 1990-91 to 41.2% (or two in five) in 1999-00.

Table 1.1: The proportion of female members in the 10 largest UK unions

1990-91			1999-00		
Union	Membership number	% women members**	Union	Membership number	% women members**
TGWU	1143825	17	Unison	1290549	72
GMB	880000	31	TGWU	874927	20
NALGO*	744453	14	AEEU	725000	10
AEU	702228	14	GMB	712010	37
NUPE*	604000	21	MSF	420000	33
MSF	603000	23	USDAW	309811	60
USDAW	343176	62	CWU	287732	21
COHSE*	201253	79	NUT	228438	75
UCATT	200000	2	GPMU	201296	17
UCW	193195	29	PCS	260000	58
Total membership	5615130	average % = 24.3	Total membership	5309763	Average % = 41.2

Total membership of TUC-affiliated unions	2861143	34	Total membership of TUC-affiliated unions	6638986	39

Compiled from: Labour Research (March 1992:9, March 2000:17), SERTUC (2000) and Equal Opportunities Review (November/December 1990:26, January/February 1999:30).
na - not applicable.   * - Merged to form Unison in 1993.   ** - All figures rounded to nearest whole number.

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[1] They also represent two out of five members across the 77 TUC affiliates (Equal Opportunities Review January/February 2000, Labour Research March 2000). The female membership proportion of non-TUC affiliates rose from 48% in 1980 to 62% in 1991 (Farnham & Giles 1995).

Just 19% of private sector employees are now union members, compared with 61% of public sector workers (Taylor 1999a), the latter implying further feminisation of union memberships and reinforcing the end of the stereotype of a unionist as a skilled male, manual worker (see also Gilman 1997, TUC 1997b, Hyman 1994).

Several studies indicate that, rather than being uninterested in unions, women have at least as strong a belief in the principles of unionism as men (e.g. Sinclair 1995, Healy 1997). Healy's (1997) findings support both instrumental (see also Waddington & Whitson 1994, 1997) and solidaristic/collective motives for membership, with little support for individualist reasons, regardless of sex differences. Indeed, while most unionists have become members because they perceive individual advantages, these advantages relate primarily to their situation as employees (Hyman 1995), and it is argued here, to their particular vulnerability as women and members of other social identity[2] groups. Forrest (1993) asserts that women are now *more* inclined to join unions than men (see also the TUC (1998a, 1998b) on black workers). That this is still not borne out by union membership figures points to the influence of other factors.

Women's position within unions

Table 1.2 compares the proportion of women who held key posts in the 10 largest British unions in 1997-98 with the situation almost a decade earlier. It shows that women's formal union involvement varies considerably across these unions. Despite a broad, positive relationship between women's union membership share and their presence in key posts, positive change in the latter has occurred slowly and unevenly. Significantly, the table reveals that women did not attain a level of representation across all three gauges which is commensurate with their membership share in any of the 10 unions.

Across British unions generally, women remain under-represented at national level, both as lay members and paid officers (Ledwith & Colgan 1996; Labour Research March 1996, March 1998), as well as at regional and local levels. As Labour Research (March

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[2] Social identification is a process whereby people develop a sense of themselves as a group with distinct, collective interests and values.

Table 1.2: Women in key positions in the 10 largest UK unions

1990-91**					1999-00**				
Union	% female members	% of NEC	% of national FTOs	% of regional FTOs	Union	% female members	% of NEC	% of national FTOs	% of regional FTOs
TGWU	17	7	3	na	Unison	72	62	21	30
GMB	38	29	12	4	TGWU	20	32	0	8
NALGO*	55	42	31	13	AEEU	10	10	0	4
AEU	15	0	1	0	GMB	37	41	17	20
NUPE*	75	46	38	11	MSF	31	33	38	21
MSF	23	21	21	5	USDAW	59	53	57	25
USDAW	59	31	20	18	CWU	19	18	14	0
COHSE*	79	50	54	22	NUT	75	41	20	17
UCATT	2	0	0	0	GPMU	17	17	13	4
UCW	30	14	23	na	PCS	58	44	38	19

Sources: compiled from Labour Research (March 2000:17, March 1992:9) and SERTUC (2000).
na - not available/applicable   * - Merged to form Unison in 1993.   ** - All figures rounded to nearest whole number.

2000:17) observes, 'there is a continuation of the gradual trend towards full representation' but '(t)here is no great watershed for the new millennium'. Women's representation is also poor at European level (Braithwaite & Byrne 1995, Cyba & Papouschek 1996). Although low union participation is not restricted to women and unions are often run at local level by a small number of activists (Klandermans & Visser 1995, Lind 1996, Fosh 1993), women's continued under-representation has prompted studies which seek to explain it.

1.3   Explaining unions' under-engagement with women

Women's labour market position

Many authors focus on women and men's differential labour market situation when explaining their different levels of unionisation and union participation, although there is no single theory to explain the gendered division of employment in the first place (Crompton *et al.* 1990). The increase in economic activity of women across Europe and indeed the world over the past 60 years has produced a significant feminisation of the working population and contributed to the decline of the 'male breadwinner' (Crompton 1999, Maruani 1992). The expansion of the public and service sectors from the 1960s saw massive numbers of women (especially white-collar workers) join unions for the first time, helping to offset the impact of large-scale retrenchment in male-dominated manufacturing industries.

Nonetheless, women are still more likely to be found in small, scattered and difficult to organise workplaces than men (Date-Bah 1997a, Chhachhi & Pittin 1999). Skilled workers tend to be better organised, more involved and more influential in unions than the less skilled. Women have been concentrated among the less skilled, often in non-senior posts (e.g. see Harrison 1979; Heritage 1977, 1983). Many union memberships choose union leaders from those in more highly valued job categories who have greater autonomy to be involved in union activities (Chhachhi & Pittin 1999). They also tend to re-elect representatives who have a proven track record and have 'served their time' - usually men - providing a powerful obstacle to women's activism (Kirton 1999, Kirton & Healy 1999, Rees 1992, Lawrence 1994). Healy (1997) notes the significance of sector, women's sense of unions as patriarchal organisations and their life context for differences in women and men's unionisation. Sinclair (1995) also attributes the female-male union membership differential to women's concentration in low-paid and insecure occupations. In short, union structures reflect the sex segregated character of the labour market and barriers to women's advancement (Braithwaite & Byrne 1995, Briskin & McDermott 1993a) though recent research indicates that the continuing trend over the 1990s of desegregation for women at the upper end and for both men and women at the middle-level of the labour market might result in 'an increasingly polarised labour force as jobs for women were increasingly concentrated in relatively low-skilled service work ... and professional work' (Rubery et al. 1999:212).

Discontinuity in employment has also long been recognised as a hindrance to participation and influence within unions. Many women's job paths are less continuous than men's as a result of their family and domestic roles. They are less likely to progress through unions which value long, unbroken service as a criterion for office-holding (Rees 1990). Having analysed men and women's age and work status from a MORI survey, Kellner (1981:33, cited in Coote & Campbell 1982) found:

> the typical male union member in his late thirties or forties has had work and union experience over twenty years; whereas for the typical female union member, work and union experience will be nothing like continuous. It follows that wherever buggins' turn applies, buggins is seldom a woman.

Related to this, Rubery & Fagan (1994:162) observed that 'women have provided the main source of new labour for the growth of services and part-time work'. Women's weaker access to and participation in unions links to their forming the mainstay of the part-time, casual and atypical workforce (see Equal Opportunities Review January/February 2000). For example, as well as often being located in difficult to unionise workplaces, part-timers can face greater pressure from management who are reluctant to allow them time off given that they work part-time hours. Fryer *et al.*'s (1978) study also found that part-time staff may be disinclined to get involved in union activities as this can put pressures of work on other staff.

Some authors link 'job attachment' to the likeliness of members' union activity (e.g. ICFTU 1991, Beynon & Blackburn 1972; cf. Sinclair 1995). Ellis (1981:23) speculates that as women are concentrated in the lower skilled occupations, 'it would therefore be expected that the apparent association between higher occupational status and participation in unions is an important factor in their differential participation'. Women also carry out most paid carer jobs. It is thought that traditional forms of union action often do not appeal to them as they 'don't want to bring about unnecessary suffering for those uninvolved in the union's dispute' (Aldred 1981:96). Many public sector unions have developed forms of industrial action to attempt to deal with this problem, however.

Thus, despite the increase in women's labour force participation and whatever unions' egalitarian pretensions, as Colgan & Ledwith (1996a:156-57) note, conditions in women's employment which have always militated against female unionism persist:

> Women dominate part-time work, personal, health and welfare services in both
> private and public sectors. These are just the situations where the structural
> characteristics of small scattered workforces, sporadic labour force participation
> due to family demands, low pay and low status jobs, plus antagonistic employers ...
> make trade union organisation of the traditional pattern costly and difficult. They
> also locate women's work as subordinate in the workplace hierarchy, with the
> result that women trade unionists representing mainly female members are sited
> low in the trade union organisational hierarchy.

This inequality is reproduced in workplace-union relations as women generally face greater difficulty getting time off work to represent their members (Colling & Dickens 1989). Unions' inability to mount an effective challenge to labour market inequality and occupational segregation, and their initial slowness to use legislative measures to improve and protect many women's terms and conditions (Cunnison & Stageman 1995, Lawrence 1994) have been only partially off-set by their resolutions and winning of piecemeal gains for female members since the 1970s (e.g. Ellis 1988). Constituency building, as exemplified by WGs, is seen as helping to counteract this tendency as constituency-based union power can form a 'substitute' for workplace status (Briskin 1998a).

The workplace-domestic nexus

A number of studies draw attention to women's 'double' or 'triple' burden in relation to their engagement with unions (e.g. Cunnison 1987, Kirton 1999, Ledwith *et al.* 1990, Cockburn 1995, McBride 1999, Rees 1992, McCarthy 1977, Walton 1991, Chhachhi & Pittin 1999). Women's different experience of the union, labour market, workplace and private sphere partly stems from an unequal domestic division of labour between women and men. For example, Kirton's (1999) study of senior union women in MSF found that many women on its NEC had faced difficulties combining union activism with family life and had had to make personal sacrifices. She concludes that this 'genders' the very notion of commitment to the union. Similarly, from an empirical study of women and leadership roles in SOGAT '82, Ledwith *et al.* (1990) partly attributed women's under-representation to inequality at work, unequal sharing of responsibilities, loyalties divided between union and children, and lack of childcare. Stinson & Richmond (1993) observe recent trends in Canada which seem to be echoed in Britain. There are more (particularly younger) men who want or are pressured to take a more active role at home and women who are not prepared to be the primary homemaker and who are committed to their paid work or activism. While men receive social encouragement for challenging traditional union roles, women who commit themselves fully to union work risk the loss of relationships, guilt, isolation and social disapproval.

Union-centred factors and women's 'nature'

The relationship between union-centred factors and women's engagement with unions is particularly significant given the focus here on WGs. Institutional/structural features, gender roles and attitudes are revealed in the literature as key influences on women's union involvement. For instance, structural changes in unions over the last decade have involved a number of amalgamations and mergers (Edwards *et al.* 1992; Waddington 1992, 1995), reducing TUC-affiliated unions from 84 in 1989 to 77 in 1999 (TUC 1999). Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) note that streamlined organisational hierarchies tend to reduce the opportunities for women and other minority groups to increase their representation higher up the union structures. The squeeze in the number of FTO positions has come at a time when women were beginning to progress past some barriers to their union involvement (TUC Women's Committee 1994, SERTUC 1994). Chhachhi & Pittin (1999) also cite male (numeric) domination in unions and the internal structure of union organisation in relation to women's lack of union participation. Clearly, union size and structure influence attempts to encourage and support women's progression in unions and partly explain how 'unions remain such male institutions while taking so many exciting initiatives to involve women members' (SERTUC 1989:1-2). Further, the union form - participatory ideals notwithstanding - has always been affected by the 'iron law of oligarchy'[3] (Michels (1915) in Kelly & Heery 1995) which suggests that it is difficult for women to succeed in elections in male dominated branches though the 'organizational/political model is increasingly being replaced by a networking/communicating one' (Waterman 1999:250).

Women workers' lack of union involvement has also been linked to the reinforcement of gender socialisation and women's roles as mothers and wives through the ideology of domesticity by certain union practices and approaches. For example, the links between women's domestic responsibilities, union meeting times and locations and women's under-representation are well-documented (e.g. Stageman 1980, Ledwith *et al.* 1990, Rees 1990, Beale 1982). In her study of women across five union branches, Stageman

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[3] Michels argued that democratically elected leaders often become oligarchic as they use organisational resources and the power and influence of their positions to gain re-election and the continuation of top-down control.

(1980) also observed that women found it difficult to attend meetings outside working hours, even at lunchtime, because of their domestic role. Although stewarding activities are mainly undertaken within working hours, they often entail attending branch committee meetings outside work time. Women have also been put off becoming involved by union jargon and rules, too much time spent arguing over procedural matters and too little on policy issues, lack of dissemination of information and the perceived irrelevancy of some of the matters they cover (Harrison 1979, Ledwith *et al.* 1990, Coote 1980b, Kirton 1999). McBride (1999) flags up men's dominance of union meetings and rules which take little account of women's different experience of work as obstacles to their participation. Kirton (1999) also notes that the tendency among paid officials to work long hours, neglecting family life, can present a further obstacle.

A number of works suggest that a sexist culture and patriarchal attitudes within unions limit women's participation and union success in organising women workers (e.g. Ledwith *et al.* 1990, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Kirton 1999, Cunnison & Stageman 1995, Lawrence 1994). Unions are less attractive to women because of the masculine image associated with them (e.g. Braddock 1998, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a). Some union men have also more purposefully excluded women, reflecting the 'divisive and conservative traditions of skill and craft' of British unions (Cockburn 1984:45). Kirton (1999) noted that the masculine culture of male-dominated environments can manifest itself, among other ways, in the form of sexual harassment and the use of sexist language and behaviour at meetings. Women may feel alienated and disempowered, and find their social integration into the union is made problematic, by such features. That some male unionists do not always take female unionists as seriously as men may relate to their according less value and significance to women and 'women's work' (Cockburn 1995).

Some studies have emphasised the links between women's union situation and personal-social-cultural factors. Cockburn (1995) observes, for instance, that typical 'women's jobs' do not build self-confidence, thus disadvantaging women in unions. Stageman (1980) adds that her female informants' general lack of knowledge about the union

'machine', less interest and feelings of not being as competent as men in union affairs could inhibit their involvement. Rees (1990) cited similar factors in respect of women's under-representation in union office-holding in USDAW and NALGO. Many women feel that unions are 'a man's world', with little done in branches to encourage participation by the existing office-holders who are predominantly male.

Summary

A range of interrelated factors helps to explain how women's union membership and participation is discouraged or blocked. Extant studies highlight institutional, practical, attitudinal and ideological barriers though their relative importance has not been researched simultaneously (see also Lawrence 1994). In respect of union-centred factors, only some aspects of union features (e.g. meeting times, locations, 'culture') have been examined. There have also been few attempts to operationalise them, sometimes creating vagueness as to what is being discussed. Increasing discussion of them, however, signals a shift in explanations of unions' under-engagement with women members from viewing women as the problem to unions as the problem.

1.4   The significance of unions' engagement with women

Union size and cohesion have traditionally been viewed as key indicators of union strength. With general union membership decline over the last two decades in Britain, and women's increasing share of the UK labour market, unions have increasingly recognised their need to attract and involve more women to help reverse their contracting numbers and operate more effectively (e.g. Kirton 1999, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Briskin 1999). Estimates of untapped yet potential female members (see earlier) serve to heighten women workers' likely significance to the labour movement in the future. For their part, Frances O'Grady (former Director of the TUC New Unionism Project) commented, five million people in Britain, 'the bulk of whom were likely to be young, women and working in the private sector', wanted unions to represent them (Women in USDAW 1997:22). Changing family and work patterns have confronted women with the growing importance of their role as workers and unionists.

The significance of women's engagement with unions is also highlighted by evidence that suggests women's 'participation begets participation' (see also Virdee & Grint (1994) on black members) and *vice-versa*. It is thought that the presence of women officials and activists helps to dispel the idea that unionism is for and about men, creating a 'role model' effect which attracts women into unions (Heery & Kelly 1988). In her cross-national work, Trebilcock (1991:425) observed that having more women in decision-making posts 'augurs well for greater engagement by those institutions on issues of special concern to women workers. That greater engagement should in turn encourage more women to come forward as leaders'. Kelly & Breinlinger (1996) assert that once involved in collective action, a person is likely to develop a new social identity as an activist, increasingly seeing herself as 'someone who gets involved' though this assumes that other influences on a woman's participation do not alter.

Women's presence and status in formal union arrangements have been linked to the creation of a union environment which reflects women's values and concerns (Cockburn 1991). Some connect the process of building a union which responds to women's concerns to the achievement and sustenance of women's full representation in decision-making structures (Heery & Kelly 1988, Cockburn 1991, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, McBride 1999). Others more specifically link a sensitivity to women's interests and 'equality aware' bargaining to women's presence at the bargaining table (e.g. Dickens 1993, Dickens *et al.* 1988, Colling & Dickens 1989, Heery & Kelly 1988, Watson 1988). Kirton (1999) suggests that women in decision-making structures are important players because of the gendered characteristics and experiences they bring to the job rather than because of the demands placed on them by members. However, key negotiators are still predominantly male, and measures to encourage equality action by negotiators have been patchy in extent and implementation (Dickens 1993). Some authors broadly state, however, that women's concerns are increasingly likely to be voiced when more women are present in unions (e.g. Cockburn 1995, Bakker 1988, Labour Research March 1990, Cyba & Papouschek 1996, Date-Bah 1997a). This is because, although men and women

share many concerns, there are 'gendered' bargaining issues which impact more on women and which they therefore regard as more important (Kirton 1999).

In respect of women's concerns, existing research indicates that it has been easier for unions to focus on policies directed at *employers* rather than to address the more immediate aspects of inequality in their own internal workings (Cockburn 1989). However, concern with women's engagement with unions has increasingly been cast as significant in terms of the equality or otherwise of their *experience* within unions. Getting women 'into' unions is not seen as enough for effective unionism in recent work (e.g. TUC 1996b, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Cockburn 1995). Women's ability to have an 'equal' union experience (variously defined) - even when they have accessed key group structures - has been related by some to their holding positions of power (e.g. within negotiating structures, on the NEC) and not just in the educational, equality and welfare posts where they tend to have been concentrated (Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Date-Bah 1997a, Higgins 1996).

Significantly, however, limited attention to the qualitative aspects of women's position-holding suggests a different story. Even when women attain 'proportionality'[4] in key structures or hold key posts, patriarchal practices and attitudes often mean that they are less empowered by their formal position than men, with implications for the pursuit and prioritisation of their concerns (Ledwith *et al.* 1990). For instance, women may be limited to assignments which do not lie at the heart of decision-making or confined to less significant locations (Cockburn 1989). There may also be 'house style' team arrangements (i.e. the pairing up of male and female negotiators) which leads to 'separate negotiation' roles which do not confer the same sense of power to women and men (Dorgan & Grieco 1993). Concomitantly, not all women may make a difference to negotiations by being present, perhaps because they have internalised dominant male-oriented values of the organisation or because of constraints imposed by notions of what is appropriate behaviour or achievements for a negotiator (Dickens 1993, Colling &

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[4] This refers to women holding a proportion of posts which is commensurate with their membership share.

Dickens 1989). Whether women come to union platforms as representatives of a social group (women) or as representatives of a mixed constituency (see Cockburn 1995) also affects what is seen as their appropriate conduct or behaviour.

Furthermore, the minority of women who emerge as activists tend to be swiftly burdened with responsibilities above their regular duties (Coote 1980b). Others remain committed to gender equality but are driven, in their relative isolation, to over-caution. Some sometimes settle for 'less' to improve women's lot, avoid a 'backlash', protect existing gains whilst paving the way for calls for further change (Coote & Campbell 1982, Cockburn 1989). In other words, women's involvement reflects not only the positions they occupy, but also what they are enabled to do in these positions and how they feel they are enabled to do it. In fact, one of the most common reasons cited by female activists in GPMU and Unison for not 'going further' as a lay representative or paid official, related to barriers to their progress, was the feeling that they could do more at grassroots level (Colgan & Ledwith 1996a; see also Cuneo (1993) on women and local union leadership in Canada).

Some studies link women's union location and power to the processes of agenda-setting and raising women's concerns. Dickens (1993) observes, for instance, that local bargaining might facilitate women's influence over agenda-setting as it becomes easier for them to make their views known than when membership views are transmitted up to national negotiators through male-dominated representative structures. Cook *et al.* (1992) concluded in a US study that it was top level officers, especially those in unions with large female memberships, rather than local leaders who in these circumstances were more inclined to keep women's interests in mind as they had more resources.

1.5   Improving women's union situation: equality initiatives

Many of the studies reviewed earlier did not convincingly indicate how, although they remain under-represented, increasing numbers of women have joined a union or gained and sustained an active role (cf. Kirton 1999, Ledwith *et al.* 1990, Heery & Kelly 1989).

Explanations of women's engagement with unions tend to focus on barriers while theories of men's or general participation often consider reasons for participation (Trebilcock 1991, Lawrence 1994). The former also often fail to explain how barriers to women's fuller engagement link to efforts to encourage their activism and the nature of the bases from which women organise in unions (Chhachhi & Pittin 1999). The following section examines equality initiatives for women within British unions and their meaning for WGs.

Integration 'strategies'

Existing studies indicate that for many years unions presumed that once women gained access to them, they would naturally progress to attain the same positions as men on the basis of 'merit'. The onus was on individual women to 'get on'. Similar assumptions have been made in respect of ethnic minority members (Virdee & Grint 1994). From this integrationist perspective, WGs and other groups organised around social identity characteristics are seen to 'produce' rather than address discrimination and to 'ghettoise' women and other groups within unions (Briskin 1993). Despite some continuing support for this position, there has been a shift away from integrationism given its failure to equalise women's union situation with that of men. Different strategies have been developed which reflect varying degrees of proactivity by women *and* unions.

'Deficit' initiatives

Briskin's (1993) 'deficit' model refers to women 'overcoming' their so-called 'inadequacies' which make them 'poorly equipped' to take on union roles. Women have been seen, and often have seen themselves, as making up for their 'shortfalls' by attempting to be 'like men' to fit into the union system (see also Coote 1980b, Gray 1993). The onus for change remains on women; indeed, changes by women have been more common than changes in men's attitudes or union structures to increase women's union participation (Dickens 1993).

Recent studies reveal that a number of women who have progressed within unions 'share' certain characteristics with male unionists though not the same family supports. Many senior female officials, for instance, do not have dependent children. They are often older, single, hold professional and higher level work posts, and have a history of local union but not women's activism (Kirton & Healy 1999; Ledwith *et al.* 1990; Cockburn 1995; Heery & Kelly 1988, 1989). They conform to the 'masculine' job model of a union official with a long, unbroken record of activism and paid, full-time employment. Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) noted that the processes in SOGAT '82 which produced female union leaders remained subordinate to those which were important in producing male leaders (e.g. judging dedication from people's success in gaining a profile, length of service). Roby & Uttal's (1988) study of Canadian workers also strikes a chord with many British union women. Married female stewards with children tended to reduce their union work outside work time and prioritise family commitments. In contrast, their male counterparts often allowed union work to spill into non-work time and relied on the support of their wives, many of whom had paid, full-time jobs. As Cockburn (1995) and Ledwith *et al.* (1990) summarise, women who make it through the system are 'atypical' or well-resourced to solve childcare needs (see also Croft 2000).

Heery & Kelly (1989) identified the deficit strategy as a 'coping' mechanism and 'patterns of adaptation' for women once they had accessed unions (e.g. relying on networks of other female FTO colleagues - a form of WG - for support at work)[5]. Having to take extra steps or make sacrifices to consolidate a power base means that successful union women appear to have little time to pursue women's equality (Dorgan & Grieco 1993). Further, many women in unions have tried to show how their interests parallel those of men, aware that others' opposition to 'gendered' issues or ways of operating influences their own union experience. Kirton's (1999) study of senior female unionists in MSF found that individual women at times preferred to make themselves 'invisible' in order to function as 'equals' to men and fit in with the dominant masculine culture.

While they recognised gender-based conflicts within the membership, in the past, many leaders and members tried to maintain that 'impartiality' alone would eliminate gender inequality. Anti-discrimination policies and 'blanket' statements of formal equality or equal treatment of all members have particularly been stressed in relation to union recruitment, selection processes, voting and office-holding.

Although the deficit approach puts the onus on women to change, some unions have actively helped women in this process, for example, through educational and training programmes (e.g. Boehm 1991). Significantly, WGs have at times justified their activity via such initiatives (Briskin 1993, 1998a). Even in Unison, oft-touted as progressive for its equality initiatives, the dominant view has been that the purpose of self-organising is to 'prepare activist members ... to a position of capability to take on elected representative roles in the 'mainstream' ... Once [proportionality] is achieved there will no longer be any need for self organisation' (Colgan & Ledwith 1998:9).

General principles of equity and democracy have proved inadequate in improving union's engagement with women members, however. When women try to assimilate into male-dominated institutions without securing feminist social, economic or political bases, they often do so at great personal cost, losing many strengths of the female sphere without gaining equally from the man's world they enter (e.g. see Freedman 1979). Furthermore, some have criticised the liberal tenets of formal equality for providing a framework of systemic inequality for women given their socially constituted and restricted position in this setting (e.g. see Colling & Dickens (1993) in respect of union agenda issues and Sugiman (1993, 1992) on the United Auto Workers). The specification of 'gender neutrality' has also usually worked against the specificities of women's concerns and hidden the practices which privilege men.

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[5] They also discovered that women were more likely to fill FTO posts in unions which primarily organise white-collar workers and rely more on bureaucratic recruitment practices. Arguably, the posts held by women and men are underpinned by different

Positive action

Many feminist ideas (e.g. Cunnison 1995, Warskett 1996, Briskin & McDermott 1993b) have sharpened criticism of the deal women get from unions, usually posed in terms of their bargaining agenda with employers (e.g. Dickens 1993, Date-Bah 1997b, Cockburn 1984). Yet, given the ambivalent effect of equality law (see Dickens 1993, O'Donovan & Szyszczak 1988, Phillips 1999; cf. Lee 1987), female unionists have turned their gaze inward to encourage the development of proactive measures *within* unions to improve women's engagement with unions. As Coote & Campbell (1982:143-44) noted,

> (t)hrough the unions, women have a chance to enlist male support in order to fight with them ... Socialist feminists have not been under any great illusions about the extent of male dominance in the unions ... [but] (t)hey see it as necessary to organise within the unions, to campaign through them and to struggle to change them ...

Some unions have sanctioned positive measures to improve their engagement with women, often following campaigns by WGs and individual women activists. 'Positive action' is defined as an effort 'to remove obstacles to the free operation of the labour market' in order to promote 'free and equal competition among individuals' (Jewson & Mason 1986:322). Examples include the provision of crèche facilities and measures to assure that job candidates from disadvantaged groups are judged on their merits. Positive action stops short of adjusting the decision-making process itself; equal opportunity[6] policy aims to devise 'fair' *procedures* (i.e. equal treatment) based on an acknowledgement of different groups' specificity and disadvantaged circumstances. Jewson & Mason (1986) note that 'positive discrimination', by contrast, entails 'manipulation' of practices to obtain a fair *outcome* for disadvantaged groups (e.g. via quotas[7]).

While most unions have traditionally adopted the view that 'all workers should be treated equally' (Hughes 1968:1), elements of positive action ideas have been imported since the early 1970s via the British women's movement. Growing support for positive action

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conceptions of the FTO role.
[6] Equal opportunities aims can be seen to vary in 'length' or ambition in terms of the change that they seek (Cockburn 1989).
[7] These are defined as a set number of seats or positions for women which usually links to their membership share.

derived from women activists' increasing and varied organisation (including in WGs) and unions' need to actively respond to women members to survive (e.g. Coote & Campbell 1982). Limited positive action provisions in the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) 1975 have provided a legitimate base from which union measures could be inspired. For instance, unions may take special action to encourage women to become members if comparatively few women have been members in the last year and to make sure that women are reasonably represented at various levels. In the late 1970s, a number of unions officially approved the principle of positive action to develop policies to ensure that women (or for that matter, men) are not disadvantaged by gender differences within their organisation. Being sensitive to what women and potential members want and attempting to deliver it has become part of the declared strategy of many unions to counter male membership decline in the 1980s and 1990s (Dickens 1993). This was exemplified by the 1991 TUC conference on positive action and the adoption of charters for women within unions and at work (Colgan & Ledwith 1996a).

Nevertheless, it is often thought that union policies to bring about what is loosely cited as women's union 'equality' are insufficient on their own (e.g. Lawrence 1994, Sourani 1996, Cockburn 1995) although take-up of the recommendations in the TUC Charter and unions' equality policies has increased, albeit unevenly and partially. This is partly due to their mild wording (Coote & Campbell 1982), inadequate voluntary compliance (Trebilcock 1991) and a gulf within unions between resolutions at national level and shop floor practices (Charles 1983). Unions' commitment to the implementation and monitoring of measures also varies and it is often not a high priority (Date-Bah 1997a), making assessment of the extent of their adoption and impact more difficult.

The perceived inadequacy of charters and declared policies and statements has often underpinned arguments, mainly in unions with high female memberships, for more extensive, obligatory measures and the implementation of internal equality programmes (e.g. see Trebilcock 1991). Union programmes which focused on changing women by developing certain qualities or training them in 'gender neutral' union procedures have

thus been gradually replaced by others that are more critical of the existing system in which women operate at a disadvantage (Briskin 1993).

The growth of positive action initiatives in unions may have slowed in the 1980s in a context of persistent unemployment which helped to prioritise (men's) 'mainstream' concerns. The likelihood of advancing beyond 'formal' equality in these circumstances was small. However, many examples of positive action in unions are now evident. Most British unions provide childcare for members at conferences, courses and meetings (McBride 1999)[8]. Other practices include maternity time-off and extended family leave; relocated and rescheduled meetings; targeted female recruitment campaigns; the provision of targeted information to facilitate women's access and participation; and workplace discussion groups and campaigns (e.g. Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Lawrence 1994, Date-Bah 1997a, Cockburn 1987).

Assessments of positive action in unions tend to focus on its meaning for women in the workplace. However, several authors have examined their general impact, though not the extent of change they bring, on women's engagement with unions. A broad, positive link between positive action (often imprecisely conceived to include WGs, a form of positive discrimination) and the extent of women's relations with unions has been found. From evidence available at the time, Coote & Campbell (1982) asserted that the more positive action a union undertakes, the faster its female members progress towards fuller participation but that women are a long way from equal participation and power.

More recently, Cockburn (1995) asserted that there has been 'considerable' movement in some unions towards 'mixité' (i.e. gender proportional representation throughout a union) due to positive action. This was more likely to occur where formal rules are backed up by measures such as training and other supportive structures (cf. Date-Bah's (1997a) international assessment). On the other hand, it has been suggested that while positive

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[8] Following the action plan for European women unionists adopted by ETUC in July 1999, member organisations draw up proposals to ensure that women are properly represented in collective bargaining and decision-making bodies, develop mechanisms and procedures to build the equality impact into policy-making and implementation (mainstreaming) and close the gender wage gap (Weber 1999, EIRO 1999).

action often helps to improve women and ethnic minorities' union involvement, it does little more than invite applicants from these groups to succeed within organisations on the basis of equal treatment or existing 'white, male terms' (Webb & Liff 1988).

Positive discrimination

Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) are among the few writers who utilise Jewson & Mason's (1986) distinction between positive action and positive discrimination in the context of unions. They view women's conferences, committees, officers and reserved seats as positive discrimination measures (i.e. measures used to pursue equal outcomes) while many classify them as positive action initiatives. The SDA 1975 provides for reserved seats for women in unions. The TUC's (1997c:1) 'Charter for the Equality for Women in the Trade Unions' recommends that '(w)here there are large women's memberships but no women on the decision-making bodies special provision should be made to ensure that women's views are represented, either through the creation of additional seats or by co-option'. Indeed, unions have most experience of the 'mainstreaming' device of reserved seats (see SERTUC 2000). Many have preferred to add reserved seats for women to a sub-structure rather than take the politically unpopular step of displacing a male incumbent. Where boards cannot be enlarged, natural vacancies have sometimes been ear-marked for women. This push for proportionality can cause problems where there are insufficient posts to go round, however, especially when unions rationalise their operations and lose valuable experience with the departure of experienced delegates who are likely to be men (Cockburn 1995).

Women's Groups: definition, types and trends

When they are referred to, union WGs are usually included within discussions of positive action and positive discrimination measures. WGs are defined here as organising by women which responds to their concerns and need for access and power within dynamic social settings, including unions. The limited work on women's separate organising tends to encompass both WGs and individual women-only posts. This thesis focuses on the

former which seek to advance women's circumstances from a *collective* 'space' for women within unions.

Three important, linked dimensions of WGs relate to separate, collective and women-only organising. Separate organising is not a specifically 'female' way of organising (e.g. see Virdee & Grint (1994) on black self-organisation). Briskin (1993) argues that it is critical to distinguish between separatism as a *goal* and separate organising as a *means to an end* (what Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) term 'interim separatism'). Separatism, insisted upon by radical feminists who view unions as a bastion of male power and inimical to women's liberation (cf. Farrell 1994), is usually based on a refusal to work with men and focuses on building alternative organisations. Separate organising, however, has been seen as a strategy for empowering women or as a 'stage' in women's 'long' equality struggle. Union women activists have mostly pursued a strategy of separate organising rather than separatism (Colgan & Ledwith 1996a). Although WGs usually constitute women members only, they are located within and interact with a mixed gender institution and pursue gender equality in that context and beyond. This thesis examines WGs in mixed gender unions, viewing those in unions with virtually all female membership in sex segregated occupations such as nursing not as 'proactive' WGs.

As a group form of organising, predicated on a social identity characteristic of union members - gender - WGs contrast with conventional union organisation which is based on the representation of individuals from certain worker groups, and (majoritarian) democratic principles. Although their introduction has been hotly debated, unions have increasingly incorporated social identity-based arrangements, particularly WGs, alongside traditional arrangements. The basis for WGs turns on the argument that women as a *group* have common concerns since there are issues that bear more on women, without presupposing what position any given group of women would take on them (Cockburn 1995). Similarly, Jonasdottir (1988) asserts that the notion of interests consists of the demand for participation and control over society's public affairs (i.e. 'form'), and 'substance'. Discussing the application of the concept of interests to women, she argues

that, in spite of their differences, there is a 'minimal common denominator' that all women share: an interest in not 'allowing themselves to be oppressed as women, or, in fighting patriarchy' (*ibid.*:38; see also Young 1990).

The limited discourse on WGs has not kept pace with their development. This is partly attributable to their sizeable number, limited resources and constantly changing arrangements. The latter, in particular, has made it difficult to gain precise information for comparative purposes (Kelly & Breinlinger 1996). Individual works have acknowledged WG variety but not dealt with it in any depth (e.g. Briskin 1993, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Colgan & Ledwith 1996a). It is possible, however, to construct an initial list of WG types in British unions from various sources, albeit with more emphasis on formal (i.e. union-sanctioned) mechanisms:

- women's conferences;
- women's committees;
- women's schools, courses/training and workshops;
- women's pre-meetings, meetings and seminars;
- women-only branches;
- women's sections and departments;
- women-only campaigns and events; and
- (informal) women's networks, working groups, caucuses, 'get-togethers', socials, discussion circles and meetings.

While several studies indicate that the 1970s formed a watershed in the wider-scale emergence of WGs in some unions and beyond (e.g. Morris 1992), Elliot (1984:67) asserts that '(t)here was no sudden explosion of consciousness-raising groups ... Women's organizations developed in a more cautious, pragmatic way, out of the day-to-day process of organizing, trying to get issues on the agenda, and so on'. Similarly, Cockburn (1995) highlights their gradual but uneven growth across unions. However, Kelly & Breinlinger (1996) found that the number of women's organisations in Britain,

including those in unions, dramatically increased in recent years even though there has been a decrease in other more visible signs of collective action by social groups. The WNC (1997) lists around 270 women's organisations, a number of which are union-based.

Although they focus on formal mechanisms[9], SERTUC surveys provide the most representative gauge of proactive measures for women in TUC affiliates. My analyses of the survey data, which involved 'weighting' equality structures equally to enable a crude comparison, revealed that 'general' equality arrangements are more numerous than WGs on aggregate and that 'mainstreaming' of equality bodies, policies and strategies is becoming more common (see SERTUC 2000; see also ETUC 1995) though some fear that this will dilute or quash the voices of women. This does not negate my discovery of overall growth in WGs[10], however, supporting Kelly & Breinlinger's (1996) findings. Furthermore, the largest unions were found to comprise multiple WGs while the smallest had few or none. Mid-sized unions showed less clear tendencies. As might be expected, unions with a virtually all-female membership had few WGs. While few WGs were found in heavily male-dominated unions, their number doubled over the last decade from 17. Unions with between 51% and 71% female membership share had multiple and frequently the highest number of WGs. Overall, the expansion of WGs reflects unions' recognition of the imperative of finding strategies to survive and operate more effectively, and women's agency. Their collective basis has gained significance given the individualistic political emphasis of recent times. However, although the increase in WG numbers might point to their increased relevance, it does not reveal how effective individual bodies are, nor how women's circumstances have changed.

My analyses revealed that most WGs identified by SERTUC surveys operate at national level (see Table 1.3). Women's courses at both national and regional levels are the most common form of WG within unions. They are followed by women's committees, which

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[9] This may reflect a survey bias and/or respondents' (senior union officials and research officers) greater knowledge of union-sanctioned initiatives and less familiarity with less formal mechanisms, particularly below national level. Significantly, the latest survey more evidently revealed growth in informal WGs, greater knowledge about such among respondents and/or better canvassing for information on such.
[10] Forty-eight unions that provided data for 1987/89 housed 137 WGs compared with 140 WGs across 40 unions in 1997/00.

may be local, divisional or national (Morris 1996), conferences, informal meetings/caucuses, and networks. This evidence partly supports claims that the most common WGs are national women's committees, departments and conferences (Cockburn 1995, Morris 1992). However, women also seem to increasingly use less structured measures such as networks and informal meetings, which the data in all likelihood understate. This development sits within wider union efforts to make themselves more flexible and responsive to their constituencies.

Table 1.3: WG types in TUC affiliates*

Year	Women's ...								
	Course	Committee	Conference	Work -shop	Weekend School	Network	Seminar	Informal Meeting/ Caucus	TUC Women's Conference delegation
1987/89	14	11	5	1	3	2	1	2	18
1997/99	15	14	8	2	3	7	1	8	19
Change	+1	+3	+3	+1	-	+5	-	+6	+1

Compiled from: SERTUC (1987, 1989, 1997 and 2000) surveys.
* Only unions which provided data for both 1987/89 and 1997/99 were included (n=21).

Much women's organising has gained legitimacy by becoming more 'institutionalised' and formal (Briskin 1999), experiencing wider union recognition and constraints. Elliot (1984) asserts that women's committees in some unions were always of necessity formal and adopted a 'general' equality remit in order to obtain union support and funding (see also Briskin 1993, 1983, 1999; Boehm 1991). She suggests that this ultimately undermines the principle of autonomous organisation and implies an often spurious similarity between the problems of different 'disadvantaged' groups (see also Virdee & Grint 1994) whereas others see it as a good use of resources, emphasising overlap in different groups' concerns and their exchange of experiences and ideas (e.g. Coote 1980b).

No existing studies comprehensively assess how particular WG types function. However, Briskin (1998a) asserts that the functional emphasis of informal and formal bodies relates to the balance of WG autonomy from and integration into unions. Formal, elected committees more overtly support the pull toward integration and function through the structures of representative democracy. Informal committees are more supportive of autonomy. Similarly, in Britain, Elliot (1984) suggests that formal women's committees

are less about autonomous organising and more about 'building bridges' with the formal union structure so that women's demands can be fed into it with formal backing. '(S)isterhood, support, shared experience ... have been carried out much more by women-only courses or by informal workplace women's groups' (p. 68). With their more participatory practices, informal bodies function both as witnesses to the activities of formal committees in order to help prevent co-option, and constituency builders to further support the authority of the formal committees (Briskin 1998a).

The impact of positive measures

A growing body of work indicates that positive discrimination measures, alone or in conjunction with positive action, broadly effect greater participation by women in mainstream and 'special' posts, empower them in unions and raise their concerns. For instance, women's reserved seats are thought have a 'ripple effect' on women's participation when linked to other measures (Till-Retz 1986, Beale 1982, ICFTU 1991). Colgan & Ledwith (1994:9) describe separate organising as 'the current hallmark' of developing the 'long' equal opportunities agenda. Heery & Kelly (1988) and Cuneo (1993:117) support this, suggesting that 'some of the most creative energies and innovative policies in the labour movement today have emerged through women's separate organizing'. Specific findings are mixed, however. For instance, Coote (1980b) noted only weak links between the three women reserved seat holders on NUPE's NEC and ordinary female members, and the business of policy-making on women's issues.

Specific change brought about by WGs, the focus here, is rarely assessed. When it is, findings are piece-meal and mixed. For instance, Aldred (1981:140) concluded: 'women's committees have done a great deal of good work ... but considering that some of them have been on the go for years, the impact they have made on trade union thinking or on the public image of the trade union movement seems quite small'. More recently, focusing on individual senior women's activism in MSF, Kirton (1999) found that their social integration within the union was partly contingent upon 'women's support networks'. However, many women involved in WGs are said to be 'frustrated by their

tendency to remain a ghetto, failing to influence the agendas of the main, mixed sex decision-making bodies and the practices of their administrations. Women have begun to speak of 'mainstreaming' the work of the women's structures' (Cockburn 1995:109, Elliot 1984). US research shows that while WGs play a key role in augmenting women's union activity and can sustain their leadership in some situations, they can sideline female equality and authority in other cases (Cobble 1990). In Western Europe and North America, Briskin (1998a:5) conjectures that 'constituency building [including WGs] may, in fact, be imperative to increased representation'.

While these studies all stress WGs as a means to achieving positive action ends, some research indicates that the relationship between positive action and discrimination, and women's level of engagement with unions, is not uni-directional. In Canada, Briskin (1998a) comments that in some contexts, improved representation contributes to constituency building and *vice-versa*. In Britain, women's increased participation and WGs may enable the establishment of more WGs. Elliot (1984) noted that from the end of the 1970s to the time of writing, women's courses had had a powerful impact in terms of spreading support for women-only organisation to a broader group of women unionists. Yet, despite Bacchi's (1990) emphasis on the ideological and institutional constraints on the nature of women's struggles within unions, there have been few assessments of the influence of the union setting on the relationship between positive action or discrimination (including WGs) and women's engagement with unions. Rare exceptions include work by Coote (1980a) and Coote and Campbell (1982) who noted the effects of union size and structure. Particularly in larger unions where members are scattered around small workplaces, with no centralised bargaining structures, poor communication is a serious obstacle to the effectiveness of positive action. They assert that the problem will only diminish if stronger women's networks are developed, more women emerge in senior positions and union hierarchies keep in closer touch with the grass roots.

While it has become increasingly hard to deny that women cannot make significant rather than 'snail-like' progress unless special measures are taken (SERTUC 1994), there have been fierce arguments in British unions over their adoption. For example, some have viewed proactive measures as interfering with the 'natural progression' of women's engagement with unions and do not accept women's structural, institutionalised and historic disadvantage. If the dominant notion of fairness is equal treatment, and many men feel that such a state already exists, then it is difficult to convey the need for policies specifically targeted at women (Liff 1996). Positive measures are perceived as 'undemocratic' (i.e. not liberal democratic; cf. Phillips 1992[11]) or 'favouritism', so that a 'major contradiction of the radical approach ... (is) that it seeks to put right old wrongs by means that themselves are felt to be wrong' (Cockburn 1989:217). Indeed, having explored reactions to equality programmes, Cockburn (1991) found white, 'average' men who felt that *they* were now being treated unfairly relative to other constituency groups. This can undermine many women's commitment to equality measures (e.g. for fear of male hostility and accusations that they get on because of their gender and not their ability - Liff 1996).

Positive equality measures have also been seen as divisive by members and by existing powerholders who perceive them as a vehicle for the pursuit of vested minority interests at their expense (Colgan & Ledwith 1994, 1996a, 1996b). This includes some women in prominent union posts who have fought for many years to 'make it' on men's terms (i.e. reflecting a deficit approach) (Coote & Campbell 1982, cf. Cook *et al.* 1992). As a result, some have been hostile to or not understood the need for WGs, suggesting that they are not representative of most women who were largely content with the way things were (Field 1983). As a form separate organising, WGs have been specifically criticised for being divisive as meanings of separate organising and separatism are often conflated (e.g. see Elliot 1984, Orr 1995). Yet, as Caputi & MacKenzie (1992:75-6) and Briskin (1993, 1987) observe, the charge of 'separatism' against women is ironic, given the distinction 'between separatism (sometimes temporary) of oppressed groups and the entrenched

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[11] A considerable literature critiques liberal democracy for not serving women well (e.g. Pateman 1990, Rowbotham 1986). Yet Phillips asserts that while liberal democracy has failed to deliver on its promises to women, it does not help to address these

separatism of many élite patriarchal groups ... [which serves to] consolidate male power and institutionalise fear and loathing of the 'Other''.

Separate organising by women has been used by some to support a right-wing agenda which uses biology as a justification to enforce women's 'special' responsibilities for children and caring. Separateness and stereotypes about women - that they are more nurturing, relational, emotional *by nature* - becomes exclusion from the public sphere. Briskin (1998a, 1993) argues that this underscores the importance of framing WGs not with essentialist arguments but as dynamic, strategic and historical responses to socially constructed and unequal union (i.e. material) experiences - as the evidence suggests.

Some men in the unions see positive measures such as identity groups (including WGs) as a waste of time and resources. For instance, in 1995, a candidate for the post of General Secretary in Unison argued that constituency groups should be disbanded because they were a drain on resources and opened the union up to 'ridicule' (see Mann *et al.* 1997). Others argue that WGs and women's posts are 'tokenistic', 'an insult' to women as they treat them as something other than the equals of men (Coote & Campbell 1982, Coote 1980b, Cobble 1990). They can divert women's energies and talents away from the main seats of power, 'ghettoising' and marginalising women's concerns (Wever 1997) and relieving men of the need to bother with women's interests (Dickens 1993, Charles 1983). In practice, therefore, women in group identity-based arrangements, both in the union mainstream (e.g. reserved seats) or otherwise (e.g. WGs) have faced resistance, their credibility challenged and their ability to fulfil their mandate hampered (Kirton & Healy 1999, Cockburn 1995, Briskin 1999). Yet, although some see the pursuit of unity and separate organising as conflicting, feminist unionists have promoted a greater inclusiveness of the union membership and an expanded agenda but have had to wage their struggles within a masculinist context while endeavouring to show their commitment to the principle of union unity (Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Guard 1997).

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failings in terms of giving up on it.

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Environmental trends have encouraged greater union membership diversity. This diversity is often grounded in social identities which may be 'work mediated' (Murray 1994) but neither originate in or are confined to the workplace. In the 1980s the notion of dual identities (i.e. two genders) was challenged further as the significance of race, caste and ethnic differences in structuring the labour force was highlighted. However, identities are selectively mobilised in response to economic, social, political and cultural processes. Identity is therefore 'a slippery concept, for it is not fixed'[12] (Bavnani 1993:37, Chhachhi & Pittin 1999). Further, differences based on sex interact with other dimensions of our identities such as class, age and ethnicity (themselves increasingly fractured). In short, although union WGs respond to a perceived sense of group-based injustice, the extent to which this is the case is unknown.

While labour force diversity is not a new phenomenon, unions have had difficulty coming to terms with it (see Hyman 1992). Many female, black and other worker groups have viewed unions as implicitly discriminatory in their traditional 'gender/colour-blind' and 'adversarial' (i.e. majority-rules decision-making) approaches (Leidner 1991) based on individuals' (cf. social groups') representation (Cockburn 1995, Lee 1987, Dickens 1997b) while 'hoping that the unions would get things done for them' (Ramdin 1987:328).

The need to negotiate new bases of (dynamic) solidarity thus presents unions with a major challenge that is increasingly seen as central to their successful challenge of wider threats. Leidner (1991) argues, for example, that by enabling input from previously silent social groups within an overarching unity of goal (i.e. a unitarist approach), a shared interest can be created which is the best outcome for the union as a whole. This is because it can provide a richer array of meanings and representations of social reality and increase the knowledge available in policy-making (see also Young 1990).

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[12] The social identity literature tells us little about how and why one might be more important at any time than the other though leaders and activists can be influential in this respect (Kelly 1998).

Coverage of responses to union membership diversity is limited[13]. This reflects many unions' belated recognition of the significance of worker diversity to their organisation, and the related paucity of information on members' social characteristics (Date-Bah 1997a). Yet, while large organisations such as unions tend to be less than innovative and often resemble conventional interest group organisations, 'diversity' measures can be identified, enabling the movement to encompass what Laclau & Mouffe (1985) term 'radical and plural' democratic arrangements. For example, since John Monks' appointment as General Secretary in 1994, the TUC has pledged to recreate an encompassing union movement which speaks 'on behalf of a broadly conceived labour interest' (Heery 1998:356, Monks 1999). Initiatives include its campaign for part-time workers, raised profile of anti-racism work, charters dealing with race and gender, Disability and Youth fora, annual Pride at Work conference on gay and lesbian rights, and campaign for students at work. The TUC has also strengthened ethnic minority and female representation on its EC (Dickens 1997a; TUC 2000, 1997b, 1996; Heery 1998; Morris 1995).

While not seeking a wholesale dismantling of the practices of liberal-representative democracy, some individual unions have pushed against the limits of existing practice through experimentation, conflict and on-going adaptations of dominant practices (Leidner 1991; for a more general discussion, see Phillips 1999). The trend towards representing women is most apparent in the field of union government (Heery 1998) (e.g., reserved seats for women, some WGs). Less dramatic are measures to secure fuller representation of ethnic minorities, the disabled, lesbian and gays, and youth. For instance, there have been changes over the last decade to union educational programmes, policy statements and resource commitments expressed through the establishment of race equality structures, reserved seats, self-organised groups and requirements for proportional representation on various bodies (*ibid.*, Dickens 1997b, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Lawrence 1994, SERTUC 1997, Terry 1996, Wrench & Virdee 1996[14]).

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[13] This contrasts with the considerable organisation and management literature on equality and worker diversity (e.g. Kandola et al, 1995, Liff 1996, Rubin 1997, Liff & Wacjman 1996, Cockburn 1989).
[14] The recency of these initiatives is emphasised by Virdee & Grint's (1994) work which reports almost no growth of self-organised ethic minority groups along the lines more common for women members.

Formal union support of variation *among* women (in terms of differing personal and social characteristics and aspirations) has also grown. For instance, a recent TUC (1997b) report recognised that *young* women were particularly difficult to organise. Kirton (1999) asserts that union negotiators and policy-makers need to be sensitive to the needs of the diverse range of women they represent or hope to represent (see also Breakwell 1979). According to existing SERTUC data, however, there has been only a weak response in terms of collective organising around gender *and* other identity features.

However, WGs are said to play a relatively important role in emphasising key concerns for other groups (Briskin 1993, 1999). Women's committees and conferences, for example, have long provided venues where issues of race, sexuality and homophobia have been raised (White 1993). Similarly, SERTUC data suggest that British union WGs and individual female activists play a growing role in pressuring unions to not only extend the boundaries of their agenda concerns and examine the gender implications of more issues, but also to raise greater awareness of 'diversity' among women (e.g. focusing on harassment for minority women). Against this, Leah (1993) notes that efforts in Canada by 'women of colour' to raise issues inside women's committees and unions have not always been welcome and that black women activists underscore the need for separate organising by race to ensure that race issues are not overshadowed by gender issues.

Comprehensive assessment of WGs' impacts in respect of diversity and equality is lacking. However, broad-brush evaluations of measures taken to help various social groups have been cautiously optimistic. For example:

> (m)any of the changes are modest and are vulnerable to the charge of tokenism and it is also the case that changes in formal union structures and policies may have little impact on union activity within the workplace. Nevertheless ... the direction seems clear, towards a more pluralistic form of trade unionism ... (Heery 1998:357)

WGs have also provided an important precedent to increased separate organising by other union constituency groups (Briskin 1998a). In Unison, for instance, 'the issue of women's

representation was tied up from the start with that of three other groups - black members, gay/lesbian members and members with disability' (Terry 1996:101) and self-organising groups were established for all four constituencies. Separate organising can provide the basis for different constituencies to come together from positions of strength (Briskin 1998a, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a) though Virdee & Grint (1994) stress that there is not necessarily a natural alliance among different groups. As Briskin (1998a:9) notes, '(t)he meaning of separate organizing is always being negotiated and reconstituted through struggle and resistance'.

Towards transformation?

Most efforts to encourage women's fuller engagement with unions struggle *within* existing organisational arrangements. However, some argue that these measures need to be complemented by initiatives which shift the power imbalance between men and women within unions, and alter the nature of union arrangements themselves. Several authors (e.g. Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Ledwith & Colgan 1994) suggest that women's demands for a more radical approach via positive discrimination initiatives have gathered momentum due to the inability of liberal incrementalism to bring about a fair representation and distribution of rewards. However, the capacity of equality initiatives underpinned by either liberal or radical ideas to effect women's full equality within existing union organisation is increasingly contested (see Phillips' (1999) discussion of broad parallels in developments in the women's movement).

This said, transformative measures have been seen to encompass the equality initiatives outlined earlier (Cockburn 1989). For instance, Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) and Davies (1988) view the consciousness-raising of the radical approach for a fair distribution of rewards for all groups including women as only the *basis* for releasing a struggle for power and influence. At their longest, however, transformational initiatives involve a questioning of the constitution, nature, purpose, culture, norms, relations and social processes of unions and the processes by which the power of some groups over others is built and renewed (Briskin 1993, Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Elliot 1984, Kirton & Healy

1999, Cunnison & Stageman 1995, Cockburn 1995, Needleman 1993, Creese 1995, Ledwith *et al.* 1990). They involve a change in the nature of power, or a 'melting away of the white, male monoculture' (Cockburn 1989:218), through the further democratisation of unions.

Organising 'autonomously', including WGs, is thought to be an essential *part* of making the space from which to challenge organisational arrangements (Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Kirton & Healy 1999, Charles 1983). However, it is also recognised that strategies of women's 'separatism' are not strong enough on their own to sustain an alternative feminist project within unions (e.g. Ledwith & Colgan 1994). Cockburn (1989) argues, for instance, for a grassroots, self-organised impetus from within the institution *and* outside. She maintains that there is then likely to be a greater potential constituency of support for a long (i.e. more ambitious) agenda within organisations because it is harder for opposing forces to criticise the demands made by women unionists as furthering their own sectional feminist agenda at the expense of union solidarity (see also Colgan & Ledwith 1994, 1996a).

In practice, unions have seldom ventured into the terrain potentially opened up by transformative equality strategies (Cockburn 1995). In respect of self-organisation strategies, for example, Cobble (1990) and Virdee & Grint (1994:202) assert that they 'often manifest a powerful commitment to the goals and ideals of the labour movement'. This fits with a pluralist approach whereby neither the goals pursued by groups nor the methods used to achieve them threaten the fundamentals of existing institutional relationships (Martin 1989). This point has not been lost on employers who have wanted to keep unions at a distance from equal opportunities or on a 'short' equality agenda (Dickens 1993).

There are some signs, however, that aspects of unionism are being modified to reflect feminist ideas though opportunities to push for a long agenda differ across unions. For instance, Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) observed of Unison that the chance to transform

organisational features was best taken in a period of turbulent change when existing structures were fluid. Kirton & Healy (1999) observe that MSF's senior female officials balance 'status quo' objectives and 'transformational' strategies in working towards union survival and renewal. They concur with Cockburn (1991) 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' (p. 43). Unions themselves have begun to reconsider accepted patterns of organisation and behaviour, beyond targeted recruitment, in response to their membership difficulties (e.g., Heery 1998).

The extent to which WGs specifically provide the kernel for transformative change within unions is largely unknown. Significantly, however, recent developments in the conceptualisation of separate organising and WGs themselves may impact on how they are received in the union setting. Briskin (1998a) notes that traditionally separate organising has been overly associated with separatism from men rather than with the equally important separatism from dominant organisational practices. To challenge one is to challenge the other, however (see also Elliot 1984, Needleman 1988, Leidner 1991). She claims that women's 'continued success' depends on the maintenance of a strategic balance between autonomy from the structures and practices of unions, and integration (mainstreaming) into those structures. Autonomy supports revisioning of union practices, prevents the dissipation of radical claims for inclusivity and democratisation, maintains the integrity of women's struggle within the general labour struggle, and encourages alliances with the wider women's movement (Briskin 1998a, 1993; ICTU 1987; Sugiman 1993). Integration prevents women's marginalisation, provides a source of legitimacy, creates the conditions for both resource allocation and gendering of union strategy, and helps to prevent WGs from becoming 'dumping grounds' or being overloaded by trying to tackle multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously (Cobble 1990; Briskin 1998a, 1993; Foley 1995; Lawrence 1994; Till-Retz 1986; Feldberg 1987)[15]. The autonomy-integration paradigm removes the need to choose a separate organising or a

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[15] Indeed, Virdee & Grint (1994) emphasise Black and minority self-organising as a strategy of relative autonomy.

mainstreaming strategy and the assumption of a linear and progressive move from one to the other (see also Colgan & Ledwith 1998).

In the same vein, challenging some (female) union activists (e.g. see Kirton 1999) and some academics (e.g. Cook *et al.* 1992) who maintain that interim separatism should last no longer than 'necessary', Cockburn (1995) and others argue that women's structures should not be seen as a 'stop-gap' measure. The need for their existence is likely to be among the long term requirements of any radical union democracy. Women's committees, conferences and courses have already existed for some time in many unions (e.g. see Morris 1992, Trebilcock 1991, SERTUC 2000) though some assert that unions cannot tolerate intense or prolonged mobilisation which challenges their traditions, and often try to incorporate, co-opt or control women's structures (e.g. Field 1983, Virdee & Grint 1994).

Finally, there is some debate over the exclusivity of the character of challenges to the union *status quo* by women. For instance, Briskin (1999) and Cobble (1993) assert that 'more' democratic, local, networking, participatory approaches to organising and representation seem to align more with 'female styles' of leadership and conflict resolution. Gender-conscious styles are also alluded to by others such as Cobble (1991a, b) and Crain (1994). These may be socially constituted, reflect women's innate 'ways' and/or respond to (white) male power within the union which functions to exclude and disadvantage women. However, other social movements (e.g. human rights, ecological, peace, women's) typically use the organisational forms and modes of struggle employed by union women (see Castells 1997, Waterman 1999), reflecting their shared characteristic: oppression by dominant identity groups.

Summary

Environmental and internal factors have pushed unions to re-consider their relevance to women, and women workers have become more interested in union protection. The link between unions' survival and success, and their incorporation of women members and

their interests and views stresses the need to better understand WGs as a nexus between women's and union organising. This review of equality initiatives indicated that unions differ in the priority they attach to internal equality and the methods by which they think it should be achieved. WGs are a form of positive discrimination and are unevenly yet increasingly found across British unions. Little is known about the specific nature of WGs' aims, how they address them, the equality ideas which underpin them or the impact of WG initiatives on women's circumstances within the union (cf. the considerable body of research which assesses the equality aims that inform work organisations and their initiatives). WGs may be informed by a range of equality ideas of varying 'length' though the review indicated that they increasingly reflect a more political, transformation-seeking edge while underscoring the need for union unity.

1.6   Women's Groups' roles

Lack of research into WGs' particular equality initiatives and approaches has been noted. There is also some confusion in the limited WG literature of their reasons for existing (i.e. purpose) and what they do (i.e. functions). The following list pulls together WGs' espoused 'purposes' from various sources:

- to advance women's interests by lobbying on bargaining issues and issuing recommendations of concern;
- to act as an intermediary between union bodies and individuals;
- to help women's recruitment, representation and involvement in unions;
- to provide a 'space' in which to mobilise, disseminate information and exchange ideas, vent frustrations and realise a common predicament (i.e. politicise women);
- to strategically challenge discriminatory attitudes and practices, and to democratise union arrangements;
- to develop mobilising, leadership and assertiveness skills, and train women in union procedure;
- to support women by providing them with a 'safe environment' apart from men to (re)-build self-confidence and collectively explore and define their needs.

The list indicates that, aggregately, WGs pursue a range of objectives of varying equality 'length'. Yet, purpose and function are seldom delineated according to WG type. Even in the few sources where they are, the emphasis varies. For instance, Braithwaite & Byrne (1995) observe that women's committees mainly promote increased participation by women in union leadership (see also Pocock (1995) on South Australian unions). Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) and Aldred (1981) suggest that their main functions are to report and advise but not to make policy (cf. bodies such as the executive). Cockburn (1995) stresses the often vague co-ordinating role played by women's committees (see also Trebilcock 1991, ICFTU 1991). Cuneo (1993) views women's committees and caucuses as pivotal for initiating and carrying out most anti-sexism and 'affirmative action'[16] campaigns. On women's conferences, Aldred (1981) writes that they pass resolutions on relevant issues while Colgan & Ledwith (1996a:160) see them as important fora where women 'meet, support, debate and learn from one another'. SERTUC (1997) data and Cuneo (1993) indicate that a range of WG types help women to access union posts, prioritise their concerns and establish connections with the outside women's movement to change union arrangements. The roles and approaches of particular WG types thus need further examination.

1.7   Study research questions, rationale and contribution

Some of the main gaps in the limited literature on union WGs concern:

- the factors relating to union identity which influence the number and overall 'shape' of WGs

- the aims which WGs pursue, how they address them and the equality ideas which underpin them and

- the effects WGs have in terms of attaining women's union equality

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[16] In the ''° .... ..-... .-.-   ..   .. ' . ' . ' : used in place of 'positive action' (e.g. see Cook et al. 1992).

Exploration of these questions here is necessary given the increasing importance of women as a source of members and continuing under-representation of women and their concerns in unions. Unions and their WGs constitute a legitimate topic for academic study for many other important reasons. Unions are remain important, dynamic institutions in society (Rose 1993, McIlroy 1995, Martin 1989). While some authors (e.g. Neary 2000, Munck 1999) note that unions in Britain and throughout the world face an uncertain future, others seek to dismiss suggestions that the labour movement is in crisis (e.g. Kelly 1998, cf. Howell 1999) and recent reports highlight that unions can enter the new millennium with more confidence than at any time in the past 20 years, particularly if they can commit significant resources to organising (e.g. Kelly 2000; BBC News 23 February 2000). This study is timely given the need for union strategies for survival and effectiveness which increasingly depend recognising the diverse needs of different worker groups (see Hyman 1991, 1997).

The focus of the study is justified as women's views and experiences have been largely omitted or downplayed by much conventional social science methodology and frames of reference. Within industrial relations, the mainstream literature has not shown much interest in women as the subjects or shapers of research (Forrest 1993, Dickens 1997a). Further, few studies systematically analyse women's efforts to organise though, when it is pieced together, the story of women's activism is long and impressive (Forrest 1993). This has contributed to the invisibility of women and the disappearance/non-appearance of women's accomplishments from historical records (a problem voiced in nearly every other discipline), a slanted image of unions in which women have been involved, distorted understandings of women, and additional errors because generalisations were grounded in a single sex perspective.

What treatment there is of female union activism has tended to focus on sporadic or short-lived mobilisation. Little is known about the circumstances necessary for women's sustained activism, as in many WGs. A few recent studies at the individual level of senior female officials in the Manufacturing Science Finance (MSF) union reveal the gendered

nature of their commitment to sustained union activism (Kirton 1999, Kirton & Healy 1999). However, the general failure to examine women's involvement in less standard ways, including WGs, implicitly marginalises these forms of activism and women themselves as their engagement with unions is often less structured than that of men.

The fact that WGs are under-researched and -theorised phenomena is an even more important omission given their growing presence in British unions and significance as a non-mainstream but very real form of organising for female unionists. As Briskin (1998a:2) notes, even though women's organising in Western Europe and North America has developed in sophistication, innovation and efficacy, '(t)he discourse for describing and discussing such organizing ... has not always kept pace'.

The rationale for examining union WGs is also strengthened by debates over the alleged decline of collectivism and rise of individualism, specifically whether union collectivism has been displaced by a more complex pattern of specific collectivisms organised through new social movements (Kelly 1998, Gallie 1989; for a broader assessment, see Rentoul 1989). WGs' broad aim to impact positively on women's lives and to reduce gender inequalities via collective action also justifies a public as well as scholarly 'right' to know more about them (see Stake 1995).

In examining the three above-mentioned research questions, this thesis makes several key conceptual and empirical contributions. First, it adds to the growing body of feminist work which examines organisational theory (Acker et al. 1992) and redresses the relative inattention to women's activism. Second, it provides an initial but useful synthesis of research and theory from different literatures, including those of industrial relations, gender studies, political studies, social psychology and sociology. For instance, there exists a considerable literature on gender equality theory and its application to work organisations (e.g. see Jewson & Mason 1986, Cockburn 1989). There is some work which links equality ideas to union aims and initiatives. However, the equality ideas which inform the pursuit of union WGs' aims and the impact of these groups on gender

equality in unions have received little attention. This is despite the potential advantages that WGs offer for better strategising by unions and women over traditional responses to union members as a homogeneous group.

Third, the study makes the first known systematic examination of the organisational 'identity', based on Hyman's (1994) union 'model', of individual unions and WGs. Fourth, by closely investigating union WGs, the study begins to chart the significant yet largely unexplored collective nexus between the union and women's movements that reflects different trends around collectivisation.

Fifth, the study's in-depth examination of the complex relations between unions and their WGs responds to the claim that interactions amongst groups *within* particular institutions (McLennan 1995) and between groups and their institutional location are under-theorised and -researched. The dearth of such work is due in part to researchers' preoccupation with the contradistinction between macro- and micro-phenomena. While some (e.g. organisation theorists) may dispute that there is a deficiency, this argument is certainly relevant given minimal research attention to the relations between unions and their sub-structures (e.g. Heery 1998), including WGs.

Sixth, the study's focus on various WG types contributes to the little examined area of women's engagement in less formal, mainstream or routine union activity (Fosh 1993; cf. Goldthorpe *et al.* 1968). Finally, it makes a number of suggestions in respect of more effective WG and union strategy, policy and operation on the basis of key empirical findings.

1.8   Chapter synopses

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 elaborates and justifies the philosophical approach and methodology adopted to respond empirically to the research questions. The qualitative approach of multiple case design, which captures rich data about MSF and USDAW and a number of their WGs, is deemed the most appropriate

research response. While the study is mainly exploratory, two general analytic strategies based on an original equality typology and Hyman's (1994) model of union 'identity' guide and are extended by a grounded research approach (see Glaser & Strauss 1967). The chapter also details how the analytic categories of these frameworks are operationalised. It outlines what kind of evidence is derived from semi-structured interviews, observational activity and examination of union/WG documents. These are only fully applicable to the complex cases and initiatives under investigation, limiting 'grand theorising' about union identity and WGs, but it is suggested that clear reporting and adherence to tests of validity and rigour may facilitate wider testing of the study findings.

Chapter 3 is the first of three chapters which describe and analyse the cases. It overviews WGs in both MSF and USDAW. In response to the first research question, it then examines how various facets of the main features of MSF and USDAW's organisational 'identity' influence the number and arrangement of their respective women's structures, highlighting the relative strength of these influences where possible. The main points are summarised to set the scene for the examination of four of MSF's WGs in Chapter 4 and five WGs in USDAW in Chapter 5. These two chapters respond to the second and third research questions which focus on WG aims, how they address them and the equality ideas that underpin them; as well as the impact WGs have for women within their union setting. The analyses of WGs are fully related to the influence of the union setting and *vice versa*. They are also linked to limited existing empirical work which devotes some attention to WGs as this is largely specific to particular aspects of WGs.

Chapter 6 draws together, and where possible compares, the implications of the major findings relating to the union cases and WGs to summarise the study's response to the original three research questions. The findings from the preceding three chapters are then used to develop the union identity model and build explanations relating to the research aims. The chapter seeks to support and discuss the implications of the general thesis arguments that i) WG presence and their union-centred contributions are of considerable

benefit to women and the union as a whole, particularly if their activities are better directed and 'longer' equality aims are achieved, and ii) union identity is a significant but not exclusive influence on WG equality approaches and impact, with implications for ways of enlarging their effectiveness. It notes possible limitations of the study which could form the basis for wider testing of the thesis ideas in later studies.

1.9   Summary

This chapter outlined general trends in women's union membership and participation levels in Britain. It revealed that women now constitute nearly half of the workforce and their union membership continues to grow. Despite this, their progress within unions has been slow and uneven, and women's union representation and involvement still lag behind those of men. This has implications for the extent to which women's concerns are represented in unions, and their union experiences are equitable ones. It also raises questions about how successful strategies for union revitalisation can be if the pursuit of women's union equality is integral to them.

Although a growing number of works emerged over the last decade which examine women's current engagement with unions, gender equality issues still occupy a marginal place within 'mainstream' industrial relations. This chapter reviewed initiatives to improve women's engagement with unions. These measures range from 'short' equality initiatives such as women's passive integration into unions through to 'long' equality measures involving the transformation of unions themselves. WGs, increasingly common in British unions, were categorised as a form of positive discrimination. Despite their growing numbers, WGs were found to be under-researched and -theorised. Union WGs were defined here as organising by women which responds to their concerns and need for access and power within dynamic social settings, including unions, and key dimensions of union WGs were related to their 'interim separatist', collective and women-only character. They were portrayed as a strategic and historical response to women's socially constructed experience and related disadvantage rather than as essentialist in nature. As a

form of organising based on 'difference' (i.e. gender), WGs contrast with the individual-based, representative democratic arrangements of much union organisation.

A review of the limited literature on WGs revealed the absence of an integrated body of work and the need to respond to several significant research gaps. The objective of this study is thus to provide an empirical and conceptual contribution toward the following major questions:

- What union factors influence the number and overall 'shape' of WGs?;

- What aims do WGs pursue, how do they address them and what equality ideas inform them?; and

- What impacts do WGs have on gender equality in their union?

The next chapter details the methodological approach thought most appropriate for approaching these research questions.

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[1] The term 'union' rather than 'trade union' is preferred in this thesis to reflect that they are today most commonly organised in Britain as general or conglomerate organisations (e.g. Edwards *et al.* 1992, Martin 1989).

2   RESEARCH DESIGN

2.0   Introduction

From our critique of the literature, three main research questions about WGs in British unions emerged relating to the union-level factors that influence the number and configuration of WGs; WG aims, how they are pursued and the equality ideas that inform them; and the effects WG have on gender equality in their union. The questions assume that WG- and union-level factors are central to understanding WGs. They also assume that WG arrangements and the factors which shape and are shaped by them are dynamic, favouring a research design which can accommodate the contemporary *and* historical aspects of these complex, social phenomena (Kitay & Callus 1998, cf. Yin 1994). The research response thus requires descriptive, exploratory and explanatory data as a way of coming to 'know' the unions and the significance of WGs for union women.

The approach adopted was qualitative, multiple case research conducted from a constructivist/feminist standpoint. The chapter firstly justifies the qualitative approach and the philosophical and ethical position of the study. It then explains why case studies were chosen over other research strategies and outlines the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. The rationale for undertaking two union case studies is also given. Criteria used to select the research sites and how the sites were accessed are then described. The chapter discusses two WG pilot studies which improved the case design. It then outlines the main data collection tools, measures taken to manage the case evidence and the general analytic strategies and techniques. The analytic frameworks - Hyman's (1994) model of union identity and an original equality typology - are then detailed and their selection is justified before criteria used to reinforce the validity of the research design are discussed. Finally, the method of case reporting is overviewed.

2.1   Philosophical standpoint and the rationale for qualitative inquiry

Ontological and epistemological assumptions not only demonstrate the philosophical stance of the researcher but also portray the appropriate connections between the research objectives and methodology. Various schools of thought have proposed different

approaches (Blaikie 1993). The nature of the interpretivist paradigms which structure qualitative research in the social sciences implies the appropriateness here of the ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies of the constructivist/interpretivist and feminist paradigms.

Implicit in the interpretivist and feminist paradigms is a preference for empirical research. Constructivism assumes a relative ontology (i.e. multiple realities), a subjective epistemology (i.e. 'knower' and subject create understandings) and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (i.e. phenomena are interpreted in terms of the meanings people bring to them, with all meanings treated as valid) (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, Stanley & Wise 1983). Subjectivist epistemologies and a naturalistic methodology are also assumed in the feminist paradigm and inform three frequent goals of feminist research such as this: to document women's lives; to understand women's experiences from their own perspectives; and to conceptualise their behaviour as an expression of social contexts (Reinharz 1992, Lennon 1995).

Some argue that subjectivist epistemology has no basis for the 'rational' resolution of agreements because it rejects the idea that there are real conditions of women's oppression independent of particular women's experience of them (e.g. Hammersley 1995, cf. Ramazanoglu 1992). However, it is argued here that validity can be 'rational' *and* determined by study participants, reflecting a rationalist-constructivist view. An outside world exists, corresponding to study participants' notions of it (Stake 1995). Multiple views need not necessitate the absence of a rational resolution. At the same time, treating all individuals' perceptions of unions and WGs as valid does not necessarily negate the idea that there are real conditions of women's oppression independent of particular women's experiences of them and the feminist model privileges a materialist-realist ontology.

The feminist standpoint here has emancipatory implications and is not value-free (cf. much positivist work which seldom makes explicit its moral and political commitments -

Reinharz 1992). For example, focussing on WGs emphasises social identity group representation and women's general disadvantage as socially constructed. It also responds to the 'gender blindness' of much industrial relations work and the social sciences generally. Furthermore, many study participants (myself included) did not view all aspects of existing union operations as likely to fully empower women.

Some critics of feminist methodology argue that there are problems with gender categories (e.g. Hammersley 1995). Yet, while some feminist discourse may have irreconcilable conceptions of gender relations and the worth and character of male and female stereotypes, this may also be welcomed for reflecting multiple perspectives about experiences and phenomena, and indicate the need for more theorising and research (Reinharz 1992). Hammersley argues that although social research needs to be assessed for male bias, feminist bias is also a danger. However, this study is not critical of male bias *per se* but of its covert nature and presentation as 'truth for all'.

Finally, qualitative research does not aim to achieve the measurement and predication of a phenomenon but to interpret social actors' perceptions in relation to meanings embedded in social settings. In this way it critiques aspects of the politics and method of positivism by privileging certain issues and time, methods and grounded theories. While recent analysis revealed a shift from inductive, qualitative and policy-oriented industrial relations research to deductive, quantitative and discipline-oriented research (Whitfield & Strauss 2000), the complex phenomena under investigation here encourage a qualitative approach (Parker 2000a, 2000b). However, different methods are viewed here as alternative ways of telling union and WG 'stories' - whilst Reinharz (1992) suggests that feminist fieldwork has a special role in upholding a non-positivist perspective, feminists generally have not claimed that their fieldwork is inherently feminist or purely qualitative (e.g. Oakley 1998).

2.2   Rationale for case inquiry

The constructivist/feminist standpoint of this study shapes the logic of its qualitative design which involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject and draws on various methods, including case study. This study treats individual unions as case sites as they form the primary 'unit of analysis' (Yin 1989) in which WGs are embedded. Case research builds on a significant methodological tradition in the social sciences, including industrial relations (Michelson & Baird 1995, Kitay & Callus 1998).

The advantages and disadvantages of case study design are extensively discussed in the research methodology literature. Advantages include the flexibility of multiple data collection methods, the generation of insightful stories and detailed description (cf. statistical information) (Reinharz 1992), the inductive generation of hypotheses and theory (e.g. Yin 1993, Whitfield & Strauss 1998, Glaser & Strauss 1967, Strauss 1987, Eisenhardt 1989) and, in contrast to many other designs, the realisation of a holistic perspective of a phenomenon (Yin 1989, Schwandt 1994, Audi 1995). This enables the researcher to address a broader range of historical, attitudinal and observational issues, and to articulate perceived realities from various sources. In industrial relations, the popularity of case studies reflects the multi-disciplinary character of research, and enables one to provide explanations and an understanding of complex social phenomena such as institutions. Industrial relations also deals with values and viewpoints as well as 'objective' facts, requiring methods that can access a wide range of evidence (Kitay & Callus 1998).

Disadvantages include a case design's limited representativeness of social phenomena when compared, for instance, with survey designs. The theory generated from case studies can also be overly complex, idiosyncratic or narrow (Eisenhardt 1989) - those with less regard for the study of the particular have unjustly stereotyped casework as 'a weak sibling among social science methods' (Yin 1989:10, 1984; Denzin 1989). Some authors go so far as to portray case studies as atheoretical and unsystematic (Michelson & Baird 1995) and some positivists criticise them for not being 'objective' (Denzin &

Lincoln 1994). Further, they are time-consuming when compared to many other designs (Yin 1989, Kitay & Callus 1998).

However, case studies are appropriate here because of my focus on a complex institution, unions, and in light of the lack of clarity between the phenomena under investigation and their context (Yin 1989, Stake 1988). While the boundaries between unions and their environment are distinguishable in certain respects, their interconnectedness make it difficult to say where a union case ends and its surroundings begin and placing phenomena in context is an important element of case studies (Yin 1994). Further, Yin (1989, 1993) argues that a case study, like other research strategies, is a way of investigating an empirical topic by following a set of pre-specified procedures. It is 'hard' even though it has traditionally been considered 'soft' research. The use of union cases here reflects his criticism of the hierarchical view that case studies should be used in the exploratory phase of an investigation and other research strategies should be used at explanatory and descriptive phases. In addition, commenting on case research in industrial relations, Frenkel (cited in Michelson & Baird 1995) argues that it is a misconception to believe that case studies are not systematic. The selection of organisations and respondents should be carefully made according to pre-determined criteria and not be influenced by accessibility or convenience. This is likely to reduce bias and lead to greater confidence in the generalisations that are made.

Criticism of the limited representativeness of case studies is responded to here via the study's intention not to generalise findings about the chosen phenomenon to a 'law' for prediction purposes. It uses analytic frameworks to specify what is to be explored *and* to develop explanations relating to the cases and their WGs (i.e. analytic generalisation as opposed to the sampling logic of surveys). My case studies do not provide a representative account of British unions or their WGs but they contribute to theorising on these phenomena within temporal and local contextual boundaries. From a constructivist viewpoint, each case represents its own uniqueness; explanation-building within and across cases is an amalgam of the perspectives embedded in the data and of my position.

Unlike Eisenhardt's (1989) case approach, however, the starting point in theory construction here is not without prior theoretical considerations or guiding frameworks. This was seen as valuable in practical as well as conceptual terms, safeguarding against the collection of too much data and subsequent loss of clarity to which case study research is prone (Michelson & Baird 1995).

This said, an inductively-oriented rather than tighter, deductive case design was chosen as the research terrain was somewhat unfamiliar and complex; a solid bank of applicable, delineated concepts was absent; and the objectives were largely exploratory (Huberman & Miles 1994, Yin 1989). At the same time, the explanation-seeking aspect of the research lent itself to the use of case studies because they deal with operational links needing to be traced over time (Yin 1993). Further, both union cases were examined in as much depth as a 'single' case, as Platt (1988) advocates. There was an effort to explore in detail and 'thickly' describe (Geertz 1973) the themes and variations of both cases (Sexton 1982), and to develop their issues, contexts and interpretations (Stake 1994). While the analytic categories used to examine the unions and WGs enabled meanings and insights to emerge, they also enabled the modelling of data and testing of constructs.

Finally, it was noted earlier how the significance of gender as a basic feature of all social life has not been included or has been rejected in many conventional research designs of organisational and union studies. In-depth case studies enable an examination of the complex social realities of women in unions that are often overlooked with other methods. Feminist case studies are distinctive in their emphasis of the relations between gender, power and the emancipatory aspects of social settings.

Multiple case studies

Unlike many research strategies, a catalogue of case research designs has yet to be developed though writers such as Yin (1989, 1993) and Stake (1995, 1994) have moved, from different epistemological positions, towards describing a basic set of designs. Because of the instrumental (explanatory) aspect of my research questions, a two union

case design was chosen. This follows the increasingly common approach in industrial relations and other social sciences to use multiple and comparative case designs (Lansbury & Macdonald 1992, Macneil *et al.* 1994, Yin 1989). At the same time, the intrinsic (exploratory and descriptive) aspect of the questions encouraged comprehensive treatment of the cases (see earlier). This intrinsic as well as instrumental treatment of the two union cases justifies the looser, inductive case design described earlier.

A single case study is appropriate when it represents a 'critical' case (cf. a critical experiment) in testing a well-formulated theory; a significant contribution to knowledge and theory building; a 'unique' case; or 'reveals' a previously inaccessible phenomenon. It can even refocus future investigations in an entire field (Yin 1989). Too little was known, however, about unions' internal operations to say whether particular unions constitute critical or exceptional cases, and useful theory relating to the research questions was yet to be constructed. I assumed that both union cases could be 'revelatory' given the lack of relevant prior work, thereby stressing the need for in-depth examination. The cases' complexity and contextual uniqueness have implications for the feminist view of exceptional cases as valuable as a model to emulate or avoid (e.g. Trebilcock 1991). They only become 'blueprints' in the broad sense of providing inspiration for change.

Stake (1995) asserts that the insistence on the ultimacy of theory building appears to be diminishing in qualitative social science. In this field of research, however, the need for theory construction and development is clear. The multiple case design enables a comparison of case differences and reasons why they exist (Michelson & Baird 1995). Multiple case evidence is often considered more compelling than that of single cases and the overall study regarded as more 'robust' though people can learn much that is 'general' from single cases (Yin 1989). In addition to theoretical demands, topical relevance also encouraged the selection of a two case design (*ibid.*). British unions are widespread, contemporary social phenomena with relevance to the lives of many workers and others; and WGs are increasingly apparent in many (see Chapter 1). The lack of in-depth knowledge about union operations and WGs justified the in-depth investigation of

more than one union. The decision not to examine more cases and WGs was influenced by the need to study a manageable number, the thesis timetable and limited financial and physical resources.

2.3   Selecting and accessing field sites

Unions with Women's Groups

As well as practical constraints, the decision to limit case selection to British unions was driven by the need to focus data collection and provide a realistic contextual boundary to the study (i.e. unions in the same system of industrial relations). The selection of two unions, Manufacturing Science and Finance (MSF) and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), followed the application of criteria to ensure purposeful rather than random selection (see Morse 1994). To initially establish which British unions housed multiple WGs, relevant data were gathered from Maksymiw's (1990) union directory. Because of the need for more current and representative data on such, I contacted the SERTUC Women's Rights Committee Chair who organises a regular survey of equality initiatives undertaken by TUC affiliates. In exchange for research assistance with the administration of the survey, questions I posed about WGs were included in the 1997 and 2000 surveys. While the survey focuses on formal initiatives, WGs identified by it were highly representative of their types as the survey return rate has been 80% or more. This provided a reliable starting-point for identifying unions with multiple WGs.

From the survey results, I compiled a database of TUC affiliates with multiple WGs. From this pool of unions, those with the largest number and structural variety of WGs were noted[17]. The number and variety of WGs were deemed significant because of the exploratory aspect of the research. It was not intended that the range of WGs under examination would be representative of all WGs, nor their unions of all British unions. Indeed, the unions in this pool all turned out to be 'reasonably' sized in terms of

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[17] Unison was excluded as another Warwick PhD student was researching its structural arrangements for women.

membership. To elicit a manageable number of unions for preliminary analysis, criteria relating to the variety of union types within this sub-group were applied. Desired characteristics included a 'mixed' gender (cf. heavily male- or female-dominated) membership against which to examine single-sex WGs, and differing scope of organisation (e.g. general, sector-specific) to compare WGs in different settings. The unions highlighted for study were: the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers, the Ceramic and Allied Trades Union, the former Civil and Public Services Association, MSF, USDAW, the General Municipal Boilerworkers and Allied Trades Union, the Transport and General Workers' Union, the Graphical Paper and Media Union and the TUC[18].

Semi-structured interviews were arranged with 15 individuals who had knowledge of WGs in these unions. They were mainly senior female officials, plus a support staff member, education officer (the only male), research officer and academic (Appendix 1). Twenty-four interviews were conducted between mid-1996 and early 1998. A draft report based on the interview material and existing literature summarised the range of WGs across these organisations (see Parker 1998) and was sent to participants for comments, affording them a role in shaping the inquiry, consistent with the feminist aim of developing egalitarian research.

Women's Groups and individuals

The above report revealed that among the eight unions, MSF and USDAW housed the widest array of WG types. Initial contacts in these unions also offered the most extensive access possibilities to WGs and individuals, helping to ensure adequate data collection. The fieldwork timeframe and other resource constraints[19] did not enable the examination of all WGs in the two unions. The following were selected because, combined, they provide a diverse range of structures and were seen as 'key' WGs by study participants, helping to maximise discoveries about WGs:

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[18] Although a number of WGs exist in the TUC and parallel some of those found in its affiliates, individual unions play a different role to the TUC (e.g. they directly serve their membership rather than other unions), encouraging a different range of structures and strategies for women (Parker 1998).
[19] I covered all of my research expenses (travel, accommodation, subsistence, materials) throughout the research with the exception of the women's week and women's weekend in MSF.

- national and 14 regional women's committees in MSF;

- black and ethnic minority women's network in MSF;

- national women's week in MSF;

- national and eight divisional women's committees in USDAW; and

- national women's conference in USDAW.

While all are union-sanctioned, the formality of their organisation varies. This is significant given the under-exposure of less formal mechanisms in prior studies and because women's union involvement is often less structured in character than that of men. The network and women's week were also chosen because of their rarity across British unions (see SERTUC 2000) and because the former is organised around ethnicity as well as gender. Women's committees from both unions were included to enable their comparison within and across the union cases. The committees were also selected, along with USDAW's women's conference, to provide information of common WG forms.

Semi-structured interviews were arranged with MSF's National Secretary (Equalities) and her successor (Anne Gibson). After presenting my fieldwork plan to them, Gibson and USDAW's National Women's Officer (Bernadette Hillon) facilitated my access to an initial group of interviewees, certain WG and union events and documentation. Following-up on contacts suggested by subsequent participants was simpler and less formal in MSF. I had to receive central office approval in USDAW before broaching individuals who were not on the initial interviewee list. Access to WG events was also more forthcoming in MSF. For instance, I was not permitted to attend USDAW's women's conference as several senior female officials felt that my presence could be off-putting to delegates. Several informants who were delegates asserted, however, that my access was probably blocked to prevent me from witnessing any 'problems' at Conference.

While this case study research, like much qualitative work, was intensely interested in personal experiences, views and circumstances (Stake 1994), it was important to consider any possible consequences for study participants of their revelations. Confidentiality was therefore a vital element to the research, reflecting (contextual)-consequentialist ethics (see Denzin & Lincoln 1994). However, certain informants required assurance of their anonymity only in respect of sensitive data. This was adequate to avoid the problems of eliminating important information outlined by Yin (1989).

2.4   Pilot studies

Two WGs formed case pilot studies: the women's week and weekend courses at the MSF college (Hertfordshire) in April and July 1998 respectively. They were selected mainly for practical reasons: timing, access and because the officials present at them were able to facilitate access to other WGs. The pilot studies refined the intended field procedures and the type of data sought (see Janesick 1994, Yin 1989). For example, weekend school attendees revealed that MSF's women's conference was not run in 1997, meaning that it was not among the then current WGs to study. (By contrast, in USDAW, a number of interviewees provided information about their women's conference, influencing the decision to include it in the study). The women's week pilot study later deepened into a full WG initiative for examination as it generated considerable information about this type of WG and its relations with the union.

2.5   Main data collection

Case evidence comes from interviews, documents, direct observation, participant observation, archival records and physical artefacts (Yin 1989, 1994; Kitay & Callus 1998). The first four sources were drawn on to respond to the research questions.

The fieldwork needed to generate 'adequate' data to respond to the research questions within a given timeframe (from March 1998 to March 1999). Data collection terminated when much of the collected data started to overlap and variation within was largely accounted for (Morse 1994, Eisenhardt 1989). The opinions of study participants and

colleagues were also sought to ensure the adequacy of the data collected. This culminated in 101 interviews, around a third (36) with USDAW representatives and two-thirds (65) with MSF participants. The difference in interviewee number from USDAW and MSF reflects the larger number and size of intermediate-level women's committees in MSF and the different levels of research access I had to the unions. Non-participant observational activity involved 18 events (four relating to MSF and six to its WGs; one relating to USDAW and five to its WGs; one to MSF's delegation at the 1998 TUC Women's Conference and one to the 1998 TUC Black Workers' Conference). Participant observation was undertaken at MSF's women's week and weekend courses, and at women's committee meetings (see Appendix 2, Tables 1 to 3). Various documents issued by MSF, USDAW, their WGs and other sources was collected.

All data on MSF and its WGs were collected in the half year preceding the six months of data collection for USDAW and its WGs. This ensured that I was immersed in and had a better understanding of a union case and its WGs when collecting the relevant data. It also provided adequate time for informants to supply data which were not immediately available, a major strength of case studies (Yin 1989). The duration and timing of data collection in each union also enabled me to identify and fill data 'gaps' that emerged and to clarify questions about collected data during the fieldwork period.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews, the favourite methodological tool of qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln 1994), were central to involving study participants in the construction of data about their lives in respect of the unions and WGs. They also facilitated a sense of connectedness and understanding with informants (see Reinharz 1992, Graham 1984). Interviews provided much critical case and WG information because the phenomena under investigation concerned 'human affairs' (Yin 1989). Further, they helped to piece together understandings of the unions and their WGs in current terms *and* provide a short-cut to the history of the cases. Their flexibility also frequently enabled me to identify and initiate access to other sources of evidence (Reinharz 1992).

The nature of the semi-structured interviews meant that the same types (cf. substance) of data were collected to respond to the study questions. Interviewees were asked a core set of questions (see Appendix 3) though it was important to include unprepared questions when new and significant issues were raised or clarification was sought (cf. survey research, structured interviewing). The interviews provided a rich description of the unions and WGs from multiple perspectives. The use of set and spontaneous open-ended questions also encouraged a grounded theory approach to data collection, analysis and explanation-building. Most interviews were conducted with one study participant at a time but several group interviews took place when the setting encouraged (e.g. at a women's meeting) or interviewees preferred it. Multiple interviews with several participants, characteristic of much feminist research (Reinharz 1992), helped to build trust between, and develop a collaborative approach by, informants and myself, reflecting feminist and consequentialist research ethics (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). It also provided opportunities to discuss certain issues further and collect missing information, thereby balancing 'instrument' and 'interviewee' orientations.

Interviews varied in length for practical reasons and when it was considered that a 'saturation point' had been reached in terms of the issues covered (Andre 1981, Reinharz 1982). The majority lasted about an hour and a half while some lasted several hours. Most interviews were conducted at union sites or other locations which best suited the interviewees (Stake 1995), for example, at work, at home or in a leisure environment (see Appendix 2, Table 1). Several interviews were conducted by telephone, e-mail and letter when it was not possible to meet interviewees face-to-face, re-emphasising the necessary flexibility of the fieldwork design given the busy lifestyles of many participants.

Most interviewees were women as they have the most and direct experience of WGs. They included paid and lay officials from various union levels and members from the length and breadth of Britain. They held a range of political views and varied on other measures of personal and social identity (e.g. age, education, having no, young and/or

older children, ethnicity, work and union experience). All displayed feminist[20] beliefs and values, echoing Kirton (1999) and Colgan & Ledwith's (1996a) union studies. Many referred me to other contacts, re-emphasising feminist, collaborative and democratic research ethics. By listening to women speak of their understanding of WGs, previously neglected or otherwise assumed worlds of experience were explored. At the same time, the considerable experience of many women of the wider union meant that they were able to confidently discuss WGs' relations to it, and at times, compare women-only and mixed bodies. The inclusion of a minority of male interviewees and those not directly involved in WGs added to the richness of the study data and provided further perspectives on the unions and WGs. Individuals involved in the unions at local level were contacted first in the belief that if they were not amenable to participating in the study, I could still try to access those at intermediate and national union levels; it would have been more difficult to 'work downwards' if national-level contacts had refused to grant access to other potential informants.

All informants were helpful in their provision of information. However, personal experience varied and some gave a more 'official' line than others in their comments, confirming that I could only empirically research the material made available (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). The openness and character of most comments did not relate to informants' union position though some of the stronger advocates of WGs tended to be more forthcoming. This was not so extensive to form a bias in the interviewee data.

It is often thought that asking people what they think and feel is an activity females are socialised to perform and respond to (Reinharz 1992). Certainly, the largely female base of interviewees for this study seemed comfortable about being asked questions. They frequently expressed their views on topics that were not typically part of public or academic discourse, were somewhat tangential to the research topic and/or were emotional issues. Feminist research ethics were thus re-emphasised. This may have related to a combination of my gender, the conduct of the interviews, informants' wider

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[20] A feminist is defined as 'a woman whose values, knowledge or understanding inform female strategies of challenge and change towards the transformation of patriarchal structures and obstructions in women's attempts to participate and progress'

political experience or other factors. The 'best' interviews, however, tended to depend on the dynamics between the individuals and myself, situational factors (as in ethnography) and interviewees' reactions to our shared and differing personal attributes and views. As ever, then, interviews were not a neutral tool (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). While it is a much-debated feature (e.g. Oakley 1981, Stacey 1988), the degree of self-disclosure arising from the closeness established between many interviewees and myself helped to elicit elaborate and sensitive material (cf. the supposed 'objectivity' of 'scientific' interviewing). These interactions also caused me reflect on my own preconceptions when analysing data.

Guided by feminist ethics of commitment and egalitarianism, I chose to 'believe' my interviewees as well as 'test' the data that emerged. This approach can be controversial because social interaction typically involves a certain amount of conscious or unconscious deception, and because the 'scientific approach' has formally depended on detached scepticism (Kuhn 1970). I found, however, that a 'believed' interviewee was more likely to trust me and disclose his or her 'truth'. This was particularly important when I asked questions about the WGs and equality ideas that were perceived to be politically charged. Where there were discrepancies in interviewees' accounts, I sought further clarification and to reveal multiple 'truths' where they existed.

All but one of the face-to-face interviews were taped, enabling me to listen more attentively and seek clarification and elaboration during the interview (Stake 1995). Recording interviews also minimised breaks and distractions from the discussions and provided comprehensive coverage of them, thereby overcoming a weakness of interviews: that they are subject to poor recall (Yin 1989). Transcribing each interview required a more time-intensive commitment than was originally planned within the scheduled period (see Blaxter *et al.* 1996) but was worthwhile as interview notes and an interpretive commentary were written soon after the interviews to ensure the integrity of the data.

(Colgan & Ledwith 1994:14).

Observation

I gained access to a number of union and WG activities (see Appendix 2, Tables 2 and 3) and witnessed their operations first-hand. This enabled me to verify and supplement interview data, particularly in respect of the actual processes and dynamics within WGs which a number of interviewees painted very 'brightly'.

Important issues (including ethics) inform methodological choices about whether to study people opportunistically (Fine 1984), and for some feminists, whether a 'complete observer' role is ethical (e.g. Ruzek 1978). Given the constructivist standpoint of the study, I did not feel that the inquiry was completely separate from my researcher role and views about the research. My visibility to others during observational activity made some degree of 'difference' and my behaviour and approach were influenced by the settings.

'Non-participant' observational fieldwork included casual and formal observation of WG and union events. The democratic approach of the research design meant, however, that participants' consent was sought for my presence at these events. In less formal situations such as coffee breaks at union conferences, participants seemed less aware of the potential for observational fieldwork. I judged the appropriateness of including data from these occasions in terms of the research aims and the implications for those who provided it. At certain WG events, it was not possible to merely observe. For instance, I was required to facilitate small group discussions during the MSF women's week and weekend to 'justify' my sponsored attendance. At other times, however, my proactive involvement was as *minimal* as possible because I lacked formal membership and did not wish to be seen as aligned with particular groups (other than in the sense of being generally in favour of identity groups). As this could inhibit the views expressed by those under observation, my observations were also episodic rather than continuous (cf. ethnography), and I perceived there to be greater benefit in maintaining some distance rather than being a true 'insider' (e.g. this helped me to be aware of and record the dynamics among attendees at women-only and mixed fora).

Documentation

As is customary in case research (Yin 1989), including case studies in industrial relations and gender studies (e.g. Lawrence 1994), documentary information was important to the study. From the constructivist paradigm, however, the naturalistic, 'found' quality of this source of evidence was tempered by its influence on me and my interpretation of it (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). Its usefulness was not based on its necessary accuracy or lack of bias though this was of course welcomed when identified. The most important use of documents here was to corroborate or refute evidence from other sources (Yin 1989) and to provide unique historical information about the unions and WGs. This helped to build comprehensive responses to the study aims. WG and union documents included letters, memoranda, agendas, minutes, reports, formal studies, website material, organisational charts and contact lists, some of which are not publicly available. Some material also expedited the fieldwork (e.g. by providing contacts).

2.6 Data management and analysis

Data were subjected to systematic management and analysis. Checklists of what information needed to be retained during and following the qualitative study were used (Levine 1985, Stake 1995, Huberman & Miles 1994). I kept and reviewed hard copies and computer files of the interview schedule and transcripts, contacts, addresses and telephone numbers; and raw field notes, document reviews, interpretive commentary and personal reflections on both cases. Cases and case cross-references were indexed on separate files. Much of this information was converted into partially processed data to prepare them for analysis. Data matrices were used during collection and analysis to identify data gaps and analytical progress.

Analysis of case evidence is one of the most difficult aspects of qualitative research (Yin 1989, 1993; Eisenhardt 1989; Huberman & Miles 1994; Stake 1995). However, general analytic strategies which structure priorities for what to analyse and why, and their translation into analytic techniques, reinforced the rigour of this case design (Yin 1989).

General analytic strategy and techniques: 1

To stress the complexities and detail of the union cases and WGs, a direct interpretation analytic strategy was employed. I became familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity (see earlier), enabling their unique themes, details and patterns (i.e. the 'thick' description of a case-oriented strategy) to emerge before the instrumental aspect of the research questions was addressed by finding themes that cut across cases and WGs (i.e. a variable-oriented strategy - Geertz 1973).

Reinforcing the internal and external validity of the case design, I drew upon a range of analytic techniques suggested by Huberman & Miles (1994), Miles & Huberman (1994, 1984), Yin (1989, 1993) and Stake (1995). Partially processed written material was subjected to direct description of particular instances and events to see 'what was there'. Information was put into a matrix of categories and chronologically-ordered data displays. The complexity and relationships which arose from the data were thereby examined. The emergence of a realistic range of topics helped the presentation of a powerful narrative (Denzin 1989). Several participants' views of emerging themes and images were sought to maintain input from multiple perspectives. This work followed others (e.g. Huberman & Miles 1994, cf. Yin 1989) who stress the development of such data manipulations during analysis and elsewhere.

General analytic strategy and techniques: 2

The instrumental aspect of the research questions required analyses which could discover significant patterns and relationships within and across the cases. It stressed the need for categorical data and measurement. A 'categorical aggregation' analytic strategy refers to the continued aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a 'class' (Stake 1995). The explanation-building process for case studies has not been well-documented in operational terms (Yin 1989) but here it was similar to the process of refining a set of ideas and viewed as context dependent. As is common in casework, however, explaining the phenomena revealed that 'causal' links can be complex and difficult to measure precisely.

The iterative nature of the research involved moving between analysing data about the cases, and refining them on the basis of the analytic framework categories, themes emerging from the data, existing literature (Eisenhardt 1989) and my own deliberations. I focused much of the data collection on emergent themes or constructs while gathering more data. When a theme was identified inductively, I sought to confirm or qualify the finding, thus establishing a new inductive cycle. This process revealed the pertinence of and extended the constructs which operationalise the analytic frameworks; verified the accuracy of the findings; discovered the limits of their generalisability; and provided insights into emergent ideas within and across the cases. As more information was collected and more descriptive and category aggregation analysis was undertaken, data displays were revised, pointing to new insights and explanations for single cases and WGs, as well as across the cases and WGs. This continued until incremental improvement in the emerging explanations was minimal (*ibid.*, Glaser & Strauss 1967).

The study aimed to reveal significant and original insights in respect of the three research questions (cf. merely replicate prior theory or find clear patterns within the data - Eisenhardt 1989). As 'hard' theoretical propositions about the cases were absent at the start of the inquiry, explanation-building involved structuring the aggregation process via two guiding analytic frameworks: i) Hyman's (1994) model of union identity to structure the analysis of the unions and their relationship to their configuration of WGs and ii) a typology of equality approaches constructed from a critical review of the literature (see Chapter 1) to assess the equality ideas which inform particular WGs' aims.

Analytic frameworks

A model of union identity

Hyman's (1994) model of union organisational 'identity' delineates four interconnecting dimensions: interests, democracy, agenda and power (see Figure 2.1). The author broadly applies the model to union cases at the national and European levels.

Figure 2.1: A model of union dynamics

Source: Hyman (1994:120)

Hyman's categories of union features are sufficiently general so as not to impose a model of a union 'ideal type', supporting Child *et al.*'s (1973:74) argument that

> while it is possible to distinguish the trade union as an organizational type by reference to certain broadly defined basic functions ... considerable variation may be exhibited by other secondary defining characteristics ... (T)here is a strong argument for moving towards a framework of analysis in which union characteristics are treated as dimensions, ... [providing] a basis for comparative empirical research.

This also means that the dimensions of union identity can encompass most of the details and themes about union identity which emerged from the data collection-analysis iterations. The model was thereby useful for organising the data (cf. testing the model itself) at different levels of analysis (i.e. it was applied to individual unions and WGs) than those used by Hyman.

While the model provided an important point of departure for operationalising a study of union organisation, it emphasises the importance of 'harder' organisational features which subsume social processes and modes of operating. Here, Hyman's model was refined with the addition of the analytic category 'social processes and modes of operation', following the emergence of its significance in my empirical investigation and several earlier works. Further, my analysis indicated that the model would better fit the evidence if the 'democracy' category was widened to 'structure and democracy'. Adapting it in these ways thereby reflects the model's use at the 'micro-level' here rather than a criticism of the model as Hyman (1994) applies it at national and European levels.

While space precludes an in-depth examination of the analytic facets of Hyman's original model, their brief examination clarifies their significance for the inquiry. First, all unions represent **interests** which are specific constituencies with criteria of inclusion, focusing on distinctive aspects of their individual and collective experiences. Hyman (1994) acknowledges that the question increasingly raised is how far union interest representation can meaningfully include constituencies formerly marginalised as a result of such factors as gender, ethnicity and employment status (see Freyssinet 1993). Other key issues include the extent to which workers and their representatives see unions as a self-contained sphere generating a bounded set of industrial problems and seeking the political integration of labour within the dominant system (Munck 1999, Scott 1991) or as an aspect of their lives interconnected with other experiences and social relations; and how unions' internal processes reflect yet also influence members' interests (Dufour & Hege 1992, Hege & Dufour 1995; Elliot 1984). The articulation of a coherent employee 'voice' involves the filtering and prioritising of multiple, often contradictory concerns. Successful interest representation therefore requires a strategic perspective on costs and benefits, risks and opportunities, which is in turn often seen to presuppose a certain institutional distance (Batstone *et al.* 1977, Hyman 1995). Thus, what are often presented as general class interests have traditionally been largely representations of the interests of relatively advantaged sections (see also Held (1995) on democracy at the level of the socio-economic system). Unions attempting to represent a wider constituency have tended to embrace a more extensive range of concerns (Hyman 1994, 1997).

Agendas reflect constituencies' interests which unions seek to represent and the outcome of their processes of democracy and leadership. They cover bargaining demands, public campaigns topics, political lobbying and negotiations. Though not mentioned by Hyman, they also include related internal union matters (e.g. women's representation). The pursuit of certain items over others reflects the dynamics of the bargaining (and internal) relationships and a structure of priorities. The differentiation of the labour force calls for differentiated agendas and flexibly specialised unions (Leisink 1997). Yet the representation of diverse, union-centred interests is seen by many to sit in tension with

the overarching aim of unity, central to which are the perceived dynamics of power. This emphasises the interrelatedness of the union dimensions of Hyman's model.

Third, unions are distinctive as organisations in formally possessing a **democratic** rationale. Their representativeness depends on the functioning of internal structures of accountability to members' interests; as Phillips (1999:2) notes more generally, '(d)emocracy is never just a system for organizing ... It also brings with it a strong conviction about the citizens [read union members] being of intrinsically equal worth'. In Chapter 1, unitary and adversary concepts of democratic union and WG organisation were briefly considered (see also Leidner 1991). It has been more common, however, to differentiate between representative and participative union democracy, a distinction which is often linked to the controversial 'efficiency versus democracy' thesis (Hyman 1994, 1975; Streeck 1988). In the long-standing debate over service versus participatory organisational strategies, the former is tied to narrower 'bread and butter' or business roles and responsibilities, and the latter to a view of unions as connected to a broader social movement, often reflected in a more activist structure and a more atomised, member 'consumer' approach. For example, some assert that it is impossible to establish the interests that unions represent without membership participation. However, union hierarchy is often justified as a representative form of democratic organisation. Streeck (1988) argues that increasing differentiation of interests within union constituencies means that intra- and inter-union conflict can be contained only where centralised authority prevails, reflecting Turner's (1962) earlier assertion that activist democracy is viable only in small unions with an occupationally homogeneous membership. In a decentralised system, dissemination of policy is also more difficult (Pocock 1997) and while it might improve the representation of women, it does not necessarily make it easier for women's interests to be represented (Briskin 1999)[21].

On the other hand, as Waterman (1999:257) observes, '(w)hilst unions may struggle energetically for either liberal or some kind of socialist democracy, they are today hardly

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[21] In women's studies, however, it is often suggested that flatter organisations are 'more' democratic' and 'women friendly', and encourage widespread empowerment through participation and grassroots control (e.g. Leidner 1991, Oerton 1996).

considered as themselves shining examples of democratic virtue'. They typically take on forms determined by the structure and organisation of capital, labour markets and the state but tend to retain such forms long after capital has changed, making them ineffective even in defence against its worst new abuses. Indeed, there has been growing disenchantment within the constituencies of some European and British unions and a search for alternatives to the formal meetings, decision-making hierarchies and constitutionally prescribed positions of official authority which have traditionally provided the main model of union organisation (Hyman 1994; Munck 1999; Briskin 1999, 1998b). In these searches for alternative forms and 'ways' to reconcile leadership and democracy, and enhance union adaptability and effectiveness in a rapidly changing environment, modes of organisation which are common to (newer) social movements have been utilised (e.g. see Phillips (1992) on the women's movement's concern with sharing expertise, influence and time, and internal egalitarianism). The development of working groups, networks, discussion circles and grassroots organising, which constitute some forms of WG (see Chapter 1), are examples of labour organisations 'seeking ways out of the apparent impasse of the old tactics, organizational modes and even objectives' (Munck 1999:12).

Although active workplace representation remains a distinctive aspect of British unions (Bean 1994), recent research suggests that patterns are changing and that shop stewards, under pressures of new demands, are increasingly turning to external support for bargaining - at a time when 'resource-poor' unions are least able to provide it (Terry 2000, 1996). Some unions have established new policy-making bodies at company and industry level to increase shop stewards' integration into their official structures (Edwards *et al.* 1992). This shift has also been prompted by workforce restructuring, changing working patterns and increasingly dispersed and diverse demands from constituents. This is significant given the tendency of feminists in unions to lean towards participatory forms of democracy (Cockburn 1995) and the partial focus here on some nation-wide yet locally operating WGs[22].

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[22] For studies of innovative feminist organisations that reject bureaucratic organisation as inegalitarian, see Brown (1991) and Leidner (1991).

Finally, **power** is one of the most contentious and elusive concepts in social analysis (Hyman 1994). According to Hyman, at least, it has the ability to: i) achieve objectives in the face of resistance; ii) win an institutional or legal framework within which an agenda is more likely to be realised and iii) influence attitudes and perceptions to create a favourable ideological climate. He observes that unions can only ever partly offset the structured imbalance of power which confronts them. Furthermore, in terms of the links between union dimensions, power varies according to the agenda matters in contention. Further, the simple addition of members' individual resources does not empower unions significantly. Power requires a qualitative transformation, based on a collective 'willingness to act' (Offe & Wiesenthal 1985).

Union power is often assumed to derive mainly from the capacity to strike or resist the demands of bargaining counterparts. Whilst the strike capacity of British unions has been tested and curbed in recent decades, this has encouraged more effective *internal* union communication and searches for compensating influence in other, often social and political, ways. This implies attention to unions' roles, activities and sub-structures, WGs included, and 'space' for change within them. Unions which have achieved greater success in terms of social and political power are those which have helped generate broad definitions of membership interests (see above) and cultivated alliances with social movements whose concerns overlap with theirs (Hyman 1997). Although broader considerations of social justice and movement are not absent, British unions have traditionally emphasised the attainment of shorter-term economic gains for their members (Bean 1994). As Hyman (1997) observes, however, whilst radical transformation cannot be anticipated, unions have the potential to construct a new model of 'organic solidarity' which recognises and respects differing interests whilst constructing an externally-orientated agenda to unite members. He suggests that crucial themes in this are those of flexibility, security (see Taylor 1999b) and opportunity. While unions are shaped by their history and environment (McIlroy 1995), more may be feasible in terms of organisational capacity, democracy and activism (cf. Allen 1999).

In Chapter 1, equality initiatives of increasing, yet sometimes inter-related, ambition were discussed. Only a few works outlined these initiatives with explicit regard to the equality ideas which inform their functional approach (i.e. as 'means') as well as their key aim (i.e. 'ends'). It is possible to locate the initiatives in terms of increasingly ambitious equality approaches and goals which are pulled together here from the equality literature: 'sameness', 'difference' and 'transformational' (e.g. see Bacchi 1990, Cockburn 1989, Greer 1999).

In this study, **'sameness'** (with (white) men) equality in the union refers to the treatment of all members in the same manner. The integrationist 'strategy' illustrates this. Supported by the tenets of industrial unionism - universality, impartiality, liberal democracy and gender/'other' neutrality - an appealing argument often used to support this sameness approach has been that through the equal treatment of all members, a sense of solidarity will develop among them, 'the collective problems of workers as workers [transcending] whatever differentiates them along race, gender or cultural lines' (Virdee & Grint 1994:208). Sameness equality may also refer, however, to the equality goal that the initiative seeks to attain (e.g. sex proportional representation on a union structure). When this goal is met and women are treated like men, the concern with gender essentially disappears. In her exploration of disputed issues and women's equality in Britain, the US and Australia, Bacchi (1990) observed that women workers in the last two centuries have been obliged to battle for rights within unions and beyond by seeking the same opportunities as men or the 'male actual' (Greer 1999), their 'choice' of approach reflecting the ideological and institutional alternatives available. Indeed, the deficit model acknowledges women's (constructed) differences but then explains them away by minimising their influence on women's mainstream activism.

'Equality through **difference**' is used here to refer to 'probably the most distinctive feature of contemporary thinking on democracy' (Phillips 1999:25). While it, too, can refer to an equality approach or goal, it acknowledges and responds to the differences

between women and men in terms of social identity characteristics (e.g. physiology) and circumstances so that members of either group are not disadvantaged by their gender- or other-based differences.

Positive action acknowledges difference in order to pursue a (masculinist?) 'sameness' equality goal (i.e., formal equality or equal treatment), 'compensating' for women's differences so that women and men can compete on a 'level playing field' as 'equals'. It thus adopts an individualistic, meritocratic approach which fails to challenge the existing power paradigm of gender (and race) in unions (Colgan & Ledwith 1996b, Collinson *et al.* 1990; see Phillips (1999) for a more general discussion). As a liberal measure, it also provides a plausible legitimating function for unequal outcomes (Liff 1996). Positive discrimination entails manipulation of practices (i.e. a difference approach) to obtain a fair outcome for disadvantaged groups (i.e. substantive equality yet essentially a 'sameness' equality *outcome*)[23]. While WGs constitute a form of positive discrimination and reflect a 'difference' approach as a gender-based form of interim separatism, one cannot presuppose their equality goals. 'Difference' equality goals seek specific recognition of gender difference(s) in equality outcomes. Differences between and within women (cf. common social identity characteristics across men and women) can be subsumed within 'difference' equality ideas.

'**Transformational**' equality can also be seen in terms of approaches and goals. They were seen earlier to challenge existing arrangements and power relations in unions to reflect women's 'ways of operating'. Greer (1999:1) uses 'difference' equality in a transformational sense when she refers to 'endowing that difference with dignity and prestige, and insisting on it as a condition of self-definition and self-determination'. It is argued here that initiatives informed by transformative approaches encompass less 'ambitious' equality approaches. As Cockburn (1989:215) asserts, 'modest' radical equal opportunities for a group may be needed to achieve an initial breakthrough but that the dichotomous liberal/radical schema is 'is a straight-jacket that we need to escape'. The

growing heterogeneity of workers and union members stresses the difficulty of representing their diversity with a one-dimensional 'radical' version of equal opportunities. In place of a liberal/radical tension, Cockburn (1989:218) suggests, what emerges from studies of equality policies and practice is an equality agenda of shorter or greater length:

> At its shortest this involves new measures [i.e. positive action] to minimise bias in procedures such as recruitment and promotion ... At its longest, its most ambitious and most progressive it has to be recognised as a project of transformation for organisations.

At their longest, transformational initiatives involve a questioning of the basis of union organisation and the processes by which the power of some groups over others is built and renewed (e.g. Briskin 1993; Colgan & Ledwith 1996a; Kirton & Healy 1999; Cockburn 1995, 1989). Feminists argue that taking account of differences in power and experience does not create divisions among union members; 'rather, it acknowledges existing differences' (Briskin 1998a:19). In this way, unions increase the potential for a transformed, inclusive and activist organisation which moves beyond 'defensive solidarity' (Warskett 1992) to build equality in practice. Furthermore, Phillips (1999) argues that, based on economic equality, the alternative strategy to liberal tolerance of people's 'peculiarities' (see above) looks beyond access to (public) 'recognition' and a presumption of equal human *worth*, thereby dissolving the need for tolerance by dissolving the initial suspicions or distaste.

Operationalising the analytic frameworks

Union features were operationalised in this study partly by reference to the constructs implicit in Hyman's (1994) discussion of his union 'model', those employed in other works, and study participants' own constructs of union features. These sources were valuable because of the emphasis here on the democratic and largely exploratory nature of the research; because the union model has not been empirically applied before at the level of the individual union; because it extended the model by identifying a further broad

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[23] Furthermore, Jewson & Mason (1986) observe that positive discrimination (i.e. radical policy) may 'masquerade' as a positive action measure (i.e. liberal policy) and vice-versa - either as the unintended consequences of power struggles or more deliberately to manipulate situations and perceptions.

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category of union features; and because it helped to ensure that the study's responses to the second research aim (see Section 2.0) is grounded in the evidence. The operationalisation of types of equality goals and approaches was similarly constructed by reference to existing works, and informants and my own constructs of equality.

To structure the empirical response to the third research aim (WGs' effects on gender equality in their union), it was important to 'benchmark' their impact. Existing evaluations of WG 'performance' are infrequent and piece-meal (e.g. see MSF South West RWS-C 1997a). The absence of comprehensive WG evaluation by the wider union was even more apparent in USDAW. Assessments of women's committees' progress by the NCWC and occasionally by its delegates (Women in USDAW 1994) focus only on certain aspects of their features of organisation. Consequently, WG effectiveness was measured here in terms of: i) the change in the union setting for women which can be attributed to WGs in terms of measures of their identified goals; ii) assessments of WGs' effectiveness in respect of those goals according to informants; and iii) the relative contribution of the different WGs to these aims.

While written records provided details of environmental and union influences on WGs and *vice-versa*, the particular foci of the data sources meant that the impacts of only a portion of WG endeavours could be assessed. Measures of progress used by data sources and previous studies were used to assess WG effectiveness. The absence of 'hard' data partly reflects the complex, qualitative phenomena which impact on WGs' aims and meant that WGs' relative effectiveness had to be approximated.

Quality of the research design

Despite the popularity of case design among industrial relations researchers, there are no universally accepted standards for its use (Kitay & Callus 1998). While it remains more of an art than a science, there have been attempts to inject more rigour into the approach (e.g. Yin 1993, 1994). The quality and validity of this research design were fortified by drawing on both positivist and interpretive paradigm criteria to provide a check against

some of the most common and insidious biases that can steal into the process of drawing conclusions. Traditional (positivist) criteria include construct validity, internal validity (in explanatory case studies), external validity and reliability (Yin 1989). To ensure construct validity or 'correct' operational measures for the concepts being studied, the research drew on existing works, the constructs which emerged from the sources of evidence and my own analysis of the data. Several study participants also offered their opinions as to how well the constructs measured key aspects of union identity, WG aims and equality impacts, providing an additional check on construct validity.

The development of theory has often emerged by combining observations from previous literature, common sense and experience (Eisenhardt 1989) but the tie to data has often been weak (Perrow 1986). Consequently, in respect of explanation-building here, internal validity was ensured via careful checking and cross-referencing of data. The iterative process outlined earlier for developing grounded 'theory' involved continuous comparison of data and conceptualisations. Arranging data in chronological order also helped to establish the nature and direction of broad, partial 'causal' links. Again, several participants provided their views on the accuracy of my emphasis and description of case-context, within- and across-case relationships. The dangers in the iterative approach such as 'drift' from the original aims and unmanageable data collection (Yin 1993) were guarded against by careful specification of the units and sub-units of analysis, and constant referral to the original aims of the inquiry and the databases for each. Multiple understandings were served and multiple realities revealed by examining both of the union 'wholes' as well as the constituent parts of their identities.

While case studies are often viewed as less reliable than other approaches (e.g. Kirk & Miller 1986, Kitay & Callus 1998), the reliability of this design (i.e. its repeatability with the same findings) was strengthened by the various research procedures outlined in this chapter. The construction of a comprehensive and carefully checked database, and triangulation (*ibid.*, Stake 1995) verified the 'broad' repeatability of interpretations and conclusions. Triangulation served also to clarify meanings by identifying *different* ways

of viewing unions and WGs (Flick 1992) in line with the feminist-interpretivist paradigmatic assumptions of the research. Further, the analytic categories of the union cases helped to anchor the data to avoid 'slippage' from the original research aims. Transparent reporting of data and procedures helped to keep the analytic strategy coherent, repeatable and manageable (Huberman & Miles 1994).

The time-specific and complex nature of the phenomena under examination meant, however, that observations and interpretations were not seen as *perfectly* repeatable. The objectives of the research were to incorporate the context-bound and multiple views and realities that emerged about union-WG relations, the conditions for equality for women within unions and the aims and equality impacts of WGs to produce in-depth understandings as well as analytic generalisations about the unions and their WGs.

To ensure the external validity of the design (i.e. the generalisability of findings), several tactics were used. These included triangulation of the evidence, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the data and checking for 'researcher bias'. Using two union cases enabled key processes, constructs and explanations to be tested in different configurations. The viability of patterns were also tested by means of active searches for contrasts and comparisons. Although explanation-building within and across cases extended only to the cases examined in a particular context over a particular period, their broader features could be useful in explaining other cases in subsequent studies.

Some reject (post-)positivist criteria in their research, contending that they reproduce only a certain kind of science that silences too many voices (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). The position taken here, however, was that the pragmatic use of these criteria provides additional safeguards which can supplement by other measures to better evaluate the research design. While there is no generally accepted set of guidelines for assessing theory-building research using case studies (Eisenhardt 1989), several criteria were thought appropriate as they helped to question whether the concepts, framework or 'propositions' that emerged from the research process were 'good theory'. The study

generated parsimonious and testable explanations in respect of the relations between unions and their WGs, and the aims and equality contributions of particular WGs. Alternative explanations were ruled out as far as possible where clear explanations arose from the complex contextual and case factors. In the hypothesis' testing, the study conclusions had a good, though not necessarily perfect, overall fit with the data. An effort was made to report adequate evidence to enable readers to make their own assessment of the fit with theory whilst increasing confidence in the validity of the ideas that emerged.

Additional methods for evaluating the work included the constructivist criteria of 'verisimilitude', emotionality, an ethic of caring and respect, multi-voiced text, reflexivity, credibility, a desire for inclusiveness and egalitarianism (e.g. Reinharz 1992). For instance, strategies such as seeking feedback from participants and spending adequate time in the field were adopted, particularly given the multiple views and diversity of participants. I also made a conscious effort to recognise my own standpoints and biases as is common in much feminist and other research based on an interpretive epistemological approach. This also added to the equality interest of the study process. For example, the validity of the focus on gender as a key dimension for examination in a study of union sub-structures and equality approaches was assumed (cf. Hammersley 1995), skewing the research towards a neglected field of industrial relations inquiry. Finally, whilst Yin (1989) asserts that case research is also preferable when the researcher cannot control actual behavioral events, from an interpretivist position, my presence during data collection had unintended influences. Efforts were made, however, to incorporate feminist ethics of democracy and egalitarianism into the research process, particularly in my interaction with study participants.

2.7 Reporting on union cases and Women's Groups

In case research, the reporting phase is one of the most difficult and does not follow any stereotypical form (Eisenhardt 1989, Yin 1989). The structure and content of the case and WG chapters which follow respond to the exploratory, descriptive and explanatory aspects of the three research objectives and to the utility of the analytic frameworks. The

'audience' of the case design and wider thesis were also considered (Van Maanen 1988, Yin 1989). The thesis structure represents what Yin (1989) calls a 'linear analytic' approach which is standard for composing research reports. The sequence of sub-topics involves the research problem being studied, the methods used, the findings from the data collected and analysed, and the conclusions and implications from the findings - '[this] structure is comfortable to most investigators and probably is the most advantageous when research colleagues or a thesis or dissertation committee comprises the main audience for a case study' (*ibid.*:138).

Having closely examined historical and contemporary features of the two union cases and their WGs, the ensuing systematic examination of both unions with regard to their key organisational features facilitated an analysis of their relationships to the general 'shape' of their WGs as well as some comparison of findings in Chapter 4. This analysis involved detailed case write-ups, paving the way for a detailed exploration of the character of WG initiatives and a more instrumental evaluation of their equality initiatives and contributions in Chapters 5 and 6.

Like much qualitative research, the 'emic' meanings held by the sources of evidence themselves were purposely sought (Stake 1994). The cases and their WGs are thus presented in both descriptive and analytic terms, sometimes in a 'jointly told' and impressionistic way. For instance, short excerpts of interview contents were reproduced out of respect for the words of women and to reduce errors in communicating their thoughts. Because it was not known at the outset what the final range of analytic categories, issues, perceptions and localised explanations would be, the case content evolved in the act of writing. Although I was guided in writing the case narratives by what the cases themselves and others' indicated was most important, and strove to be self-reflexive (e.g. challenging my own frames of reference and gender bias - Atkinson & Hammersley 1994, Reinharz 1992) to clarify and counter methodological and ethical dilemmas, as the researcher, I ultimately decided what was necessary for an understanding of the cases. As Stake (1994:240) notes, '(i)t may be the case's own story,

but it is the researcher's dressing of the case's own story'. This approach anticipated that a reader would comprehend and construct some knowledge from my analyses and interpretations, but also might arrive at his or her own.

2.8   Summary

This chapter outlined the research design of the study. A qualitative approach to the inquiry was chosen in light of the complex social phenomena which the three research questions seek to explore, describe and evaluate. Constructivist and feminist paradigms shape the logic behind the design. Implicit in these approaches is a preference for empirical research. It was argued that, on balance, multiple case studies provided the most appropriate methodological response to the research questions. Examining cases holistically and in detail enables the pursuit of both intrinsic and instrumental interest in the unions, WGs' aims and equality impact, and the union-WG relations. While both the strengths and weaknesses of case design were outlined, measures to overcome the latter were incorporated. The chapter outlined the processes involved in selecting and accessing certain unions with WGs for preliminary research, and then in obtaining evidence about the two unions which house the widest array of WGs: MSF and USDAW. Pilot studies of two WGs refined the data collection plan and stressed the flexibility of case design. As is customary with case inquiry, I was able to draw on multiple sources of evidence: semi-structured interviews, observational activity and a range of documentation. These enabled an examination of a broad yet essential range of historical, attitudinal and observational issues, and the articulation of perceived realities from various sources. Although the main fieldwork spanned a year, this was justified by the rich and comparative data it generated. Data were subject to systematic management and iterative analyses involving direct interpretation and 'categorical aggregation'. While the study is predominantly exploratory, two broad analytic frameworks - an independently derived category of equality aims and an extended form of Hyman's (1994) model of union 'identity' - were operationalised to focus data collection so that findings were grounded and fitted the research questions. Various traditional/positivist and constructivist criteria were observed to ensure the rigour and validity of the case design. Finally, the chapter outlined the

rationale for the presentation of cases and WG initiatives in the following three chapters. The next chapter provides a background to MSF and USDAW and their key WGs before moving on to analyse the key features of both unions' identity in relation to the number and general 'shape' of their WGs.

3   LINKING UNION IDENTITY AND WOMEN'S GROUPS

3.0   Introduction

This chapter describes MSF, USDAW and their key WGs. It emphasises the influences on WG arrangements which derive from their union's organisational 'identity'. This addresses the first research question: what factors relating to the union influence the number and overall configuration of its WGs? The dimensions of union identity defined in Chapter 3 - structure and democracy, agenda, interest representation, power, and social processes and modes of operation - are operationalised by using constructs derived from the data sources and existing literature.

The chapter firstly overviews key WGs in MSF and USDAW. It then examines how the main features of MSF and USDAW's structural arrangements relate to their respective WGs. Subsequently, it investigates the links between other features of union identity (see above) and WG configurations. The main points are summarised to set the scene for the examination of specific WGs in Chapters 4 and 5. Two points should be noted in the presentation of the findings in Chapters 3 to 5. First, the analyses and discussion are related to the available union and WG literature to compare and contrast findings where relevant. This reference to existing scholarship helps to identify some of this study's contributions to knowledge. However, many earlier works do not directly address the questions which are central to this study, stressing the originality of the analytic frameworks and the scope of the research findings. Second, direct quotations from informants are used relatively sparingly due to the constraints of space; the multiple perspectives of the empirical material are encapsulated in the text, however.

3.1   Women's Groups in MSF and USDAW

MSF resulted from a merger in 1988 between two unions for professional workers: the Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Staff (TASS) and the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staff (ASTMS). In the mid-1980s, ASTMS comprised a range of WGs, including national and divisional women's advisory

committees, a Women's Conference and national women's courses. Divisional Councils ran weekend and day schools. TASS also acted earlier than most unions in establishing a women's structure, national and divisional women's sub-committees, and women's courses including national and divisional weekend schools. Other positive measures (e.g. reserved seats for women on Councils, women's posts, encouragement of regions to nominate women for delegations) to address women's low representation in certain sectors were purported to be gaining acceptance throughout the membership just prior to the TASS-ASTMS merger (SERTUC 1987).

Following amalgamation, 14 **Regional Women's Councils** (RWS-Cs) were maintained in MSF. After the merger, the national women's committees of both founder unions amalgamated into the **National Women's Sub-Committee** (NWS-C), comprising two women from each region, among others. This arrangement continued for nine months when joint regional ASTMS/TASS delegates were elected. Along with the National Race Equality and Youth Advisory Committees, the NWS-C was re-constituted and strengthened in 1989 (ASTMS' national women's committee had had advisory status only). MSF also maintained **women-only courses** and weekends under the auspices of the NWS-C and RWS-Cs/Education Department, and has increasingly developed 'women's' issue-based initiatives (e.g. a Breast Cancer Working Party in 1996). As in ASTMS, the NWS-C organises an issue-based, non-policy making Annual Women's Conference which makes recommendations to the wider union and provides an important networking opportunity for active women. Other networks for women exist. Five years ago, following the appointment of four new women officers, senior female officers began to meet to discuss issues of concern to them and women members and to offer mutual support. The demise of this network was linked to competing time pressures on officers, reflecting the disempowering nature of the 'long hours' culture of union work (Kirton & Healy 1999; see also Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) female activists in the GPMU and Unison). Following the establishment of a lesbian and gay network (LaGiM), the **Black and Ethnic Women's Network** was set up in 1994 (MSF 1995).

USDAW, too, has housed WGs for a number of years. Though their range is not as extensive as that of MSF, their diversity is still impressive when compared to TUC affiliates generally (see SERTUC 2000). In the early 1980s, USDAW's Executive Council (EC) set up a 'Women in USDAW' Working Party to assess why women's participation in union structures did not correspond with their membership majority. Its recommendations to ADM in 1985 included the establishment of **national** and **divisional women's committees**. The first Divisional Women's Committee (DWC) was set up in the North West. A National Women's Officer responsible for women's organisation (USDAW EC 1985) was appointed (replaced by a Women and Equalities Officer in 1998, with additional responsibilities for race, disability and lesbian/gay interests). Other DWCs then became operational, and at a meeting of the DWC Chairs with the General Secretary, plans for a National Women's Committee (NWC) were drawn up. USDAW's first annual national **Women's Conference** was run in 1986.

3.2   Connecting union identity and Women's Group arrangements

Having outlined key WGs in MSF and USDAW, the analysis now focuses on union features that were found to influence their number and configuration. For the most part, informants portrayed their union holistically, referring to aspects of its identity simultaneously. Applying the analytic dimensions of union identity to the data, however, enabled a comprehensive and systematic examination of the complexity surrounding the relations between the unions and the scale and character of their WGs. When informants and other data sources focused on particular aspects of union identity but not others, my role in interpreting WG features in these terms was enlarged.

Structure and democracy

Union membership and size

Following the TASS-ASTMS merger, MSF's membership grew to 669,000 in 1991. Like many unions, it then dropped markedly (to 412,000 in 1997-98) before recovering slightly

in the last couple of years (see column two of Table 3.1), making it the fifth largest UK union.

Table 3.1: Profile of women in MSF

Year	Total members	Women members	Women as a % of members	Women as GS, AGS, President or VP	Women as a % of union conference	Women as % of the NEC	Women as a % of Regional FTOs	Women as a % of national FTOs
1987	ASTMS 390000	74100	19	-	na	(4 women)	-	-
	TASS 241000	26510	11	-		na	(TASS: 1 div officer)	-
1989	650000	153870	20	-	11	8% (4 of 48) (incl. 1 inherited res'd seat from TASS)	9	30
1991	669000	153870	23	-	16	18	6	21
1994	552000	149000	27	President	25	24	6	18
1995/6	na	133227	31	Vice-President	Na	32	9	33
1997	446000	138000	31	Vice-resident, AGS	22	38	na	na
1997/8	412000	128750	32	President	na	32	16	30
1999/0	420000	138600	33	-	na	33	21	38

Compiled from: SERTUC (1987, 1989, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000), Labour Research (March 1994, 1996, 2000), TUC (1999) and interview data.　　　na = not available

USDAW is the sixth largest union in Britain with 293,500 members (see column two in Table 3.2). Following a long-term decline in membership from 440,000 in 1981 to 290,000 in 1995/96, it has experienced some growth, reflecting intensified recruitment drives (Undy et al. 1996), with FTOs spending more of their time on recruiting[1]. Analysis of SERTUC survey data indicated that larger unions tend to house a wider structural array of WGs (see Chapter 2). Indeed, MSF and USDAW are among the largest British unions and host many, varied WGs. USDAW is three-quarters the size of MSF which may account in part for MSF's larger number of WGs.

Table 3.2: Profile of women in USDAW

Year	Total members	Women member	Women as a % of members	Women as GS, DGS, President or VP	Women as a % of union conference	Women as % of the EC	Women as a % of Divisional FTOs	Women as a % of national FTOs
1987	392307	239307	61	-	na	na	na	na
1989/9	393066	239770	61	-	25	32	17	na
1991	343176	202474	59	-	38	59	27	0
1993/4	316491	189894	60	-	40	60	21	0
1995/6	290170	171200	59	President	42	62	19	0
1997/8	295000	172460	59	President	43	53	24	25
1999/0	309811	186676	60	President	44	53	25	57

Compiled from: SERTUC (1987, 1989, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000), Labour Research (March 1994, 1996) and TUC (1999).
na = not available

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[1] Recruitment is vital for all unions but due to high labour turnover in the private service sector (Howell 1999), USDAW has the unenviable task of trying to recruit over 100,000 new members each year, many of whom women, to keep membership static.

Recently, MSF and USDAW formally committed to recruitment campaigns which are consistent with the TUC's major 'New Unionism' project (IRS 1997), signalling a concerted effort to tackle the problem of membership decline (Munck 1999, Parker 1999). These embody a shift from the servicing model and organiser dependency back to a 'member to member' approach 'using the methods which built unions in the first place' (e.g. MSF 1996/97, USDAW EC 1998a). The strategy is consistent with those who argue that union renewal will result from local activism (e.g. Fosh 1993, Fairbrother 1996) and is supported with nation-wide training for lay activists to recruit and organise in their workplaces (MSF 1996/97). While much of USDAW's recruitment effort has focused on consolidation within its existing job territories, with some targeting of particular groups and workplaces, the union has launched the occasional expansionary campaign (Mason *et al.* 1997). In October 1999, MSF sought to broaden its coverage by launching a community-based campaign to recruit new members by demonstrating 'the wider relevance' of union membership (MSF 1999a:1). Several senior WG members speculated that organising approaches designed to consolidate and/or enlarge the membership would strengthen the presence and roles of WGs whose lay members would become more central to the recruitment and organisation of women by women (i.e. a 'like by like' approach).

Organisational arrangements

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 outline MSF and USDAW's formal structure. Documentary and interviewee evidence revealed that certain features of the unions' structure have impacted on the number and location of WGs. Key among these is MSF's coverage of 14 regions while USDAW covers eight divisions of varying geographical and membership size (USDAW 1998a). These arrangements directly affect the number of WGs operating at the intermediate and local levels of the unions, as well as the scale of their operations and number of formal channels of communication with the rest of the union.

Figure 3.1: MSF's organisational structure

Annual Conference

Gen. Sec.	NEC	Finance	Org'n &	Policy	Race	Women's	Lesbian &	Disability	Youth	National
President		Sub-C'tee	Recruitment	Party	Equality	Sub-C'tee	Gay Sub-	Sub-C'tee	Sub-	Women's
Assist. GSs			Task Group		C'tee		C'tee		C'tee	Week
National Officers										Course
union Depts										

| 14 Regional Councils | 14 **Regional Women's** | 14 Regional Mgt | 14 Regional Race | 14 Regional Youth | |
| Regional | **Sub-Committees** | Sub-C'tees | Sub-C'tees | Sub-Committees | Officers |

Branches

| Members in Workplace Groups | **Black and ethnic minority women's network** |

Source: Adapted from MSF (undated(a):14-15). WGs analysed in Chapter 4 are in bold.

Figure 3.2: USDAW's organisational structure

Annual Delegate Meeting

EC	President	Nat'l Officers	Trade	National	**Nat'l Women's**	Race Relations	Nat'l Youth	**National Women's**
	Gen. Sec.	Heads of Dept	Conf'ce	Political	**Committee**	Committee	Committee	**Conference**
				C'tee				

Divisional	8 Divisional	Divisional	Area	8 Divisional	**8 Divisional**	8 Divisional
Conferences	Councils	Chairperson	Organisers	Political	**Women's**	Youth
		Divisional		Committees	**Committees**	Committees
		Secretary				

| Branches | Shop | ADM | Health & |
| | Stewards | Delegate | Safety Reps |

Source: Adapted from USDAW (1998b:1) WGs analysed in Chapter 5 are in bold.

The figures also stress that USDAW has a flatter formal structure than MSF. A number of informants felt that this feature was important in facilitating communication within the women's structure, and between WGs and the rest of USDAW. MSF's more tiered, complex structure was sometimes cited as a factor that complicates and slows WG-union communications. However, women in both unions stressed that WGs actively seek to keep communications direct among WGs and with other parts of the union (e.g. via extensive informal contact) to help raise female members' 'voice' in the mainstream. This approach is indicative of the networking, horizontal approach of 'new' social movements. Further, the evidence revealed that RWS-Cs' formal links with mainstream regional structures are increasing. RWS-C members ventured that this reflects growing recognition in the union of WGs' utility, particularly in attracting new members. They added that it could influence the scope of RWS-C remits though they also stressed the need for WGs to

guard against 'over-integration' with the rest of the union, a key theme of Briskin's (1993, 1999) work.

Structural change

Mergers

USDAW came into being in 1947 upon the amalgamation of the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers, the forerunners of which mainly organised workers in co-operative employment, and the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks. None of the informants related historical merger activity to the establishment of WGs. Somewhat differently, MSF records indicated that the relatively recent merger between TASS and ASTMS (see earlier) involved rationalisation. Several NWS-C members asserted that the loss of posts impacted disproportionately on women's already low representation in certain areas. Significantly, WGs were maintained and developed to help remedy this effect. A merger with the virtually all-female Community Practitioners and Health Visitors' Association (CPHVA) in 1990 was also seen to have encouraged CPHVA members' input into and support of MSF WGs. The complex effects of merger activity were emphasised, however, by the proposed amalgamation of IPMS with MSF in 1997. Many informants felt that while it would have provided an uncommon opportunity to overhaul MSF's structures, IPMS' 'paternalistic' approach and the federal structure it wanted would probably have led to a cut-back or the demise of WGs.

Equality initiatives

In 1989, along with an EO Charter which includes steps to further women's 'equal opportunities' in the union and beyond (MSF 1996a), MSF brought into rule four reserved seats for women on its NEC. The posts were designed to enable women's concerns and views to be heard and to help the seatholders gain leadership experience with which to later seek election into regional and industrial seats (Equal Opportunities Review May/June 1996) though the limited term for holding these seats does not always

coincide with staggered elections for which seatholders may wish to stand. The reserved seats, an example of positive discrimination, were also generally seen as a means for encouraging other women to participate in MSF. Regional Councils have also been rule-bound since 1989 to support positive measures. They should, for instance, comprise between two and four reserved seats for women with voting rights. Flexibility in their number of reserved seats is officially emphasised as enabling an arrangement which best suits women in each region. Significantly, women in reserved posts are often members of WGs. Their mainstream position was seen by most informants as providing a platform from which to raise the profile of WGs and argue for their continued existence and proposed initiatives.

By contrast, USDAW's EC and Divisional Councils have no observer or reserved seats[2]. Nor are its branches, unlike MSF's, entitled to elect a women's officer who can provide a link to divisional level via a voting seat on the DWC (though many branches in MSF have been unable to provide a women's officer because of low numbers of women at branch and few women wanting to undertake the role). This reflects an enduring sentiment in USDAW against positive discrimination measures. USDAW stresses women's involvement on 'sameness' terms with men in existing posts. The union's 1984 Women's Working Party recommended and USDAW sanctioned WGs only on the basis that they provide a 'means' to improving women's 'ordinary' representation rather than an 'ends' in themselves. It was argued that alternatives such as reserved seats for women could institutionalise the low representation of women, and that women had been making progress without recourse to special measures. The only exception to this approach was made by the EC with regard to TUC and Labour Party Conference delegations where separate voting lists for women and men were introduced. It was felt that women's proportional representation on these delegations was unlikely to occur for some time without intervention (MSF has reserved seats for women on delegations to the Labour Party Conference and recommends that women should be proportionally represented to

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[2] Several Divisional Councils endeavour to appoint a woman when a vacancy arises, however.

reflect their regional membership share in TUC Congress and Labour Party delegations though there have been difficulties meeting 'quota').

Informants and documents (e.g. MSF EC Statements, USDAW ADM reports) revealed that the unions influence the 'shape' of, and indeed the existence of certain initiatives started by, their women's structure by making 'space' for them within mainstream structures. For example, their annual conferences include WG events. In USDAW, DWCs conduct 'probably the best attended' fringe meetings for women (USDAW NWC and DWC Co-ordinators 1998:3), informal get-togethers to 'bring on' new women, women's social events, a women's stall, workshops and a women's debate session (including discussion about WGs). Similar events are increasingly run at Divisional/Regional Conferences, and some of them are undertaken at external venues (e.g. TUC, Labour Party events). Traditional union events are thus 'stretched' to incorporate identity-based mechanisms (see Leidner 1991), enabling WG members to 'mainstream' and network among themselves.

As well as accommodating, and thereby assisting the existence of, WG events within their structures, both unions have recently established new equality posts and structures in response to changing union and external factors. For instance, MSF set up a national Working Party for Women in 1998. The Party develops strategy on recruiting and involving women in the union. It was also regarded by many informants as stressing an increasingly participative approach to raising issues in MSF with its dissemination of information through the regions on issues of concern to women, and its identification and development of 'regional experts' who head local campaigns and train local organisers. The Party was seen as reinforcing the need for existing WGs and developing more local-level WGs, as they, officials and their interrelationships with workplace representatives and members are integral to this process which recognises the particular difficulties that female representatives and organisers face.

The unions have mirrored one another by their recent appointment of a National Secretary for Equalities (see earlier) and a national Equalities Team in MSF[3], and the establishment of a Women and Equalities Officer in USDAW. While the former women's/equality officers in both unions focused on issues of gender equality, the new officers (and equalities team in MSF) oversee equality aims defined according to several social identity characteristics of members, including gender. This shift in emphasis was generally viewed by informants as having important ramifications for the role and scope of WG activities. In MSF, for instance, the new arrangements have brought more officers into the equality area, helping to free the National Race Equality Committee (NREC) to pursue its own strategies, including a revitalisation of the black and ethnic minority women's network. The equality initiatives were also seen as helping to cross-fertilise the equality concerns of various groups, encouraging equality efforts by WGs which couch gender as one of several dimensions for consideration. This has positive implications for ethnic minority women, for instance, who are weakly represented in mainstream and WG bodies due to higher structural and (cultural) role barriers (see Sourani 1996) despite forming 2.5% of MSF's membership (or 11,000 members)[4]. Furthermore, informants asserted, like Briskin (1993, 1998a, 1999), that WG activities, in co-existence with 'integrated' equality initiatives, could play a larger part in encouraging the involvement of a wider range of women in their activities and providing an impetus for organising by them (see also Briskin 1998a). At the same time, many interviewees felt that minority women's under-representation at present will continue to impact on WGs' ability to develop appropriate responses. Several senior officials also viewed the new equalities arrangements as a 'resource management exercise' which could curtail the overall attention given to women's equality, with implications for the scale and remits of WGs.

Structural inertia in other union parts

Despite the above structural changes, much of MSF and USDAW's basic organisation has changed little in recent years. This reinforces Hyman's (1997) argument that radical union

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[3] This comprises the National Secretary for Equalities, the NREC Secretary and a representative each from the NWS-C, Disabilities Committee, the NHS and finance sector.
[4] Historically, MSF has not comprehensively monitored the ethnicity of its members (Hastings & Smith 1992) but it recently began to record the ethnicity of new members. In USDAW, black workers constitute some 5% of membership (SERTUC 2000).

transformation cannot be anticipated though there is the potential to construct a new model of 'organic solidarity' which respects differing circumstances and interests. The usual stability of the unions' organisation, coupled with resistance to change other than that conceived as 'vital' by their supreme policy-making bodies (Annual Conference in MSF and Annual Delegate Meeting in USDAW) was seen by informants to sometimes 'cap' the scope of WG arrangements and initiatives. They argued that unionists become accustomed to particular ways of operating and often resist the changes sought by bodies such as WGs. This supports Colgan & Ledwith's (1996a) observation of Unison's experience, with the chance to transform organisational features best taken in a period of turbulent change when structures are fluid. Yet, changes to WG arrangements brought about by union mergers (see earlier) may subsequently mitigate WGs' pursuit of further change. For instance, many unions that have merged with MSF have retained much of their original structure, rules and independent 'voice', sometimes leading to conflict with MSF's interests and ways of operating (e.g. see MSF 1994a). Several senior officials observed that their entrenched ways of operating, particularly in male-dominated sectors and crafts and quasi-autonomous sections, constrained WGs' penetration of them. At the same time, they *encouraged* WGs to develop equality efforts which respond to them although they start from different points of reference in different parts of the union.

Summary

As large British unions, MSF and USDAW support a wider trend by housing a broad array of WGs. Their recent formal commitment to the organising approaches of 'New Unionism' was assessed to bode well for strengthening WGs' power and roles in local recruitment and organisation, particularly of women members. The two unions' structural organisation was found to directly affect WG numbers and their scale of operations. USDAW's flatter structure was seen to facilitate communication among WGs and with the rest of the union, though WGs endeavour to communicate directly with others. In MSF, the development of stronger formal links between regional mainstream bodies and RWS-Cs were seen to have implications for WG independence within the union. Recent merger activity in MSF was found to have direct consequences - both positive and

negative - for WG arrangements. MSF, unlike USDAW, has employed a number of positive discrimination measures to improve women's union representation. USDAW's rejection of positive discrimination measures for women has encouraged its sanctioning of WG arrangements only on the basis that they provide a 'means' to improving women's 'ordinary' representation rather than an 'ends' in themselves. However, the recent development of new 'integrated' equalities structures in both unions looks likely to impact on the shape and equality approaches of WGs, perhaps encouraging their greater representation of minority women and of an impetus for minority women's self-organisation. Although this shift in emphasis has implications for WGs in terms of their diverting resources away from gender-specific initiatives, there was no evidence to suggest that the new equality arrangements would lead to the replacement of WGs in the near future. Finally, much of the unions' structure has remained unchanged in recent years, sometimes with the effect of 'capping' WG initiatives, arrangements and access to the mainstream union.

Agendas

Issue substance

Analysis of motions raised at MSF's Annual Conference and USDAW's ADM and of union agenda documents revealed matters which concern economic rights for workers and the unions' political integration over which men retain firm control, and a much smaller body of 'pro-women' issues (i.e. issues adopted by the union to address women's distinctive needs). In USDAW, the latter included maternity rights, part-time work, a working family tax credit for mothers and women's health (e.g. USDAW EC 1998a, USDAW 1998e). In MSF, they included childcare, parental leave, cancer screening, sexual harassment and domestic violence. Many issues of importance to female informants have still not been addressed in mainstream agendas or via collective bargaining, supporting Colgan & Ledwith's (1996a) finding and Munro's (1999) argument, based on research of four local union branches in the National Health Service,

that institutional biases within unions exclude a number of issues specific to women workers.

Explicit issues around 'women's equality' were seldom explicitly addressed (major exceptions included equal pay which has been the most revisited of all ADM issues in USDAW since World War I (USDAW 1998c) and MSF's campaign for breaking through the 'glass ceiling' in manufacturing and IT). Nor were the gender implications of 'mainstream' matters consistently addressed (cf. Briskin (1999) on Canadian unions). In the main, ostensibly 'same for all' gains were sought though these may have different impacts for women and men (see also Colling & Dickens 1989). These findings qualify Kirton & Healy's (1999) assertion that, at least in unions with a substantial female presence, the argument to have women's concerns included on national policy agendas has been won.

Significantly, a number of WG women felt that union agendas have a considerable influence on the nature of the matters and change pursued by WGs, as well as the perceived need for WGs. For example, several NWS-C members asserted that MSF's conservatism in terms of its mainstream agenda issues influenced WGs' pursuit of gradual change to the substance and approaches of union agenda matters. This was likely to be seen as 'less threatening' by the wider union and less likely to cause factions among members. Informants also observed that union conservatism encouraged WGs and other active women to couch their calls for positive efforts to cater for the special needs of women workers and consideration of the gendered nature of mainstream concerns in terms of how this assists the union generally (e.g. in terms of recruiting). This accounts, for example, for the pursuit by USDAW's EC of several issues of particular concern to ethnic minority women despite the union's general anti-fair representation stance.

Issue priority

Longitudinal analysis of MSF NEC Statements and USDAW ADM reports revealed that, amongst the specific concerns for women that reached negotiation and other union

platforms since the mid-1980s, only a very small number have gained equal priority with 'ungendered' pay and conditions issues. While their consideration in the mainstream reflected the unions' growing appreciation with some of women's more pragmatic demands, pro-women's issues tend to be added to rather than integrated into the main agendas. This supports Dickens' (1993) research on British unions which found that women's bargaining (and internal) goals face suppression by patriarchal practices and attitudes, as well as insecurity in the labour market (see also Kirton 1999, Warskett 1996). Significantly, several senior officials felt that this raised the level of effort and resources channelled by WGs into profiling their concerns as central union issues. They also felt that the problem was more pronounced for ethnic minority women's specific concerns due to officials' varying abilities or predisposition to pursue them.

Issues and context

Most interviewees and an analysis of union documents indicated that when gender equality matters are explicitly broached by their union, they are mainly viewed as 'external' or bargaining issues rather than internal union matters, supporting Cockburn's (1989) wider observation of unions. However, both MSF and USDAW increasingly appear to have recognised and responded to links between workplace- and 'other'-centred matters - partly influencing and partly in response to WG initiatives. For example, a South Western RWS-C member commented:

> Many unions didn't tackle domestic violence because it was seen as divisive, to do with women. But WGs knew that some members were going home and kicking their partners around. Once WGs had encouraged the union to take the matter on, they were then able to tackle it from different angles, both inside and outside MSF.

Nonetheless, conference documentation indicates growing union attention to women's equality *within* MSF and USDAW. Key internal issues in both unions include women's proportional representation, recruitment, substantive concerns (e.g. union facilities for women) and processes for profiling women's concerns (i.e. the 'form' aspect of Jonasdottir's (1988) conceptualisation of interests). Significantly, it emerged that union literature and events often couch their under-engagement with women

members as open to improvement via mechanisms such as WGs. For example, MSF's EO Charter advocates that mechanisms including WGs be used to pursue women and men's equal access to and representation in all posts, higher profiling of 'women's issues' on the negotiating agenda, women's recruitment and women's *experience* of union life (e.g. 'women friendly' meetings) (MSF 1996b).

Agenda setting processes

Profiling and keeping issues on union platforms is a long and arduous process. Several NWS-C and NWC members felt that the effort required to raise equality issues in male-dominated unions underscored the need for sustained and innovative activity by WGs. In MSF in particular, with its largely decentralised bargaining context (see 'Power'), the extent to which national-level union policy commitment and the concerns of national WGs themselves are translated onto local bargaining agendas was seen to be contingent upon the equality commitment of FTOs and lay officials (see also Kirton & Healy 1999; Dickens 1993, Colling & Dickens 1989, Heery & Kelly 1990). When this was lacking, local WG activities and the need to make constructive links with officials responsible for negotiations were seen as paramount for raising and sustaining the momentum behind these matters.

Summary

Union agendas were found to emphasise 'bread and butter' concerns over 'pro-women' issues, thereby setting the context for the pursuit of women's concerns by WGs. Gender equality and the gender implications of 'mainstream' matters were seldom explicitly or consistently addressed. The conservatism of MSF and USDAW's national agendas was generally seen to influence the range of issues broached by WGs and their incrementalist approach to change, seeking to 'take everyone along' with their pursuits. However, it also encouraged WGs to push for positive efforts to cater to women's special needs. Only a small proportion of women's concerns that reach union platforms were found to gain equal priority with 'traditional' union issues. Consequently, WGs have had to expend considerable energy in drawing wider attention back to their concerns. The evidence

showed that gender equality matters are mainly viewed by the unions as 'external' issues. The unions are, however, starting to pay greater attention to women's situation within them, and have stressed the significance of WG arrangements to pursue gender equality. Finally, the difficulties associated with profiling and keeping equality issues on male-dominated union platforms were found to have encouraged sustained activism by WGs.

Interest representation

Spheres of interest

Much of the evidence did not directly refer to interest representation by the unions but touched upon it in reference to other union features such as structure and agenda, stressing that the analytic categories of union identity are not wholly discrete. However, MSF's (1994b:1) rulebook states that it seeks 'to improve the economic and social well-being of the members and to enhance their status'. USDAW (1997:3) aims to 'improve the conditions and protect the interests of its members' and to 'regulate the relations between [members and employers] by the withholding of labour or otherwise'. While these aims emphasise members' interests specifically in relation to the workplace, it was found earlier that the unions' agendas have increasingly recognised the links between themselves and other settings, indicating that they do not see themselves as bound to a set of industrial problems but rather as an aspect of members' lives interconnected with other experiences and social relations (see also Hyman 1994, 1997). However, many informants felt that USDAW's rulebook statement of more 'economistic' interests provided an impetus to WGs to continue to broaden their union's base of interests, particularly via more extensive WG arrangements and initiatives (e.g. external links).

Sectoral coverage and types of workers

MSF and USDAW's membership differ considerably. MSF members are mainly located in the private sector. Nearly half work in manufacturing industries, across occupations such as engineering, science, technology and research, as craftspeople, draughtspeople

and managers. The other half are professional staff employed in universities, commercial sales, the voluntary sector, finance and the NHS (MSF 1997, 1998a). MSF can thus be characterised as a 'general technical union' (Howell 1999). USDAW operates solely in the private sector, its core membership now in the retail trades. This follows the recent emphasis of its recruitment drives and the decline of its historical dependence on the co-operative sector for members. USDAW also has a sizeable number in wholesale, food manufacturing, mail order, distribution and milk, and chemical process industries. Typical occupations covered include shop assistants, supervisors, managers, clerks, drivers, operatives, process workers, rounds staff and warehouse workers (USDAW 1998b). USDAW's image has thus shifted from that of a union for shop workers to one of a general union (USDAW 1998b) dominated by female manual workers. Related to its sectoral emphases, part-time workers form a quarter of its membership and many are women.

Several senior officials felt that the character of their respective union's sectoral coverage, and the uneven distribution of women across these sectors and industries, strongly influence the nature and level of WG initiatives as well as the focus of union and WG agendas in different ways. In USDAW, for example, DWCs were said to place considerable emphasis on visiting workplaces as they are able to access a number of workers in one location (e.g. the staff canteen). At the same time, the location of many female members in USDAW in the lower echelons of non-professional occupations presents WGs with specific structural considerations when accessing members at work (e.g. on night shifts, in traditionally union-hostile or difficult to organise workplaces such as supermarkets). According to informants, the professional status of a number of MSF members can make them difficult to access as a group at work, some professionals not welcoming union attention in that setting. MSF's diverse sectoral coverage means that '(t)he dangers of spreading itself too thinly and underachieving on the equality front are real' (National Officer (Political), Equal Opportunities Review May/June 1996:26). Many interviewees felt that such factors highlighted the need for WG initiatives that circumvent

gendered work- and domestic-related barriers to members' union involvement while the wider union sought to reduce the barriers themselves.

Members' social characteristics

Unions have often represented the particular interests of relatively advantaged sections (Hyman 1997) and influenced the extent to which members' interests are reflected via their internal processes. While MSF and USDAW's formal statements of intent now acknowledge members' diversity in terms of various social characteristics, they also de-emphasise them by stating their pursuit of the 'same' treatment for all. For instance, USDAW stresses its formal opposition to 'discrimination on grounds of sex, race, ethnic origin, disability, sexual orientation or religion' (USDAW 1997:3) yet promotes 'equal opportunities and equal treatment for all members' (cf. MSF 1988:2, 1994b:6, 1999b).

The 'shorter' equality ideas implicit in these statements are significant because formal union objectives are often used in campaigns to attract and maintain a diverse membership. Many informants felt that they set the formal parameters for WG operations. As before, however, union agendas indicate that the interests actually served by the unions and their WGs extend unevenly to constituency sub-groups. For example, MSF WGs helped to bring attention and respond to the union's decision to address issues relating to sex and race discrimination in a 'Year Against Racism' campaign in 1997. Formal union statements of interest representation thus do not constrain developments in practice, with implications for the extent to which WGs can actually pursue social groups' various interests, including via identity-based arrangements (such as the BWN).

Women's membership

The extensive women's structures in MSF and USDAW were attributed in part by senior officials to women's absolute membership number. The third column of Table 3.1 (see earlier) shows that women's membership in MSF rose to 153,870 in 1991 then dropped to 128,750 in 1997-98 before recovering slightly by 1999-00. Similarly, in USDAW, women's membership grew until the end of the 1980s, then fell from 239,770 in 1989 to

171,000 in 1997 before rising moderately to 192,000 by 1999 (see column three of Table 3.2). MSF has begun to focus more on recruiting women as half of its members work in increasingly feminised sectors and occupations. Indeed, women are now constitute MSF's fastest growing membership group (45% of recruits), with better retention rates than men (MSF 1994a). Many interviewees felt that women's absolute and expanding membership in both unions strengthened support for the expansion of WG arrangements alongside 'general' equality initiatives.

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 (column four) show that women have formed about one-third of MSF's membership since the mid-1990s and about 60% of USDAW's numbers for even longer. Growth in women's membership share in MSF is attributable in part to its merger with the CPHVA (see earlier). In both unions, it also reflects wide-scale redundancies in the early 1990s in male-dominated industries where the unions were concentrated (e.g. engineering for MSF). A number of MSF informants' comments echoed Kirton & Healy's (1999), emphasising the 'feminist' basis of WGs and their aims given that women form a minority of the membership. Women's minority share was also seen to justify WGs' continued existence in that informants did not feel that women's proportional (i.e. minority) representation on mainstream structures would lead to their 'equal' empowerment with male unionists. This stresses the union's adoption of aspects of a unitary approach to democracy. By contrast, USDAW women's membership *majority* was seen to provide an impetus for continuing WG arrangements as women are still under-represented in the mainstream and lack a 'voice' which is seen to be commensurate with their number. At the same time, informants acknowledged that women's membership majority provided a basis for opposition towards WG arrangements in some quarters.

The gender and union experience of members emerged as an influence on the nature and roles of WGs, particularly in MSF. Two-thirds of its members have never belonged to a union or staff association before (Maksymiw 1990). NWS-C members indicated that the

relative 'newness' of many members to unionism provides an impetus to MSF to sustain their membership and coax their activism by presenting itself as 'progressive'. This was seen to include efforts to appear 'gender-friendly' in which WGs were deemed to play a key part. Indeed, documentary evidence showed that some newer, female members joined after they became disenchanted with the gender-blind approaches of their former unions (e.g. MSF Women 1994).

Women's representation

The last decade saw women progress unevenly through USDAW and MSF's ranks (see Tables 3.1 and 3.2). Women recently attained proportional representation on the executive bodies (i.e. a significant minority on MSF's NEC and the majority of posts on USDAW's EC), a rare achievement in the British union movement (see SERTUC 2000). Further, women's numbers as national FTOs (38%) in MSF recently exceeded their membership share. While women do not hold any of the four central officer posts in USDAW and formed just 25% of national FTOS in 1998, they now constitute 57% of the latter (Labour Research Department March 2000).

Nonetheless, men continue to dominate many structures and key posts on executive and other bodies. Men have always filled the post of General Secretary in MSF and USDAW. In MSF, men still dominate the three NEC sub-committees that strongly influence union direction (the Finance Committee, Organisation and Recruitment Task Group and Policy Party) and the 160 industrial National Advisory Committees which reflect sectional interests (MSF undated(b)). USDAW's National Political Committee is dominated by men, and men undertaken the union's important finance functions. Although improved, women's representation at MSF's Annual Conference and at USDAW's Annual Delegate Meeting remains disproportionately low (despite NEC recommendations that regional delegations should reflect women's membership share in MSF). Women in both unions tend to be better represented on (non-policy making) equality and education bodies, and occupy conventional and 'special' posts which are less formally empowered. This was generally seen to have implications for the extent to which women have an adequate

voice and influence on mainstream fora, and specifically, can influence the mainstream to support WG arrangements and initiatives.

Similarly, at regional level, women's representation has improved but is still not commensurate with female membership share. In MSF, women are under-represented on all regional structures but the all-female RWS-Cs despite the existence of reserved seats for women on Councils and special arrangements on other sub-committees (MSF undated(a)). While women in USDAW have a stronger presence on Divisional Councils, they fill only 43% of Council posts (USDAW Central Office 1998). The female share of a growing number of regional officer posts in MSF has risen, but only from 9% in 1996 to 21% in 1999-00 (Labour Research Department March 2000, 1998). In 1998, only one of seven divisional officers and one of seven deputy divisional officers in USDAW was female (USDAW Central Office 1998) though Labour Research Department (March 2000) data indicate that women now constitute 25% of 'regional' FTOs. Women held only 38% of 63 Area Organiser posts in USDAW in 1998 (USDAW Central Office 1998).

Branch activity has been flagging in both unions, with some exceptions (e.g. Braddock 1998). While branch meetings used to attract a minimum of 30 to 40 people in the early 1980s, they now often have single figure attendance. While women form 40% of nearly 500 branch secretaries in USDAW, several female branch secretaries expressed doubts at the equivalence of their influence at branch with that of men. Other women's low level of attendance at branch was attributed by informants to their 'macho' culture and traditional inattention to women's interests. Women are also under-represented in most workplace groups and committees (e.g. MSF undated(b)).

Informants generally felt that changes in women's level of representation had implications for the representation of their interests, and more specifically, WG arrangements and 'clout'. For instance, in the mid-1980s when women's voice was seldom 'heard' in USDAW and women members were weakly represented on union

structures, pushes for the establishment of WGs came from early female activists, branch propositions and the TUC. Even the then male-dominated EC in what was generally seen as a reactive context acknowledged that male-dominated structures rather than women create barriers to women's activism and representation. More recently, informants stressed, women have become increasingly vocal and influential in policy-making as their representation has moderately improved. Women active in the mainstream are often active in WGs and were seen to be able to transfer information and ideas between WGs and the mainstream, as well as endeavouring to argue for the on-going development of WGs from their mainstream position. For example, the possible re-establishment of a women's officer network in MSF may be prompted, according to the National Secretary (Political), by the recent recruitment of a number of female regional officials and organisers.

At the same time, some evidence indicated that the relationship between changes in women's representation in the union mainstream and WG configurations is not always positive. For example, RWS-C members in MSF and DWC members in USDAW noted that women's proportional representation on the (N)EC had heightened calls among their opponents for the *removal* of WGs. West Midlands RWS-C members observed that in 1997, only six of a 57-strong regional delegation to the TUC were women. One branch took the view that if there are insufficient female delegates, the regional reserved seat woman (and RWS-C link) should attend. This has meant that the seatholder has attended for many years while 'guys in the branch never get to go' (West Midlands RWS-C member), engendering a sense of 'reverse' discrimination among some men and some opposition to special WG arrangements, according to RWS-C members.

Summary

The analysis revealed links between the breadth of the unions' stated intentions in respect of representing members, and that of *formal* WG remits. Although in practice WGs and their union pursue a wider range of interests, USDAW's more narrowly conceived statement of interest representation was seen to provide an impetus to WGs to widen their

union's base of interests. USDAW's large base of female, manual workers (many of whom are part-time or shift workers) and MSF's professional/technical membership, coupled with the uneven distribution of women through the sectors and industries in which they organise, were found to strongly influence WGs' initiatives and agenda, albeit in different ways. The relations between the unions' formal statements of 'equal treatment' of all members related only to WGs' formal remits rather than their difference-acknowledging pursuits in practice. The expansion of the already extensive women's structure in both MSF and USDAW was attributed in part to women's absolute and growing membership size, and in MSF, to an increased focus on recruiting women. MSF and USDAW's female union membership shares were seen to have positive implications for WG configurations for similar and differing reasons. Women's increasing presence in the union mainstream was drawn on by some, however, to argue against the continued existence of WGs. To some extent, it emerged that the gender and union experience of members related to the nature of WG arrangements, particularly in MSF. Finally, the analysis highlighted links between women's changing level of representation in the union mainstream and changing WG arrangements.

Power

Institutional power and degree of centralisation

MSF and USDAW's formal structures imply that structural arrangements at each tier of their hierarchy have the same level of influence and status (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). However, certain structures and posts on each level were shown by their Rulebooks to possess more formal power than others in terms of determining union direction and influencing others. Most interviewees concurred with this. Nationally, MSF's NEC, three key sub-committees (see earlier), sector/industry-based committees, negotiating bodies, and less often, Annual Conference were seen as internal loci of power. Power at national level in USDAW was seen to reside in its EC, Political Committee and certain posts (e.g. General Secretary, Central Treasurer). One experienced female shop steward assessed

that 'the General Secretary and President are the King and Queen. Area Organisers are only soldiers, protecting them'.

At intermediate level in MSF, each Regional Council is charged with strengthening and co-ordinating its branches, advancing MSF's interests and policies throughout the region, and keeping the NEC informed of members' interests. Councils propose their own standing orders and formally determine the size and duties of regional bodies, subject to NEC endorsement (MSF 1994b). Informants' comments indicated that their counterparts and other divisional bodies in USDAW are more formally accountable to central level, particularly the EC (see USDAW 1997). Similarly, USDAW branches are centrally accountable while their counterparts in MSF are controlled principally from regional level.

These power points in the unions sit uneasily with their stated commitment to representative democracy, and in MSF, to sectoral/industrial autonomy (see MSF undated(b), Sourani 1996). Many informants felt that they had implications for WG power and operations. For example, in MSF, many RWS-C activities are ratified by the Regional Council and Education Sub-Committee. However, many formal links between RWS-Cs and the union are loosely constructed, enabling WGs to tailor their operations to regional conditions, fitting with MSF's declaration of a 'flexible decentralised ethos' (MSF 1999b:4). This was seen to provide WGs with the 'space' to give more value to the local work and informal leadership of women (see also Cuneo 1993). USDAW's central level has more formal power over DWCs though the male majority on most Councils tends to influence the formal parameters of DWC and local WGs' operations. Centralised power in USDAW and the union's straightforward structure were seen by several senior officials to formally facilitate a unified approach to equality interests by WGs although this could 'smooth out' variations in divisional interests. They felt that it both influenced the stated character and range of WGs' formal strategies but also encouraged them to find ways to tailor national policies and their own operations to local circumstances. Many

informants linked the extensive informal networking by WGs at mainstream events to the need to circumvent hierarchical union processes, for instance.

Reflecting the dynamism of power, however, the two unions' formal commitment to 'New Unionism' was viewed by many to have the potential to decentralise power and empower women if WGs and others successfully integrate into related campaigns. Furthermore, MSF has diffuse bargaining arrangements, with representatives in over 8,000 diverse workplaces (MSF 1994a, 1998a) while USDAW has formally adopted to a social partnership approach (USDAW EC 1998(b,c)) which may strengthen the union's presence in certain work organisations (e.g. Tesco)[5]. Decentralised bargaining, particularly in MSF, coupled with the qualitative nature of the bargaining process, was viewed by many experienced unionists as having positive implications for the extent to WGs can influence bargaining issues and arrangements.

However, the shift towards a more participatory approach to organising and agenda setting was also seen to be partly mitigated by other circumstances and trends. For instance, both unions were widely cited as still 'organiser dependent', thereby adversely affecting women's representation while reinforcing the perceived need for WGs. For example, two West Midlands RWS-C members observed that, reflecting wider political developments, the stream-lining of union processes had moved influence *away* from the grass roots and thus women who hold fewer posts as a result:

> MSF've tried to close how lay members influence union progress. They've experimented in cutting the amount of meetings and committees and who attends. That will eventually include women groups. We've got to keep our eye on it.

Informal power

As well as women's continued under-representation, virtually all interviewees stressed the disempowering impact on women of sexist behaviour and attitudes in the unions. The informal power attributed to union men *as men* in terms of respect and support was not seen to be as forthcoming to union women *as women*, suggesting qualitative inequities

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[5] USDAW used to represent members on six now defunct wage councils, negotiating at industry, national company (particularly

between women and men's union *experiences* (see also Briskin 1999, 1990; Cuneo 1993). Even among the four women in the reserved seats on MSF's NEC, for example, two seatholders felt that they were subject to more argument and opposition from some men for their role in primarily representing women members and for simply being women (see also Kirton & Healy 1999). In USDAW, several female Area Organisers maintained that the union supported women at senior level who are less likely to threaten the *status quo* (i.e. a 'deficit' approach) and that several women on Divisional Councils 'have become like men to survive', impacting on the progressiveness of WG aims and the level of support for their existence.

Politics

Within MSF, there are two main political factions: MSF for Labour and the Broad Left (formerly Unity Left). Unity Left was the dominant faction in TASS and representative of the Communist Party of Great Britain. MSF for Labour, which emerged from activists in ASTMS, represents 'a broad spectrum of people regarding themselves as of the Left but from a non-Communist Party background' (Carter 1997:11). As a result of the merger, MSF for Labour now dominate the NEC but have failed to get control of the leadership[6]. They are characterised as 'centre right' by the Broad Left who are critical of MSF for Labour's continuing support for General Secretary Roger Lyons (Brock 1997). In its turn, USDAW has been 'plagued in 1996 by factional infighting and legal action among the leadership over organizational issues [appears] firmly in the camp of the modernizers' (McIlroy 1998:557). Kirton & Healy (1999) noted that both major political factions within MSF generally supported women's equality in terms of proportional representation and reserved seats. In this study, however, only MSF interviewees who described themselves as Left-wing related their political leaning to women's advancement. They felt that only a broad political shift in the union would significantly widen and facilitate WGs' operation and roles, and promote 'longer' equality aims which seek to empower women *as well as* strengthen the union (see also Waterson 1999).

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in retail distribution and the milk industry) and local (particularly in food, chemical industries and warehousing) levels.

More specifically, internal politics were found to have permeated several Regional Councils' attempts to close or control women's committees that were not functioning as they would like. About five years ago, for instance, the 'Right' mobilised about 40 people to attend a West Midlands RWS-C meeting to oust the NWS-C delegate in a vote (though she was returned in two years), motivated by a political difference in views about voting procedures at a conference. Another RWS-C was suspended by its Council over its disposal of funds. An RWS-C member recalled: 'It hadn't done anything wrong. The Treasurer then, an extreme male chauvinist and right-winger, decided that it wasn't helping the region'. Certain branches were also identified as well known in opposing RWS-Cs. Similar links between internal politics and DWCs were not made by USDAW interviewees, many of whom were more cautious about proffering political views. This was indicative, however, of the more conservative union climate in which their WGs operate.

Resources

Resources including personnel, time and finance determine the scope and character of much union activity. Several informants linked changes in union resources to changes in union size. MSF recently emerged from a difficult financial period (MSF 1998b). Careful management and rationalisation (including cutting back on staff officers, many of whom were women) impacted on the development of initiatives such as WGs, according to several NWS-C members. Even though MSF's financial situation has been improved, 'it's still made a difference to what can be demanded' (President). For instance, the decision not to stage the Women's Conference in 1998 was officially due to problems of planning and work pressures on potential attendees. Several informants felt, however, that its cancellation reflected decision-makers' lower prioritisation of the WG and the less favourable disposition of some officials and councillors towards the Conference. Furthermore, USDAW maintains one of the lowest member contribution levels in order to recruit and retain low paid workers. This was linked by some DWC members to their

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[6] However, an acrimonious election campaign in early 1997 saw Lyons convincingly defeat his Broad Left opponent (McIlroy 1998).

success in recruiting women in low-paid posts, and subsequently, the pool of women available for WG involvement.

External links

Both MSF and USDAW's organisation is extended by numerous ties with other bodies at local through international levels. There are areas of overlap. For example, MSF has ties with the Financial Services Union which it founded in 1994 (MSF 1996a), the European and International Metalworkers' Federations, Unison in the health sector, the TUC, STUC, Labour Party, sponsored MPs, European Parliament representation, and FIET which gives it access to the European Commission. USDAW's links include the TUC, STUC, Labour Party, sponsored MPs, the International Chemical Workers' and International Food Workers' unions, European union organisations, MEPs (USDAW 1998d) and international bodies such as FIET for which it has provided a President on several occasions. A number of informants felt that these links helped to profile WG agendas, operations and aims at a wider level and raise the likelihood that they will be addressed, supporting Briskin's (1998a) observations. Several female officials in both unions felt that particular links had specific implications for the concerns of and resource use by WGs. For instance, they indicated that their union's traditionally close working relations with the Labour Party (see USDAW 1999, Women in USDAW 1994, Coote & Campbell 1982) meant that senior MSF officials meet with MPs each month, sometimes on matters of direct concern to women. Some informants in MSF were critical of 'New Labour', however, in respect of issues which impact disproportionately on women, supporting Wilkinson's (1998) view that the gender agenda is still marginal to it. The President felt that the Government's approach to the welfare state, for instance, led unions, their female members and WGs to seek to preserve past gains.

External WG links for USDAW and MSF include the TUC Women's Conference, Committee and regional equivalents (see TUC Equal Rights Department 1998a, 1998b; MSF 1998a). USDAW's former National Women's Officer replaced MSF's National Secretary as an ETUC Women's Committee representative several years ago. Most

interviewees felt that union and individual union women's links to wider women's bodies provided a source of external legitimacy for WGs within the union setting and raised the profile of their concerns and configuration in and beyond the unions. Furthermore, union WG members often play an active part on external WGs and link through them to other fora (e.g. the TUC Women's Committee has discussed international aspects of the General Council's work in the ICFTU and ILO). Several officials felt that USDAW's links with WGs in other British unions were weaker than those for MSF, with ramifications for the profile of their respective WGs and configuration in terms of their interaction with them.

Summary

Influence over union direction in USDAW was found to reside in national structures and posts. MSF was formally characterised as having greater regional autonomy. Despite and partly because of the location of formal power in the unions, particularly at central level in USDAW, it emerged that WGs seek to create spaces within their union through which they circumvent and supplement existing, hierarchical union procedures (e.g. extensive informal networking) and generate their own collective influence. While the decentralisation of power identified in the unions' formal commitment to New Unionism and changing bargaining arrangements were assessed to have a potentially empowering effect on WGs, organisational stream-lining could move influence away from women and WGs. Although women's influence in their union has increased, men's continued domination of more formally empowered posts was linked to the extent to which 'mainstream' women (often WG members) can effectively support WG arrangements in the mainstream. The problem is compounded in MSF where even sex proportional representation means that women only constitute a minority of postholders, though some informants felt that this strengthened the need for WGs. Informal powers accorded to men were seen to impact on the volume of women's voice for their concerns and WGs. It emerged that MSF informants on the political Left felt that only a broad political shift would significantly extend WG operations and promote 'longer' equality; examples of how 'right wing' mainstream structures had adversely impacted on WGs were given.

Similar links between internal politics and WGs were not made by USDAW interviewees, highlighting the conservative climate in which they operate. Union resource levels emerged as a significant influence on WG arrangements. Finally, MSF and USDAW's external connections were found to provide an external profile, legitimacy and support for WGs. Links with external WGs were particularly important in this respect though this USDAW's links with WGs in other British unions were weaker.

Social processes and modes of operating

Female interviewees with considerable union experience provided examples of their own and other women's encounters with sexist remarks, language and behaviour in their union. Male interviewees supported their comments (see also Kirton (1999) and Kirton & Healy (1999) on MSF). For example, MSF senior women officials were concerned about the lack of support on the NEC for its new members (particularly women) and male members' competitive style, seen to alienate many women. A NEC reserved seatholder commented that, a decade ago,

> I went to a women's school for rep training. We discussed how regional councils are full of men, women don't have a say. I went to Council to make up numbers and realised why other women didn't go. There's a negative attitude towards women.

Attitudes were seen to have changed least in the male-dominated and/or key decision-making fora (see also Aldred 1981). The executive bodies, certain Regional Councils in MSF and Divisional Councils in USDAW, and particular branches in both unions were singled out by informants for their 'male, pale and stale' culture, with 'a few men making decisions for the many and dismissing new ways of working', and for people voting for familiar faces (i.e. mainly men). MSF's President commented:

> Many men are hide-bound by what's been done for the last 50 years and feel insecure when you do things differently. They criticise WGs for that, but branches need to think how they're going to be more accessible and attractive to people.

Female informants indicated their particular dislike of long-winded, overly-proceduralised, formal, old-fashioned, 'macho', 'white' and male-dominated union

gatherings (with many branches comprising a high ratio of retired and non-working members to employed members) due in part to their responsibilities and commitments outside the union. For example, several senior MSF women saw NEC meetings as 'boring and unsatisfying' and overly proceduralised at the expense of policy issues. These features and its large size was seen to deter newer (and often younger) female activists.

For many informants, the male-dominated image of union structures was reinforced by structural barriers to participation. In the MSF magazine, 'Common Ground', Braddock (1998:12) commented that '(f)or many members, the union branch is a shadowy group that meets in a smoky pub to discuss either the overthrow of capitalism or the finer points of the union rule-book'. Informants pointed out that asian women in particular may find the pub location of many branch meetings a barrier to attending, and that many women do not have adequate transport arrangements for meetings. USDAW also faces a particular problem in that many female members work in industries (e.g. retail) which are difficult to organise because of increasingly flexible working patterns. Interviewees also identified sectoral barriers in MSF where women were less well represented. Although some branches have tried to accommodate women's needs, their solutions are often only partial given women's wider gendered roles. However, the difficulties that WGs face in accessing the mainstream and having women's concerns considered more extensively were seen by many to provide them with the impetus to find and develop alternative modes of operating.

Allegations of sexist or offensive attitudes and behaviour were not directed against all union men (see also Kirton 1999). For example:

> People at branch aren't representative of members. Female and male reps who I admire don't even go to branch! Some branch meetings aren't even quorum. A few people are political and persuade others to come along. They're dominated by a particular group of men. (former NREC Secretary)

Furthermore, many interviewees indicated that overt sexism and hostility to women activists from male unionists was diminishing. This was seen to be due in part to WGs,

the growing numbers of women progressing through the union, formal anti-discrimination policy and growing recognition of the need to organise around membership diversity. For instance, informants commented that the infusion of mainstream events with WG and women's activities had reduced overt antipathy towards and gained wider support for WGs. Whereas the presentation of USDAW's EC Statement to ADM document at the start of the women's session once used to be the cue for the hall to half empty, people now stay as they realise the relevance of the debate and WGs, particularly as 'women's' issues are increasingly couched as issues for everyone. I observed from an afternoon session of USDAW's 1998 ADM (USDAW 1998d) and five days at MSF's Annual Conference that many men were interested in WG events. Further, since 1997, women's workshops at USDAW's ADM have been opened to all stewards to encourage everyone to feel comfortable about handling 'women's issues'. At both unions' conferences, the female President used her address to refer to gender relations, WGs and women's initiatives, and to warn delegates not to use sexist language. Women spoke more on motions concerning gender equality and the roles of WGs. This said, WG operations are sensitively located within mainstream events in recognition of any lingering opposition to WGs as separate and divisive mechanisms (see also Elliot 1984). Informants' comments suggested similar developments at regional/divisional conferences, which were viewed as having positive implications for the further development of WG configurations and number, particularly as younger men were identified as being more supportive of female colleagues and WGs.

A tolerant and 'egalitarian' culture was found to be more common in non-policy making union fora with a more balanced gender make-up. This was particularly the case in training bodies (e.g. USDAW's quarterly, weekend Federation schools for branch training (Maksymiw 1990), branch workshops, shop steward and issue-based courses) where networking, learning and communication skills are emphasised, some training topics having special meaning for women (e.g. public speaking, assertiveness skills, a focus on retail sector contracts) and WGs are discussed (USDAW undated; SERTUC 1989, 1994). There is thus a question as to whether the social processes and modes of operation at

decision-making structures reflect genuine attitudinal change or merely respond to the threat of sanctions (e.g. removal of delegates from conference) and prior self-screening (female delegates are often better versed in union ways than many average female members to ward off sexist behaviour but recognised that potential female delegates could be put off attending by some men's attitudes and behaviour). Several delegates commented that women still experience discriminatory behaviour and comments at conferences which increase when gender-related issues are debated and 'when the guys think they can get away with it'. Indeed, many informants viewed the threat of discriminatory behaviour in other parts of the union as a *reaction* to women's improving situation and, in particular, positive measures including WGs. Official anti-discrimination and positive measures were seen by several to have encouraged some sexist elements to 'go underground', making discrimination extremely difficult to tackle. Again, most informants interpreted these considerations as strengthening the need for existing WGs, at least in a 'watchdog' capacity. They felt that more thorough-going cultural change was needed and most likely to emerge from WG endeavours and the development of 'New Unionism' campaigns if WGs were central to them.

Summary

Both unions have been broadly characterised as traditional, bureaucratic, white maledoms. This was reinforced by structural features which broadly differ for MSF and USDAW. Their cultures were found to alienate and block many women, some men and younger activists from participating in union structures, and to sometimes sacrifice the time available for the discussion of substantive issues. Attitudes and practices were found to have changed least in the male-dominated and/or key decision-making fora. While these features, and negative, often covert reactions to women's improving union situation, present difficulties to WGs' interaction with their union at times, they were also viewed as reinforcing the need for WG arrangements. Encouragingly, informants perceived that a diminishing group of men perpetuated sexism and that support was growing for WGs and their concerns due in part to their sensitive infusion at mainstream events. Overall,

informants felt that this and other developments boded well for the extension of WG roles and operations.

3.3   Chapter summary

MSF and USDAW house two of the most extensive ranges of WGs in all British unions though WG arrangements are slightly more wide-ranging in MSF. They comprise similar and differing WG forms. Women's circumstances and characteristics, and external factors influence the nature, forms and categories of organising and struggle in which female unionists engage and the alliances they create. However, this chapter focused on how the number and arrangement of union WGs are influenced by their union setting. In view of space constraints, it focused on the more significant union factors which impact on WG arrangements, according to analysis of the evidence.

A number of features of each dimension of the 'extended' version of Hyman's (1994) model of union identity were found to play a part in shaping MSF and USDAW's WG configurations. This stresses that the union context as a whole has a considerable bearing on the shape of its women's structure. It emerged that common aspects of both unions' organisational dimensions have both common and different meanings for WG arrangements, while peculiarities of MSF and USDAW's organisational identity impacted on them in unique ways. Furthermore, the analyses revealed that certain factors can be seen to impact directly on the number and configuration of WGs while others have a more qualitative influence or are subject to a greater interpretation in terms of their effects on WG arrangements.

Aspects of union structures and democratic arrangements were important influences of WG arrangements. MSF and USDAW supported the wider finding from our preliminary analysis in Chapter 1 that larger, mixed gender unions and unions with a substantial female membership are more likely to host a larger and wider array of WGs. This may help to account for why MSF, the larger of the two unions examined here, housed more recorded WGs than USDAW. Other aspects of union structure and democratic

arrangements found to reinforce existing or encouraging the extension of WG arrangements included the introduction of more member-centred organising approaches; the unions' own structural arrangements (e.g. number of tiers of organisation, coverage of different numbers of divisions/regions); growing WG-union links and WG operation within mainstream activities and events; and union equality initiatives for women though these broadly differed in that MSF sanctions positive discrimination measures while USDAW generally does not because this would imply that there are problems with the existing system and women constitute the majority of the membership and 'should' be able to progress through the union (concomitantly, WGs are portrayed as a 'means' to 'sameness' equality ends for women). New 'integrated' equalities arrangements in both unions were also seen to have important implications for the role and scope of WG arrangements, with no evidence to suggest that they would replace the women's structure. Less positively, structural 'inertia' in many parts of the unions was seen to effectively cap WG organisation and initiatives.

In respect of union agendas, the analyses revealed that their emphasis of 'bread and butter' matters and inconsistent regard for the gendered nature or implications of these and other issues influenced the types of issues raised by WGs and how they were approached, the nature and pace of the change pursued by WGs, and the perceived need for WGs in the union. Furthermore, the non-prioritisation of women's concerns and unions' general emphasis of 'gender equality' as external rather than internal matters was seen to impact on WG arrangements by raising the level of effort and resources they channelled into profiling their concerns. However, the increasing recognition in both unions of links between union-centred and other issues and some recent growth in union attention to women's situation within them (usually in 'sameness' terms) was found to encourage the unions to view WGs as key mechanisms for championing women's equality, and to influence and respond to WG initiatives. It also emerged that the difficulties associated with raising and maintaining the profile of issues in the unions encouraged WGs to pursue sustained and more innovative activity, and drew attention to their effectiveness in view of their current locations within the unions.

Interest representation by the unions emphasised the heuristic nature of the analytical approach to union identity. While the union's formal statement of interest representation emphasised members' relationships in the workplace, this was assessed to provide an impetus to WGs to broaden the union's base of interests via more extensive external links. MSF was characterised as a 'general technical union' and USDAW as a union dominated by 'female manual workers'. Their sectoral emphases influenced the agenda emphases and the nature and level of certain WG initiatives in different ways. They also at times presented specific problems for existing WG arrangements, prompting WGs to be flexible by altering aspects of their configuration. The unions' acknowledgement of members' heterogeneity but subsequent stated endeavour to achieve 'sameness equality for all' was seen to set the formal parameters of WG remits. In practice, however, it was seen to influence WGs' establishment of arrangements (e.g. the BWN in MSF) which recognise members' diverse characteristics and circumstances. Other factors relating to interest representation that impacted on WG arrangements and their expansion included the absolute number of women in both unions and the growth in women's numbers. Women's constitution of a significant membership minority in MSF emphasised the feminist basis of WGs while women's majority membership share in USDAW emphasised the need for WG arrangements as women still lack a 'voice' in the union which is commensurate with their number. The gender and union experience of members was also found to influence the nature and roles of WGs, particularly in MSF. Women's changing level of representation in MSF and USDAW was linked to the likeliness of their interests being represented, WG arrangements and WGs' 'clout'. Women's continuing under-representation in powerful posts in the unions, however, was seen as reflecting the less than ideal level of influence that WG women in the mainstream could wield in support of WG arrangements and initiatives.

On power, the analysis revealed that certain structures and posts in the unions have more formal power than others on the same organisational tier. Power was found to be relatively centralised in USDAW while MSF formally devolved more autonomy to

regional level. The respective loci of power in the unions was found to have implications for WG power and operations. Greater regional influences on MSF's RWS-Cs, for instance, encouraged them to tailor their arrangements and operations to local circumstances. Centralised power in USDAW, and the actual influence of Divisional Councils, helped to shape the formal remits of DWCs and local WG initiatives. While this was seen to formally unify WG pursuits, it has also encouraged WGs to find ways of tailoring national directives or recommendations to suit local circumstances (e.g. via informal networking). The dynamism of power was illustrated by the finding that New Unionism could lead to a devolution of power, important for women who are less well represented in the upper echelons of the unions, and with implications for WG arrangements and roles. To some extent, this trend was offset by others in MSF (e.g. streamlining of union processes at local level). It emerged that 'less threatening' WGs tended to gain more active support from certain union quarters while WGs perceived as more 'ambitious' often suffered attacks on their initiatives and indeed their existence. This finding was linked to the political persuasion of unionists, and in MSF at least, a political shift to the Left was generally perceived as likely to widen and facilitate WG operations and roles, and promote 'longer' equality. The changing level of union resources was found to impact on the scale of WG arrangements and initiatives. External union links, particularly with outside women's groups, were seen in most cases to provide WG agendas, operations and aims with a wider profile and greater legitimacy though USDAW's few links with other unions' WGs were interpreted as meaning less interaction between its WGs with those of other unions, affecting WGs' overall configuration.

The addition to Hyman's union model of the 'social processes and modes of operating' category was shown to be valuable for more comprehensively assessing the impacts of the union setting on WG arrangements. Sexist attitudes, language and behaviour, particularly in male-dominated and key decision-making fora, coupled with aspects of 'traditional' ways of operating which many women disliked and structural barriers to women's union participation, partly prompted the need for WGs' continued existence. WGs had responded in part by setting up activities and events within key mainstream union events

(such as annual conference). At the same time, the demise of overt sexist attitudes and behaviour in the unions raised the question of whether the shift was genuine or merely reflected a response to the threat of sanctions; women's improving position in the unions engendered a backlash in certain quarters and some unionists had taken their opposition to WGs 'underground', making them harder to counter. However, many interpreted this as reinforcing the need for WG arrangements and for them to emphasise more the need to gain men and some women's support for WG organisation and initiatives.

4   WOMEN'S GROUPS IN MSF

4.0   Introduction

Having identified key relationships between MSF and USDAW's 'identity' and their WG arrangements, this chapter responds to the second and third research aims in relation to MSF. That is, what aims do its WGs pursue and how; what equality ideas underpin them; and what effects do WGs have on gender equality in MSF? The chapter firstly outlines the assigned roles and formal position of selected WG types in MSF. It then applies the equality typology and union identity model described in Chapter 2 to the evidence to assess the equality aims each WG actually addresses within the union and how they pursue them. The analytic frameworks also structure the next section's evaluation of WG effectiveness in bringing about gender equality in MSF. The final section summarises key findings.

4.1   Women's groups in MSF

The following WGs were selected for examination: the National Women's Sub-Committee (NWS-C), Regional Women's Sub-Committees (RWS-Cs), the nation-wide Black and Ethnic Women's Network (BWN) and the annual, national Women's Week Course on negotiating skills[7].

Assigned roles

The WGs recognise aims which are endorsed by MSF and follow broad equality guidelines (e.g. MSF's EO Charter - see Chapter 3). The explicit roles of all WGs and female activists are encapsulated in a NWS-C document, 'MSF Strategy for Women' (MSF NWS-C 1994a), presented at MSF's Annual Conference in 1994:

- to improve working conditions for women;

- to campaign to end discrimination;

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[7] The course is one of three for women which form part of the 'Organising for Equality' introductory training of MSF's 'Organising Works' campaign (MSF 1998a).

- to attract more women members by making MSF woman-friendly and responsive to their needs and aspirations;

- to improve women's involvement at all levels;

- to increase women's profile inside and outside MSF; and

- to increase their involvement in political strategy.

Informants' comments suggested that these stated aims were underpinned by largely uncoordinated equality ideas. For example, improving women's involvement and ending discrimination were commonly understood to refer to 'same for all' treatment while the aim to make MSF 'women-friendly' was variously conceived.

Individual WGs' roles fit with these general aims while indicating the logic behind their particular structural form and union location. The recognised roles of the NWS-C are:

- to coordinate other WG mechanisms in a strategic manner;

- to provide a conduit between the women's groups and the wider union; and

- to set an agenda for the women's structure and advise the NEC on issues relating to women (MSF 1998c).

The first two 'roles' describe functions; only the third relates to the NWS-C's internally-orientated strategic purpose. For their part, RWS-C aims are subject to broad 'terms of reference' endorsed by their Council. The aims of the West Midlands RWS-C (undated:1) are typical:

- to promote the aims and objectives of the union with particular reference to women;

- to support and encourage women to become active and involved;

- to provide a forum for discussing the needs and concerns of women in the union;

- to advise on policies, practices and facilities to remedy the inequality of women both within and outside the union; and

- to support and liaise with members, committees and groups that promote EO.

These aims stress RWS-Cs' action orientation and proximity to female members. They emphasise the pursuit of women's equality in MSF and beyond. The first aim is general while the last describes a function. However, the second aim concerns women's union representation while the third and fourth relate to raising and profiling a women's agenda.

The assigned roles of the BWN are:

- to encourage black and ethnic minority women's self-organisation;
- to increase their participation in MSF at all levels; and
- to campaign against racist and sexist employment practices that black women face (MSF 1995, 1998c:2, 1997).

Like RWS-Cs, the BWN's roles relate to women's situation within MSF and beyond, but externally, they focus more narrowly on minority women's situation at work. The first aim encourages a 'difference' equality approach in the form of positive discrimination. The second modestly seeks better representation for minority women (cf. proportional representation, quotas, etc.). The third seeks 'sameness' equality via an agenda for minority women.

The shared administration of the women's week by the NWS-C and National Education Sub-Committee emphasises its intended purpose which, like that of the NWS-C, is internally orientated:

- to improve the position of women within MSF by offering the opportunity for women to share experiences and problems;
- to develop knowledge, skills and confidence;
- to discuss how to tackle discrimination and achieve equal opportunities and learn about MSF policies (MSF 1998c, 1998d).

Location and meeting frequency

The NWS-C is located at national level and the Regional Women's Sub-Committees at regional level in MSF's formal structure (see Figure 3.1, Chapter 3). The NWS-C meets bi-monthly in London. RWS-Cs also meet bi-monthly but mostly in regional offices. Activities staged by both levels of committee occur in various locations within and outside the union. The Black and Ethnic Women's Network is nation-wide but operates locally. It is the only mechanism specifically for minority women and the only body for minority members which physically operates below regional level (cf. Kirton (1999) who suggests that black women need more than a one-dimensional model of women's networking in MSF). Women's weeks are national-level structures which last five days at MSF's education college, Whitehall College, in Hertfordshire (MSF 1998e).

Size and participants

The all-female NWS-C comprises 14 delegates and sometimes their deputies from RWS-Cs, and sector-based representatives from tobacco (five), health visitors (four), the Craft Committee (two) and finance (one). Other full voting members include four female NEC reserved seatholders, the Committee Chair, Deputy, Secretary and Treasurer. Non-voting, speaking members include a Disabilities and a Race Equality Committee delegate, the Youth Committee Chair when it is a woman, a bloc from working parties, the President and other NEC women. NWS-C members are elected in a conventional manner from branch nominations via Councils and trade sectors. There are normally at least 25 attendees although its meeting size has on occasion exceeded 40.

The 14 Regional Women's Sub-Committees vary in size but average a core of 10 women. Their numbers have been curbed by falling membership since the late 1980s and other factors (e.g. union mergers). RWS-Cs have designated posts: a NWS-C delegate and deputy, Women's Officer, Chair, Treasurer and other officers as required. RWS-C members are nominated as a women's officer by each branch and elected at a Regional Council AGM (in reality few branches are able to propose a candidate - see Chapter 3).

While most do not allow male members, RWS-Cs with few members have had little option but to merge with mixed Disability, Lesbian and Gay or Race equality committees. RWS-Cs comprise both paid and lay officials with varying union experience. Their 'open committee' status enables them to co-opt women. They also invite visitors and speakers and allow 'ordinary' female members in the region to attend in a non-voting capacity.

No evidence of designated roles among BWN members was found, emphasising its less formal status, changeable form and the self-determined nature of involvement by women from *all* ethnic minority groups. Informants indicated that there are fewer active BWN women (who tend to be professionals (e.g. in CPHVA, NHS), London-based and 'Left-leaning') than in the past though there are 'passive' members (about 30) on a BWN mailing list. The latter were characterised by informants as diverse in respect of other social and personal characteristics, reflecting relatively low access barriers to participation in the network to some self-determined level.

Each women's week course comprises about 15 attendees, plus organising (including a Course Coordinator and tutors) and support staff, speakers and officials. They assume a lack of union experience among their attendees though informants indicated that members vary in their knowledge and involvement in the union. Participants are selected from applicants according to their regional location, occupation and other characteristics so as to encourage attendance by a diverse range of attendees.

Remit

MSF's Constitution is silent on many aspects of WG organisation. However, the NWS-C is subject to NEC endorsement which some see as representing a 'persistent form of patriarchal control' (Kirton & Healy 1999:34). RWS-Cs are mainly funded by regional fora such as Councils and their standing orders and constitution are determined by their Council, and formally subject to NEC and NWS-C endorsement. The NWS-C and RWS-Cs are not policy-making committees and the size and many of the activities of RWS-Cs are officially subject to Regional Council control, reflecting regional autonomy in the

union (see Chapter 3). RWS-Cs also develop regional responses to strategies initiated at national level. BWN members stressed the network's assigned roles and ultimate accountability to national level. The women's skills course, which focuses on developing women's communication skills in all negotiating situations, is similarly accountable to national level.

Linkages

The NWS-C and RWS-Cs are developing more formal links with the rest of MSF, reflecting WGs' increasing institutional 'integration' (Briskin 1993). For example, the NWS-C Secretary presents minutes to the NEC for approval, making it critically aware of WG activity. NEC reserved seatholders take NWS-C recommendations to the NEC from the NWS-C and report back to it, reflecting a dual remit as representatives of all members and as agents who pursue gender equality. Other NEC women are accountable to a region or body and can opt to attend NWS-C meetings, thereby fulfilling a similar role. The NWS-C Chair and Vice-Chair are members of the Organisation and Recruitment Task Group; two reserved seatholders sit on the Policy Task Group; the Chair, Vice Chair and a NEC reserved seatholder are on the Education Committee, the latter as its Chair; another is the Youth Committee Chair. RWS-C delegates on the NWS-C provide regular links with RWS-Cs, and through them, with regional and branch fora and members. The NWS-C also has strong links to other national equality fora (cf. Kirton 1999).

RWS-Cs have mainly regional and local links within MSF. For instance, the Regional Women's Officer reports on RWS-C meetings to Council and provides the Council Secretary with RWS-C minutes (MSF West Midlands RWS-C undated). RWS-Cs are also knitted into MSF's organisational fabric via their member selection processes (see later) and their officers in reserved seats on Council and other sub-Committees (see Chapter 3). RWS-Cs' links with other regional equality bodies vary across regions. In most regions, the NWS-C delegate and Regional Women's Officer are *ex officio* and participate on

many regional committees. There are also branch links via RWS-C (women officer) branch representatives.

Women's committees also have important external links. Many NWS-C and RWS-C members attend conferences and hold senior posts on outside fora. They have links with WGs in bodies such as the TUC and EOC. The NWS-C links with overseas organisations and has MSF-sponsored places on international women's bodies (e.g. the ETUC Women's Committee). External RWS-C links are again more regional or local (e.g. with individual employers via RWS-C branch representatives, with community groups via RWS-C lay members who work in related areas) but do support overseas work through the NWS-C with wider external bodies (e.g. a joint RWS-C response went via the NWS-C and EOC to the 1995 Beijing International Women's Conference) and other MSF bodies (e.g. to Anti-Slavery International via Regional International Sub-Committees). Individual RWS-C members also finance their own trips to overseas events, to which senior officials may be sponsored (e.g. the International Festival for Women) and affiliate to outside women's groups (e.g. as Labour Party Women's Conference delegates).

Compared to women's committees, the BWN's formal links with the union mainstream are limited. The network has some links with other union and external bodies, however, via individual active members. For example, one was a NREC member, with experience of the NHS Equal Opportunities Black Women's Network, the TUC Race Relations Committee and helped set up CPHVA and MSF race committees. A number of active BWN participants also attend the TUC Black Workers' Conference and have forged links with black women in other unions. Given its wide range of attendees from the union membership and officialdom, the women's week's links via individual women are numerous and extend to all union levels and beyond.

This review of the formal aims and operation of WGs reveals that it is difficult to assess the equality ideas which inform them, stressing the need for closer examination of their actual operations.

4.2 Women's Groups in operation

Analysis of the evidence revealed that the *actual* aims of different WGs complement and extend their assigned aims. Given the focus here on their aims which relate to gender equality within MSF, these aims can be broadly categorised according to the union identity categories (see Chapter 3). The following empirical analysis responds to second research question: to assess what equality aims WG pursue within MSF through their own features of organisational identity (i.e. the union model is applied at the level of WGs), how different WGs address their aims and what equality ideas inform their efforts. While the thesis focuses on WG aims which centre on women's union situation, their externally-orientated aims are discussed when they link with women's internal circumstances.

National and Regional Women's Sub-Committees

In this section, the emphasis of particular equality ideas and areas of WG and union identity over others reflect the emphasis of WG pursuits rather than their omission.

'Sameness' equality

Agenda

Women's committee minutes and literature (e.g. newsletters) showed their emphasis on 'external' issues relating to women's situation at work and often the pursuit of 'sameness' equality, suggesting the influence of wider union agendas (see Chapter 3). These include 'breaking through the 'glass ceiling'' in manufacturing and IT; encouraging women to stand for outside bodies (e.g. political fora); and tackling low/unequal pay. 'Difference' strategies have been used to campaign for these issues (e.g. a national 'Women into Power' training day encouraged women's political involvement).

At the same time, 'sameness' internal union issues (e.g. women's proportional representation, equal profiling of women's concerns) have been increasingly pursued by the committees via positive action and discrimination (i.e. difference-recognising) initiatives. The emphasis on certain issues was found to vary across RWS-Cs, reflecting

their region's sectoral base, 'where it is at' (Scotland RWS-C member) in terms of WG concerns and equality, and WG specificities. However, few region-specific issues were identified and the NWS-C tended to pursue national and supra-national level matters (e.g. women's proportional representation at European level) which are difficult for sub-national WGs to coordinate.

Interest representation and power

Virtually all informants spoke of 'improvements in women's involvement in MSF' in terms of the 'sameness' goal of proportional representation on existing structures, and among activists. Greater formal involvement by women was seen, based on their experiences, to increase the opportunities for raising women's concerns (i.e. 'sameness' representation was linked to women's empowerment to further a 'difference' aim). Only a few women in a RWS-C viewed as the most 'radical' by senior officials wanted to see '50:50 representation to reflect women's situation in society' (West Midlands Regional Women's Officer) on the basis that proportionality (i.e. minority representation) would not empower women to the same extent as men in an organisation whose operations were seen to be informed by patriarchal ideas.

To achieve proportionality, study participants generally favoured interventionist or difference strategies (see also Kirton 1999). For instance, most informants stressed the importance of recruiting women though this is not cited as an assigned role for women's committees. They believed that, in a union with larger ranks of male officials, activists and members, women's interests were likely to be quashed or disappear without 'sameness' of opportunity to represent their interests via more active women. This stressed the significance of a larger pool of women members from among whom union activists could be trained. The RWS-Cs' increasing tendency to undertake 'gendered' recruitment as membership fell was operationalised by their presentation of MSF as 'woman-friendly' and responsive to women's needs (i.e. difference strategies). For example, they recently began to arrange social evenings around topics of interest to women to encourage their membership (MSF Women 1994). RWS-Cs were seen to put

considerable store on trying to recruit and involve women at their day and weekend schools and via the 'Organising Works' campaign (part of the New Unionism approach) and other union campaigns (e.g. around maternity leave), with MSF increasingly recognising the significance of RWS-Cs as the first or only union contact point for many potential female members. *Ad hoc* activities are also used to this end (e.g. the West Midlands RWS-C's stall at the annual Leicester Caribbean Carnival targets ethnic minority women).

However, many informants felt that many members' tendency to re-elect representatives with a proven track record provided a powerful obstacle to women's activism in male-dominated branches and regions. Furthermore, a generally hostile climate for unions has translated into an approach which encourages union recruitment initiatives to be as wide as possible rather than specifically targeted on women to ensure union survival. Recognising these problems, the NWS-C recently promoted proportionality goals via formal recommendations to the union in terms of the general benefits it would bring. As well as its 'MSF Strategy for Women' (see earlier), it successfully proposed a motion to the 1994 Annual Conference which led to MSF outlining a strategy for women's proportional representation at all levels, and positive discrimination in the form of rotating the positions of Chair and Secretary between men and women at every level up to and including Councils (MSF NWS-C 1994b). The NWS-C successfully proposed a motion at the 1998 Conference which backed calls to improve women's recruitment and involvement by linking NWS-C and mainstream activities:

> Conference calls on [160] industrial sector National Advisory Committees:
> i) in conjunction with the NWS-C, to bring forward to the 1999 Conference, targets [i.e. proportionality] and proposals for recruiting and organising women in their industries;
> ii) to produce an annual report to the NWS-C ... on the development of campaigning activities, bargaining demands and achievements, enhancement of women's involvement and direct representation in all relevant machinery.
> Conference calls on all Regional Councils to develop parallel programmes. (MSF 1998b:44)

It also recommended that internal advertisements for senior vacancies should encourage women, black and ethnic minority candidates to apply, and that external advertisements should target and positively welcome applicants from these groups. Furthermore, many informants claimed that they would continue to resist efforts to abolish reserved seats for women, a form of difference approach used to pursue 'sameness' representation.

Many WG and mainstream informants viewed the women's committees, particularly RWS-C activities, as a training ground for women's wider union participation in 'ordinary' (i.e. sameness) posts in existing union arrangements. The committees can be viewed as a difference approach in that their women-only make-up helps to foster a 'safe', supportive and rare collective 'space' (see also Cuneo 1993, Cockburn 1995) where women learn about MSF and gain the necessary skills for mainstream involvement. Many women recounted their experiences when arguing that men should not attend or have restricted access to RWS-C meetings if the committees were to preserve their 'mentoring' roles. For instance:

> There's a fear that if men go along, they will take the floor and almost take control
> again as they have often done in the branches. (National Secretary (Political))

However, several RWS-C women felt that the difference approach of single-sex committees could only partially prepare women to enter the wider, 'mixed' union, supporting a competitive approach to empowerment (see Elliot 1984, Orr 1995). By inviting men to RWS-C meetings, they contended, women could observe and learn skills from others in a context which more closely resembles how the mainstream currently operates (i.e. they encouraged a 'deficit' approach). Somewhat differently, some women in RWS-Cs that had merged with mixed equality bodies also felt that permitting some men to attend RWS-C meetings enabled them to appreciate the effects of their behaviour and attitudes towards women and start to question social interaction and ways of operating elsewhere. They saw men's 'exclusion' from a full role within RWS-Cs as tantamount to a divisive form of 'reverse discrimination' which subverted wider support and understanding of WGs and their aims.

WG documents indicated that RWS-Cs *increasingly* promote women's wider union involvement. For example, the activities of their women-only schools now devote more attention to developing women's union skills (e.g. assertiveness training). Furthermore, the diverse female membership of many RWS-Cs was generally seen to encourage sub-groups of women into women's committees and later the mainstream. The wide range of women in some RWS-Cs was seen to derive from the committees' open status, targeting of minority groups, 'women-friendly' measures such as shared travel arrangements (i.e. difference approaches) as well as the higher ethnic minority mix in certain regions (e.g. London, West Midlands). At the same time, several RWS-C women discussed how they had chosen RWS-C involvement over (and had sometimes been prompted by) personal relationships and other considerations, reflecting how a 'deficit' approach, which fewer men are likely to experience, came into play. NWS-C members adhered more to the 'masculine' job model of a senior union official, supporting previous research (see Chapter 1) but their characteristics still varied more than those in mainstream structures due to the NWS-C's ability to co-opt women, the presence of RWS-C delegates, and women-friendly features. However, several NWS-C 'exceptions' (e.g. one NEC reserved seatholder was in her 30s, married, with three young children and other union roles), who were seen to provide role models to a range of women thinking about participating in the union, were able financially to sub-contract their gendered roles (e.g. childcare) (see also Watson 1988).

'Difference' equality

Agenda

The heterogeneity of female union membership notwithstanding, most interviewees believed in a common bond between MSF women which set them apart from men. They and WG documentation (e.g. minutes) indicated that the women's committees and individual female officials have *increasingly* stressed the gendered nature of many 'mainstream' issues as well as raised concerns as 'women's issues'. The former included

home working and child/elder care, the latter women's personal welfare, women's health issues (e.g. (breast) cancer screening, female circumcision, abortion, drugs) and (domestic) violence against women. Both levels of committee have organised around these issues. For example, on breast cancer screening, the committees spearheaded a much-publicised national campaign and the NWS-C established a Working Group in 1996 which compiled a survey and report on the meaning of the disease for women and their families (MSF NWS-C 1997).

The committees, particularly RWS-Cs, were identified as having pursued some issues of concern to 'sub-groups' of women. These issues included asylum seeking by some minority women, committee links with minority bodies (e.g. RWS-C merger in some cases with other MSF equality bodies) and general identification with other struggling groups. These matters were pursued through initiatives which recognise the convergence of gender- and other- based initiatives (e.g. West Midlands RWS-C has focused on the concerns of minority women at schools it coorganises with the Regional Race Equality Committee - MSF Women 1994). Indeed, the West Midlands Regional Women's Officer commented,

> RWS-C women are used to facing prejudice. They've an instinct for listening to other people's cases against it. They take more controversial issues to Council than other committees except for the International Committee.

RWS-Cs' ability to respond to minority women's issues was seen as vital given the BWN's current relative inactivity (see later) (cf. Leah's (1993) findings on Canadian unions) though they were found to mobilise less around these issues than 'broader' women's concerns.

Interest representation

Most informants did not view involvement in WGs as a direct improvement of women's position-holding in MSF because they saw WGs as a 'means to other ends', supporting previous research. However, several RWS-C and NWS-C interviewees interpreted WGs' promotion of *other* 'difference' arrangements in the union as a goal, suggesting a

conflation of 'difference' equality strategies and goals. Their perception of measures such as reserved seats for women as goals in themselves appeared to derive from their apparent 'permanency' as mainstream posts. The NWS-C's push for reserved seats on Councils and sub-committees in its 'Quotas for Women' document (MSF NWS-C 1994b) have been augmented by efforts to consolidate existing gains while seeking more. For instance, the South West Regional Council recently agreed that its RWS-C could fill two industrial places on the Industrial and Recruitment Sub-Committee. The RWS-C responded that one would attend 'to keep the momentum going' (South West RWS-C member) while it continued to pursue reserved places (MSF South West RWS-C 1997 (a, b)).

'Transformational' equality

Agenda

Both committee minutes and WG informants indicated that the issues raised to WGs were increasingly treated by them as matters which link women's situation in various spheres and thereby transcend the workplace (see also Kumar 1993). For example, many RWS-Cs have tackled (domestic) violence with regard to how it impacts on women at home. work *and* in MSF. This contrasts with the mostly industrial focus of the mainstream bodies such as branches, but has provided part of the impetus for transforming wider union thinking about union- and other-centred issues as discrete (see Chapter 3).

Most interviewees recognised that merely raising concerns for women did not automatically equate with their prioritisation or wider support in MSF. Consequently, the committees increasingly employ a transformational approach by trying to recast some (difference) issues such as childcare, breast cancer, maternity rights and flexible hours as 'everybody's business' (see also Briskin (1993), and Bacchi's (1990) advocacy of identity-based issues as 'human' matters) while emphasising their various meanings for different groups. Promoting concerns in this way was seen by many as stressing 'unity *through* diversity' without threatening 'traditional' (male) agenda concerns. Furthermore, several RWS-Cs (e.g. West Midlands) emphasised a transformative approach by

extending their agendas to include issues for non-union women (see also Piva & Ingrao (1984) on women's committees in Italian unions).

In respect of agenda setting, a number of interviewees asserted that their women's committee and other WGs seek to 'transform' existing union channels by augmenting and 'gendering' aspects of them. For instance, most issues were said to be raised to RWS-Cs from women at the grass roots via meetings, women's weeks and schools (organised by the NWS-C/Education Committee and/or RWS-Cs/other regional sub-committees), contact with WG members and in the form of resolutions from Annual Conference. The NWS-C also stages an annual Women's Conference to which RWS-Cs are linked via delegates where key issues for women members are discussed. These processes reflect a feminist strategy in that women members form a minority of the membership and would not ordinarily expect to see their concerns progress through a majority-rules system dominated by men. Furthermore, reflecting the union's sectoral coverage and WG resourcefulness, they propose to make use of many members' professional skills and expertise to advance certain matters (e.g. health care).

Longitudinal analysis of RWS-C minutes revealed that topical issues tend to widen already broad women's committee agendas. The breadth of committee agendas reflects the absence of policy 'no go' areas in RWS-Cs, apart from issues for which there were inadequate resources or ordinary members did not want pursued:

> We're head on, prepared to go for issues, have a debate and lose it, know an issue to be controversial, and with some intrepidation, take it to the Regional Council. (West Midlands RWS-C member)

(The NWS-C was generally seen to have a more open agenda than many union fora but, of necessity, to organise more conventionally with, for example, its Chair or Secretary filtering issues prior to meetings in order to coordinate a manageable body of concerns).

Power

The NWS-C and RWS-Cs are not policy-making bodies and are subject to national and/or

regional control (see earlier). Indeed, the NWS-C was not generally seen by informants as having the same formal power or influence as the three mainstream NEC sub-committees despite comprising senior female officials and being a NEC sub-committee since 1989. Nonetheless, many informants viewed the committees and other WGs as adopting a transformative approach both within and beyond their organisation as they created a space within the traditional organisation where women can come together, often aided by female activists and leaders (see also Kelly 1998), and realise that many of their experiences are the same as other women's, a process of politicisation and social identification which collectively mobilises (Kelly & Breinlinger 1996) and empowers them. This supports the claim that constituency-based union power can form a 'substitute' for workplace (Briskin 1998a), or indeed, other traditional sources of status. Informants indicated that women, feeling empowered by their WG experience, were then able to enter the union mainstream and feel confident and collectively supported when seizing opportunities to shift the balance of influence, albeit within existing (i.e. sameness) union posts and structures (see below also).

Social processes and modes of operating

In line with a generally assigned WG aim, the NWS-C formally recommends that procedures should be laid down for branches and Councils regarding 'women-friendly' meetings (MSF NWS-C 1994b). As Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) and Cuneo (1993) found for women in union positions of power, WG women were seen to use their positions 'differently', bringing about a transformative style (i.e. an approach and a goal) to unionism *as women*. For example, many informants emphasised the additional insight and perspective that they could bring to the wider union via WGs based on their experiences as women, mothers and workers. Women who saw themselves as having their own 'style of operating' revealed a general preference for openness, sharing, tolerance of differences, acceptance of people for 'who they are, not what they've already done' (Scotland RWS-C member), friendliness and non-aggression in WG settings which they tried to transfer to wider union settings to challenge, and make others question, some of the bases for power in the traditional, patriarchal union mainstream (see also Colgan &

Ledwith 1996a). For instance, informants observed that while RWS-Cs encouraged participants to learn skills to help them operate within existing union arrangements (see earlier), they increasingly helped women to self-determine the ways in which *they* most preferred to operate (see also Briskin 1993). This echoes Mann *et al's*. (1997:210) finding that women who experienced Unison's educational programmes designed for women, and often prompted or organised by women's committees, 'display a very different approach in meetings and their union activism from those coming from (the) mainstream ... they tend to be more informal and inclusive; they listen more and are less bureaucratic and hierarchical'.

MSF women also felt the committees tried to promote a transformative approach to power(-sharing) via their own example and relating this to their successes in respect of their substantive aims. This included the minimal status differences (despite their designated roles) within RWS-Cs, and to a lesser extent NWS-C[8], greater contact with the grassroots and direct communication within the women's structure. Most NWS-C members commented that they determined their level of involvement in the committee rather than complied with the union tradition of a 'long hours culture' (although several delayed their involvement until their other commitments had reduced - see also Cunnison 1987). Many WG informants stressed their keenness to change the hierarchical, formal, unwelcoming and even objectifying environment of many mixed fora (see also Kirton & Healy 1999, Walton 1991).

Black and ethnic minority women's network

'Sameness' equality

Agenda

Most issues handled by the BWN were seen by its members to reflect the desire of minority women to be treated the 'same' as men and members of other races at work and

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[8] NWS-C women felt that this was due in part to their awareness that, although they were friends with other NWS-C women,

in MSF (see also Section 4.1). BWN informants cited low pay, part-time work and under-representation in senior work positions as some of their principal workplace concerns. They also discussed issues which more explicitly reflect the convergence of race and gender discrimination which, they felt, were given little coverage in 'one-dimensional' equality bodies such as women's committees and the NREC: problems with working in 'dead end' jobs, minority women's greater chance of encountering inappropriate disciplinary action, culturally- and racially-motivated violence and intimidation at work (sometimes from minority men) and being shown little dignity at work (MSF 1997). With regard to internal union matters, the key BWN aim was minority women's greater union involvement in ordinary (i.e. sameness) positions. The BWN's small number of currently active members said that they were continuing to promote these concerns where possible via MSF and women's literature (e.g. 'Women in MSF') (i.e. using difference strategies). Several informants also felt that the BWN's emphasis on 'sameness' equality ends in respect of its agenda related to its desire to gain acceptance within the wider union and establish a stronger base from which to eventually pursue more radical change.

Significantly, the BWN's promotion of minority women's concerns alongside majority concerns on union platforms reflects a 'difference' approach insofar as their concerns are less likely to be given attention within the majority-rules (cf. unitarist) processes of the wider union. However, recent external stimuli have raised the profile of BWN's work- and union-centred concerns, reflecting a unitarist approach to 'sameness' equality. For instance, the failure of the pro-European movement to address questions of inter-European racism (MSF 1998c) prompted consideration of minority women's issues, and MSF's 'Year Against Racism' in 1997 sought responses to issues facing minorities.

Interest representation
The NWS-C and National Race Equality Committee's joint initiation of the informal BWN (i.e. an organising approach based on gender- and race-based differences) was intended to encourage minority women's greater union involvement in the union

they could stand against them in elections.

mainstream. While not explicitly stated, informants felt that this referred to the pursuit of proportional representation (i.e. a 'sameness' equality aim). The backing of the predominantly white NWS-C qualifies somewhat the finding of a study on unionism and race commissioned by the West Midlands Regional TUC that '(w)hite officials offer explanations [of low minority involvement] in terms of black members' lack of interest in, or understanding of, trade unionism' (Lee 1984:ii).

Power

Black and ethnic minority female members' formal union powers were seen as weak. Few are located in mainstream posts at national or regional level, for instance. The low level of BWN activity in recent times was also not seen to bode well for minority women's formal (sameness) union power. They recounted how, from a mailing list for its members in 1994, the BWN developed into a network with meetings and coorganised activities with women's committees, including day schools for black women at national and regional levels. However, unlike MSF's lesbian and gay network (LaGiM) which has gone from strength to strength and now incorporates a conference and national sub-committee, the BWN's activity has diminished and it no longer meets. According to the NREC Secretary, the network is now held together by mailouts, informal communication and the activism of a small number of members. Informants including BWN members attributed the network's demise to union factors (cf. lack of interest among minority women) including the restriction placed on BWN members' attendance at NREC meetings which now comprise only working delegates (because they became too large and unwieldy)[9]; RRECs' lack of focus on minority women; and MSF's tight finances until recently.

According to several BWN members, however, the network is now part of a wider push for ethnic minorities' 'sameness' of influence in MSF. The NREC, which has mainly confined its activities to fighting racism and cooperating with other anti-racist bodies with insufficient focus on ethnic minorities' participation in union governance (Sourani 1996), is aiming to strengthen MSF's race structure. Following its third Annual Seminar 'think

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[9] While the BWN continued to meet separately and with the NWS-C for a time, it lost its input into a major race forum.

tank' in 1998 (MSF NREC 1997), in liaison with the NWS-C (MSF NREC 1998), it plans to put more effort into developing the BWN and encouraging BWN women's involvement, beginning with a restatement of aims from the 1997 NREC AGM minutes to ensure that the BWN are on the NREC mailing list[10]. Such proposed support, emanating predominantly from the race-based NREC, reflects a 'difference' approach to a (BWN) sameness aim. Significantly, some senior officials view the NREC's prominence in adopting most responsibility for the BWN's relaunch as reflective of a 'race first, gender second' emphasis in view of the existence of other networks which comprise mainly white women.

'Difference' equality

Interest representation

Like women's committees, most informants regarded the BWN as a means to minority women's 'sameness' representation in MSF. However, as with the committees, the longevity of the BWN (in various guises) encouraged several to view it as an achievement in itself as a unique and 'symbolic' representative form for ethnic minority female members. Several network members also cited the BWN's promotion of difference strategies as 'goals'. For example, I observed that they supported calls for wider positive change at the 1998 TUC Black Workers' Conference. This involved a successful motion to encourage the TUC and affiliated unions to lobby to amend the obstruction of black representation in reserved seats by the Race Relations Act[11] (TUC 1998a).

'Transformational' equality

Agenda

The BWN's focus on the union and the workplace is narrower than that of women's committees. However, like committee members, its members recognised the connections

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[10] This process has been delayed by political obstacles which have beleaguered the NREC, including internal differences, changes in officers and its temporary suspension pending a funding investigation which revealed nothing untoward.
[11] The Act does not permit reserved seats for black people in organisations while Section 49 of the Sex Discrimination Act allows organisations to reserve or add seats where they consider that one gender is under-represented.

between issues of race and gender in these and other settings, reflecting a transformational approach to agenda issues. For example, a number viewed their lack of opportunities in the workplace as directly related to their race and gender, which were in turn seen as aspects of their social identities which neither originate in or are confined to the workplace (see also Murray 1994).

Social processes and modes of operating

Although interviewees indicated that the BWN's formal links with mainstream MSF were not extensive, those with difference-based equality bodies such as RWS-Cs and the NREC were well developed and collegiate. For instance,

> We believe in the principle of self-determination and support any woman who wants to be involved in the BWN. (West Midlands RWS-C member)

Most BWN informants felt that self-organised groups needed to work together (see also Colgan & Ledwith 1996a), without assuming what other groups want while being prepared to ask them what support they need. This reflected a 'multi-dimensional' model of networking by social identity groups. Indeed, NREC members saw their own committee's direct involvement in revitalising the BWN as a necessary *precedent* to minority women defining how *they* want to organise and tackle their problems[12]. This 'enabling' approach supports Meehan (1993:144) who sees mechanisms like networks being 'used by ordinary people ... with the purpose of defining for themselves their own policy needs, or at least influencing meanings - instead of being passive recipients of policies defined by other people'. Many informants envisaged that this approach would need to be encouraged in the wider union if it was to operate effectively on behalf of all of its constituents in future, thereby altering the existing power paradigm which privileges white men (i.e. a transformation aim).

In other unions, Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) found that the women and men use their own networks and caucuses to different extents (cf. Kirton & Healy 1999) for support,

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[12] Nor was the NREC's mixed gender make-up seen as problematic for its role in revamping the BWN as it has several female members and was not seen to operate like conventional male-dominated committees because its male members had themselves

enjoyment and education, and tend to pursue each of these aims differently. Given its currently weak operation, it was difficult to determine the BWN's emphases although network members felt that, following its 'reinvigoration', its supportive aspect could increasingly help to 'transform' minority women's overall experience of MSF and how they identify with it, 'knowing that they can access other minority women to collectively develop a strategy and tackle their concerns' (BWN member).

National women's week: negotiating skills course

'Sameness' equality

Agenda

Having been issue-based, about five years ago, the women's week course became more skills-based. Despite this and the course's primary emphasis on helping women to develop so that they can become involved in the union, its (difference-based) skills training encourages discussion of substantive issues (e.g. see MSF Education 1998). Issues raised in this forum related to the pursuit of 'sameness' gender equality in the union (e.g. recruitment, representation), workplace (e.g. employment rights) and other spheres via positive action and positive discrimination initiatives (i.e. difference approaches) undertaken by other WGs.

Interest representation

Informants saw the primary aim of the women's week as encouraging women's participation in 'ordinary' posts of the union mainstream. Participants and organisers regarded the women's week as a rare setting where women could share their experiences and problems, and develop interpersonal and organisational skills with which to better operate in the union mainstream (i.e. a difference approach to a sameness end). Informants felt that the course's emphasis on interpersonal skills was greater than in

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suffered from discriminatory structures and attitudes (see also Briskin 1998a, Caputi & MacKenzie 1992).

MSF's mixed courses, reflecting women's often lesser union experience than men and their need to be brought 'up to speed' (i.e. a deficit approach).

A number of the features relating to the course were viewed by informants as ultimately lending support to the pursuit of gender- (and other-based) proportionality in the wider union. For example, its Course Coordinator remarked that as well as selecting the widest range of participants from a self-selected applicant pool (i.e. it is 'filtered' in that some potential attendees are unable to overcome barriers to participation such as opposition from 'significant others' within the union and at home), minority women were positively encouraged to participate. The College's crèche for young children, free social facilities for older children and other 'women-friendly' measures (e.g. scheduling course workshops and breaks to fit with crèche schedules, assisting with extra expenses for accommodation and transport) also helped to attract and facilitate the attendance of women with dependent children.

Although recruitment is not a formal aim of the course, I observed from attending the course, and in view of the Course Coordinator's comments, that its group activities and workshop sessions were increasingly threaded through with ideas about women-friendly recruitment and the 'Organising Works' campaign (see earlier) 'to ensure that everybody goes away from there knowing what organising is' (President). Furthermore, many course attendees were shop stewards who viewed recruitment (particularly of women) as one of their key union activities - and as a basis for subsequently pursuing better representation of women in MSF.

'Difference' equality

Agenda

'Women's issues' and the gendered nature of 'mainstream' issues relating to MSF and beyond were raised on the course by attendees. They included women's health concerns, the differential impact of new legislation and the welfare state for women, violence

against women, and difficulties women encounter in their workplace and as shop stewards in male-dominated settings. Some issues also reflected gender- and 'other-' based concerns (e.g. minority women's union representation, discussion of a booklet by the UNA-UK (1997) which concerns equality for oppressed groups in various settings), reflecting the diverse make-up of course attendees which links to the women's week's reputation as a safe and supportive space for all women.

'Transformational' equality

Agenda

In respect of agenda setting, the wide array of concerns that course's participants raised not only stressed its inclusive and participative aspects but also its importance as a grassroots source of women's issues which are passed on to the wider union via other WGs. Like women's committees, the course was seen by several senior officials as augmenting and impacting on aspects of the existing channels for raising and setting agendas for women members (i.e. a transformative approach and effect, albeit low-key). For example, in the last session of the course, participants summarise issues that they have covered and make recommendations as to how the union could respond. A written report is presented to the NWS-C who campaigns on its recommendations to raise consciousness and support for the issues. This supports Elliot's (1984) observation that women's courses play a key role in developing female workers' understanding of the kind of demands they want to raise.

Power

The course seeks to empower women with interpersonal and organisational skills to encourage their involvement in the wider union, thereby seeking to move them closer to 'sameness' representation goals. However, the qualitative nature of the training was seen by most informants to encourage women to challenge the way in which mainstream positions are used by their current holders (i.e. primarily men) to better reflect women's experiences and ways of operating, thereby shifting the balance of power between men

and women in MSF (see below). This approach emphasises the view that the institutional power which is theoretically afforded those who hold formal positions in the union is in fact affected by the patriarchal basis of union operations and relationships.

Social processes and modes of operating

The Course Coordinator commented that, until 1997, apart from its women-only composition, the women's week differed only from mixed union courses on negotiating skills by its inclusion of a section on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of women as negotiators. However, it now not only emphasises skills which may help women to operate in MSF but also encourages them to apply skills in ways with which *they* feel comfortable, with implications for transforming MSF's modes of operating. For instance, while attendees of the negotiating skills course felt that it was difficult to differentiate between competitive and collaborative styles on the basis of gender, the Co-ordinator commented that many women felt more comfortable using the latter while men tended to employ competitive tactics. The course encouraged them to pursue as far as possible the modes of operation which suited them (cf. the union) best. Furthermore, within its formal schedule, attendees felt that there was considerable scope for them to determine how they wanted to undertake set activities. For instance, I observed that a training manual was adhered to only up to a point as attendees were asked shortly after their arrival what they want to achieve during the week. Tutors tried to ensure that their concerns were covered to encourage women's 'ownership' of the course. They also adopted a facilitating role, stressing a non-hierarchical setting where participants could equip themselves with skills and build their confidence in their own time and ways. The training focus and participant-influenced operation of the course, many felt, would encourage the gradual transformation of aspects of the rest of MSF when attendees left the course and went back to the union mainstream and as women increasingly permeated its operations (i.e. a transformational approach could encourage the attainment of a transformational aim).

Many MSF courses at the College, participants felt, themselves transformed members and officials' overall experience of the union, with their rural setting, small group tasks in

homely settings, summer schedule (i.e. making them conducive to outdoors 'team-building' exercises), casual dress code, social facilities and provision of a fully catered stay. These are not gender-specific features. However, the five-day duration of the women's courses was seen as vital for providing a rare, sustained period of time where the immediacy of day-to-day concerns could not distract women's focus and reflection on MSF and the skills they require to better operate in it. For example, I observed that the group on the course were asked to examine face-to-face behaviour in negotiations and the use of language to exercise power to encourage them to challenge the elements of their own and others' behaviour and communications which are not constructive in negotiations. They were also introduced to feminist ideas around negotiation, including discussions about challenging the *status quo* and the perceptions that society has about women and individuals. The semi-structured course days and evenings also enabled attendees to partake in social activities (e.g. a quiz on women's union history) which doubled as periods for informal networking and learning. Furthermore, on the final half day of the course, women chose how they wanted to present what they have learnt over the week (e.g. with a play, a song), reinforcing their learning. The week was seen by its organisers as one of the clearest opportunities for cultivating women's empowerment from *within* as a basis for challenging those aspects of operations in the wider union with which they were not comfortable.

4.3   Women's Groups' effectiveness

Having analysed how WGs address their different (equality) aims via different gender equality approaches, this section examines the effectiveness of WGs in pursuing these aims. The absence of comprehensive WG evaluation prompted the following empirical analysis. WG effectiveness is assessed in terms of:

- the change in MSF for women which can be attributed to WGs in terms of measures of their identified equality goals;
- direct assessments of WG effectiveness by informants; and

- where possible, the *relative* effectiveness of different WGs with respect to the above goals.

Structures and democracy

Most informants' comments indicated a view of WGs as a 'difference' approach to gender equality (usually conceived of in 'sameness' terms). Significantly, however, some viewed them as a permanent feature in MSF and as a key achievement in their own right (i.e. the embodiment of a structural 'difference' goal). For example, two senior female officials saw the presence of WGs themselves, particularly women's committees, as having impacted on some parts of the union's 'shape' and operations, despite the opposition they had encountered from some quarters. However, this effect was considered 'intermittent' in the case of the annual women's week and limited in the case of the languishing BWN. (Permanent) positive discrimination arrangements within mainstream structures campaigned for by women's committees (e.g. NEC reserved seats for women, special posts on Regional Councils) were similarly seen by these interviewees as 'stretching' MSF's liberal democratic organisation by their long-term existence and by helping the NWS-C and RWS-Cs to 'mainstream'.

Furthermore, two NEC reserved seatholders and several RWS-C members felt that WGs, particularly when they became part of the formal structure of the union, reflected a transformational approach to equality (see also Liff 2000). For instance, one regarded the developing formal ties between the RWS-Cs and the mainstream as having altered aspects of the power relations between the two. Another viewed WGs themselves as transformational in having impacted on some parts of existing union arrangements and power relations. For instance, the events staged by women's committees at Annual Conference (see Chapter 3) were seen to have brought structural change 'from within' and gained wider active support for WGs' ways of operating and demands. Furthermore, WGs were assessed to have successfully altered certain structural aspects and views of democracy in some Regional Councils via their representatives in special Council seats who were well-versed in encouraging Council to adopt effective WG features (e.g.

'pulling rank' less, using a more participative style to encourage the exchange of information among attendees).

However, the areas of MSF's organisation where WGs were seen to have had a transformative effect and informants' comments indicated that WGs have only encouraged the wider union to 'tinker' with existing structural and democratic arrangements. Their efforts did not reflect a fundamental or cohesive challenge to the patriarchal organisation and practices of MSF as a whole. Many informants concurred that more radical change would require an enhancement of WGs' existing roles and powers, alongside the developing 'inclusive' equality arrangements. Significantly, they assessed WGs' non-articulation of aims for more elementary change to MSF's structure and democratic principles did not reflect a lack of vision or consciousness of 'longer' transformation. Rather, they felt that it reflected an expectation among WG women that more radical change, as an articulated set of demands, would be obstructed by the wider union. This supports Briskin's (1998a) observation that most unions in Western Europe and North America have shown more resistance to transformational demands than to 'less threatening' representational issues. Furthermore, several senior officials felt that while WGs, particularly women's committees, increasing links with the formal structure of the union could both provide a basis for further transformation of existing union arrangements in the future, they at times emphasised WGs' dependency on the wider union and curbed their effects. This stresses WGs' need to balance their autonomy from and integration into the union (see Briskin 1993, 1998a) and to continue to forge links within the union around formal structures (e.g. via informal networks; see also Chhachhi & Pittin 1999) as well as to extend their external networks to bring more influence for union change to bear via the shared perspectives of WG coalitions (see also Briskin 1998a).

Agenda

Senior officials assessed that of the issues pursued by WGs, those seeking 'sameness with men' (i.e. shorter equality) within and beyond MSF had generally received most attention

on union platforms. However, virtually all informants felt that WG issues (however conceived in terms of equality aims) seldom gained priority status in mainstream agendas, whether they were ostensibly national policy commitments or not. For instance, a North West RWS-C member observed:

> RWS-C get about two minutes at the end of North West North Regional Council meetings. I don't get many questions or objections. They all want to go home by then! (North West RWS-C member)

In this case, paradoxically, the Council's relative lack of attention to WG proposals had at times led it to quickly agree with them, thereby expediting their progress through MSF.

However, women's committees, their activities and relations with mainstream bodies were seen by many and in WG documents as playing a critical role in profiling and gaining action-backed responses to a number of their concerns. For instance, the NWS-C's stronger formal position on the NEC (with four reserved seatholders and other voting representatives) than other equality bodies was assessed to have helped gain attention for its views and issues:

> The NWS-C needs NEC ratification but women's structure issues are usually taken through. When it raises an issue at the NEC, people listen. The NWS-C Chair is good at that and NEC seatholders back her up. (NEC reserved seatholder)

NWS-C industry/sector representatives were observed to have given women in often male-dominated industries a voice and women's work had been effectively taken into these areas (e.g. the 'glass ceiling' campaign) though several NWS-C members felt that this could be done more frequently and that men needed to take it more seriously. In association with the activity of individual female activists, WGs were seen to be among the strongest determinants of the increasing profile of women's concerns in MSF and thereby negotiation of collective agreement and internal provisions favourable to women unionists.

Echoing Kirton's (1999) findings, however, a number of WG women maintained that they had found it difficult at times to keep their (equality) issues on union platforms, let

alone get them there as the membership tended to see them as 'additional' to 'bread and butter' concerns that they wanted MSF to concentrate on in a context of labour market insecurity. Indeed, several Regional Councils and sub-committees were identified by RWS-C members for hiving off what they saw as 'women's issues' to RWS-Cs and branch women's officers so that they could concentrate on 'the main union business'. Several informants complained that this did not encourage members to view women's concerns as core union issues, and that RWS-Cs expended considerable energy bringing issues back into the mainstream, by which time, impetus for them could be lost. However, the skills training of the women's week was assessed by many informants to have positively impacted on women's success in raising 'women's' issues at branch or Council.

It was also generally perceived by interviewees that women who aligned with the 'MSF for Labour' politics were better placed to control their RWS-C and promote their concerns via *ex officio* posts and reserved seats on regional committees. They assessed that other RWS-Cs had to fight harder at Council or branch level meetings to profile and gain support for their concerns, though this often resulted in action eventually being taken (see also Colgan & Ledwith 1996a). For example, the West Midlands NWS-C delegate negotiated visits to male-dominated branches and successfully argued for the use of women's 'quotas' and that branch women's officers should be allowed to vote on RWS-C issues as they see fit, without recrimination from their branch[13]. RWS-Cs' differing equality 'starting points' in their region were linked to this factor, sectoral variations across the regions and the varying activity levels of RWS-Cs (West Midlands, Ireland, North West and Scotland were seen as the 'busiest' committees). Furthermore, WGs' accumulating experience of the wider union, interviewees ventured, had led them to more fruitfully raise issues within it, recognising that 'a hard line will not wash' (Eastern RWS-C member).

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[13] NEC guidelines indicate that delegates to reserved seats on Council are expected to be in agreement with the RWS-C but vote freely on other issues while women from branches or craft vote according to their respective policies.

In respect of agenda setting, women's committees, the women's week and individual female activists and officials were singled out as pivotal in picking up individual women's concerns and campaigning on them as collective issues of concern to women in MSF (see also Kirton & Healy (1999) on individual senior female officials in MSF), or passing them onto other WGs in the case of the women's week. The committees and women's week were generally seen to augment and transform aspects of the channels through which concerns were elicited and then raised (see Section 4.2), thereby encouraging awareness of a greater range of issues in MSF. Informants recognised that WGs' women-only make-up, coupled with the tolerant and safe environment they provide, elicited and subsequently enabled them to pursue a wider range of issues than was normally raised in the union, including sensitive, human rights, minority women and attendees' own personal union- and other-related problems. Interviewees felt that the WGs' open and egalitarian approach to eliciting and pursuing issues was indicative of a transformational approach (and procedural aim) which helped to capture women's concerns that might otherwise be lost, not responded to quickly enough or not raised due to their sensitivity in the rest of MSF. (This was assessed to encourage, and be encouraged by, the participation of a wider range of women on WGs than on other union bodies). At the same time, several senior officials stressed that the broad-brush terms of RWS-C 'Terms of Reference' (see Section 4.1) and the flexibility of national guidelines for RWS-C operations enabled the committees to define their own issues and respond to them in ways which suit women members.

Several senior officials also assessed that the RWS-Cs and women's week's broad, and ever-widening, issue base (including items that link them to other union bodies such as NEC ratification of NWS-C motions for the TUC Women's Conference) had prevented their concerns from being marginalised (if not prioritised) in MSF. Informants attributed transformative changes in the wider union's approach to particular issues (e.g. stressing the interconnectedness of union- and other-centred issues, viewing some issues as 'human' rather than 'women's' concerns) to the way in which WGs, particularly women's committees had campaigned on them. Furthermore, the directness of communications

between women at the grassroots via the courses to RWS-Cs and then the NWS-C and back was seen to have contributed to WGs' ability to accurately represent female members rather than impose an agenda or particular viewpoints.

Most informants envisaged an increasingly positive future for WG concerns in MSF. Several NWS-C members felt that 'quotas' (a 'sameness' strategy) might not change attitudes but could ensure that WG issues did not get 'lost' in the union. The majority felt that the new EO Officer and Team, and national working party for women (Chapter 3) would cross-fertilise the equality concerns of different constituent groups, helping them to influence mainstream agendas. Several viewed the new structures as likely to 'bundle equalities together', however, curtailing attention to already under-exposed gender equality concerns, both within those structures and by implication the wider union. This, they felt, stressed the need for a 'hybrid' arrangement whereby WGs were retained and strengthened, alongside general equality initiatives, to continue to raise consciousness on gender matters. Several participants stressed that the BWN's redevelopment would need to take account of some women's preference to join a RWS-C over the BWN given the former's track record and a belief that the women's committees will continue for some time to have relatively more influence than the BWN in gaining responses to race and gender issues. Others asserted that the BWN's effectiveness in terms of raising issues in MSF would be bolstered by the renewed support it received from the NWS-C and NREC.

Interest representation

Union/WG records and most informants' comments indicated that WGs played a significant part in women's improved representation in 'ordinary' (i.e. sameness) posts (see also Chapter 3). For example, the West Midlands Regional Women's Officer observed: 'when there were no women's structures in the union, women weren't represented high up'. While Nichols-Heppner's (1984) finding that women's committees are more effective in evoking responsiveness from unions than is the pursuit of greater electoral representation, this finding suggests that they are considerably effective in both respects. In particular, RWS-C activities and women's courses were seen as having had

the most effect on improving women's mainstream representation (cf. Coote (1980b) on women's committees in ASTMS), equipping female activists with the confidence, backing and experience necessary to progress within MSF. Positive discrimination or 'difference' measures, for which WGs have provided much of the impetus, were also seen to have been 'significant' in assisting women to move closer to 'sameness' representation (as well as some informants viewing the measures themselves as achievements - see earlier). In particular, the introduction of four reserved seats for women on the NEC and the NWS-C's strategy for gender proportional representation were followed by marked improvements in women's NEC representation (see also Kirton & Healy 1999). Furthermore, the presence of WG representatives on structures like Councils was linked to greater union involvement by women, supporting Heery & Kelly's (1988) conclusions. The supportive internal culture of the committees was also seen by their members to have at times helped stem the withdrawal of active women from the mainstream.

RWS-Cs' effectiveness for women's mainstream position was seen by informants to vary across regions, reflecting variations in their number and level of activism, women's representation on other regional structures, the size of the female membership, sectoral and industrial coverage, and the scope of RWS-Cs' Terms of Reference. Against a general feeling among informants that acceptance of RWS-Cs and other WGs had slowly grown within MSF, women's progress within the mainstream was seen by many to have been slowed by sometimes considerable opposition, particularly from male-dominated Regional Councils and branches (see also Chapter 3). This necessitated *on-going* negotiation and campaigning and networking by WGs and individual women to support women in union posts and to counter the assault on confidence and sense of isolation they can experience in male-dominated settings. Significantly, many informants felt that RWS-Cs that were seen in the mainstream to be more 'progressive' and/or to not be politically aligned with a region's powerful parties were more likely to encounter greater opposition and find their pursuits blocked (e.g. West Midlands and Scotland RWS-Cs). Yet, these RWS-Cs were recognised as more effective than other RWS-Cs because of the level of cohesion and 'will' to make a difference. For instance,

Some Council members are hostile to the RWS-C because they're misogynist. The RWS-C is also the most Left element. If we were compliant, we'd be popular. But we're the most vibrant committee in the region. Council can't pull it apart. (West Midlands NWS-C delegate)

Paradoxically, some WG-mainstream tensions were assessed by informants to have enabled RWS-Cs to make *gains* in women's representation. For example, a NWS-C delegate observed that her regional President 'can't bear to be told he's not doing a job for women. We use that to mark out some grounds' for women entering the mainstream. At the same time, the time and energy expended by WGs in defending their aims and activities was generally recognised as activity that diverted resources away from the pursuit of other equality aims or building on existing gains.

The WGs - with the exception of the BWN - were also seen to be the main generators of participation by a smaller number of minority women in the mainstream. However, most informants anticipated that, as it had when the network was first established, the BWN's impact on minority women's mainstream representation would grow following its reinvigoration. Some felt that the BWN's relatively small impact on women's representation to date explained why, as a self-organised, gender and race-based body, it had incurred little opposition from the wider union (see also Phillips 1999).

Many respondents believed that recruiting by WGs was pivotal for providing a larger pool from which to increase women's numbers as activists and in formal union posts (i.e. 'sameness' representation ends). While the slower decline in women's membership vis-à-vis overall union numbers in recent years is largely attributable to the MSF-CPHVA merger (see Chapter 3), the majority of informants felt that women's committees, particularly RWS-Cs, had played a limited but direct role alongside individual female activists and shop stewards in halting membership decline and encouraging the recruitment of new members, particularly women. They specified RWS-Cs' mainly all-female schools, social evenings/recruitment meetings and *ad hoc* activities as key in attracting new female members, particularly as their focus on recruiting and organising

had grown with the union's adoption of New Unionism organising ideas. At the same time, echoing Kirton (1999), a number of WG women who were paid officials indicated that they less time than they would like for recruiting despite it being a national policy priority.

The relationship between WGs and women's mainstream involvement was not found to be uni-directional or simple. Many interviewees observed that improving female representation in the mainstream encouraged women's entry to WGs, especially women's committees (see also Kirton & Healy 1999, Kirton 1999). Women's involvement in one WG also often led to their involvement in another. For instance, many women 'on the periphery' of RWS-Cs had come through women's educationals, according to West Midlands RWS-C members. BWN members discussed how the network had encouraged minority women to participate in 'one-dimensional' WGs such as women's weekends as well as race equality structures. RWS-Cs were cited for having encouraged their ethnic minority women members to participate in the BWN. This supports Elliot's (1984) contention that WGs can spread support for women-only organisation to a broader network of female unionists. The findings also reinforce Colgan & Ledwith's (1996a) assertion that women recognise the need for strategies of interim separatism for other equity-seeking groups which ensure that race or 'other' issues are not overshadowed by gender issues.

Overall, there was felt to be room for improvement in WGs' influence on women's recruitment and subsequent representation. For instance, many CPHVA members, as educated professionals, felt they needed more advanced training than that provided at the women's week to take an equality agenda a stage further (e.g. in the area of women and health). However, in conjunction with initiatives like the EO Charter (see Chapter 3), WGs (particularly women's committees) are key proponents of proposals to improve women's representation further (MSF 1998e, 1994a, 1995). These include a number of the as yet unfulfilled recommendations in the 'MSF Strategy for Women', 'Quotas for Women' document and the successful 1998 motion by the NWS-C at Annual Conference

on proportionality, as well as women's weeks growing emphasis on recruiting and involving women. Significantly, several NWS-C members felt that progress to date had also built *anticipation* of further change. They also assessed that once a 'critical mass' of women were in mainstream posts, they would most likely seek to introduce more difference and transformation-seeking equality aims in terms of interest representation and other facets of union identity, indicative of a 'staged' approach to 'longer' equality.

Power

Informants viewed WGs, mostly the NWS-C and RWS-Cs, as having gained some formal and informal powers for women members in 'sameness' terms in the wider union. For example, several NWS-C members observed some redistribution of numeric and informal power between men and women on the NEC which linked to presence of NWS-C women as reserved seat holders and other representatives. Furthermore, the growing history and achievements of the women's committees, and their improving links with the union mainstream were generally seen to have accorded WGs some influence and respect in decision-making structures. This gradual shifting of 'sameness' power to WG women was viewed by several senior officials as providing a partial remedy to the perceived inadequate level of grassroots power in the union, particularly among women members. This level of women's influence in the union was, however, in their eyes, still far less than it should be. Indeed, even the prospect of achieving 'mixité' in MSF via WG initiatives was not given much weight by informants as a basis for women's full empowerment in the union in 'sameness' terms unless accompanied by difference- and transformation-based changes to the union's power bases.

Nonetheless, many informants viewed the women's committees in particular as having created new pockets of power within the union. The collective 'spaces' they afforded women through their meetings and activities enabled them to come together, gain confidence and be politicised, re-energised empowered by the supportive setting and their realisation of women's shared circumstances (i.e. a difference strategy to empowerment) (see also Elliot 1984). Some ventured that WGs qualitatively 'transformed' their

participants, enabling them to increasingly assert themselves and their own collective priorities in the mainstream.

Politically, many informants felt that WGs had effected a transformative approach and aim by encouraging their members and other unionists to function with rather than oppose political and other diversity. Their tolerance of diversity was seen to expedite the pursuit of equality aims (variously conceived) both *within* WG structures and therefore the wider union by appealing to the a wider range of perspectives from concerned parties. For example:

> There've been political factions but the RWS-C's handled it. Much to do with people's different views is resolved amicably. (West Midlands RWS-C member)

Several Left-wing women qualified this by adding that political diversity had been helpful in furthering women's agenda issues so long as a Left, group-based perspective had come through. Informants admitted that WGs had had varying levels of success in permeating the wider union with an inclusive approach to politics, facing considerable resistance in certain quarters (see also Chapter 3). They maintained, however, that efforts to 'carry others along' with WG approaches and demands (albeit gradually) were likely to form the only way to achieve union unity while empowering different constituency groups.

In respect of resources, a number of study participants felt that, as well as drawing on union resources, WGs augmented MSF's 'stocks'. For example, they were seen to do this through the gendered experiences and expertise their members brought to the union in recruiting and organising women (i.e. a difference approach and effect) and through their various 'sameness' and 'difference' -based links and campaigns with external bodies, thereby helping to profile the wider union and its concerns as well as their own, as well as breathe positive changes into union operations. At the same time, a few felt that ties with external WGs were ultimately less empowering than those with external mixed bodies in bringing change for women and the wider union. For example:

TUC Women's Conference is more relaxed and takes a more comfortable role because Congress takes real decisions. If it became more relevant to men and its issues became TUC policy, the atmosphere would change. They have a women's conference to placate women. (Southern RWS-C member)

Social processes and modes of operating

Although WG interactions with the wider union imply that they multiply ('sameness') communications and procedures, the informants and my observations indicated that they made a distinct impression on some of the union's 'softer' organisational features. As Kirton (1999:219) observes, beyond 'adaptation' (deficit) strategies (Heery & Kelly 1990), women's interaction with the mainstream was seen to construct 'their own model of social integration using the vehicle of a feminine (or feminist?) sub-culture', challenging and transforming aspects of the dominant masculine culture which militates against women's social integration (see also Kumar 1993, Cuneo 1993, Cockburn 1995).

In respect of union (social) processes, for example, the involvement of a number of WG women in mainstream posts meant that they took their experiences from WGs back into the union mainstream and effected changes, albeit unevenly. For example, WG women were seen to have reported and encouraged the use in mainstream bodies of a friendly, 'open', enthusiastic yet relaxed approach to meetings. Another significant impact was WG women's encouragement of greater 'compromise' and pursuit of consensus[14] in the mainstream as this was seen as helping to help make debates constructive and enable groups to effect their plans. That several NWS-C women indicated that they pushed such changes in the mainstream qualifies Elliot's (1984) assertion that formal women's committees are more about building bridges and less about providing sisterhood, support, shared experiences.

As well as shifting social processes, informants noted that WG women had encouraged, often successfully, WGs' use of alternative ways of working in the union mainstream. For example, WG women commented that their Council representatives had successfully

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[14] Votes are only taken on policy issues, for officer election (cf. Council and branch meetings) (see also David 1983) and where deemed 'fair' (e.g. the 'one vote per female branch representative' rule is used more in RWS-Cs with a greater branch officer presence). Only two interviewees felt that claims of consensus 'distort reality' as not all WG members may have proffered an

encouraged the wider union sponsorship of under-represented member groups to Annual Conference as observers. At regional and branch levels, they had also suggested and sometimes helped to effect the use of team-working to avoid long hours and conserve resources; scheduling meetings at times and locations which fit members' circumstances (see also Kirton & Healy 1999, Kirton 1999); some 'role swapping' as the need arose and to give all participants experience of particular roles; flexible meeting formats to support and encourage unplanned debates which release participants' creativity and inspirations; the application of different approaches to negotiation which drawn on participants' strengths (see also MSF 1998f). Furthermore, WGs had encouraged greater tolerance in the mainstream of varying self-determined levels of contribution by participants (i.e. the use of survival/transformative strategies), greater use of informal liaisons (which some felt reflected WGs' creativity in finding alternative ways of functioning due to their non-mainstream status while others saw it as relating to women's gender).

The 'knock-on effect for men' (West Midlands Regional Women's Officer) of RWS-C influence in the mainstream was seen to be curbed in several regions by the inactivity of the NWS-C delegates. However, particularly as more WG successes (e.g. in recruiting) were accrued, informants suggested, receptivity in parts of the mainstream to the new practices and ways of working had grown. For instance:

> In supportive women's meetings, you get more done. You drag through other, more formal meetings. Men have hats and roles for security. There's 'a' pattern and structure, whether or not that impedes the flow of business. It stifles people taking an active or creative part. But if you offer men different ways of doing things, most of them will try them out. (South West RWS-C member)

It is significant that WGs' 'difference' and transformative ways of operating were seen as transferable to mixed settings as this underscores their constructed character and supports Crain's (1994) observation that while some suggest that different styles of organising are appropriate for men and women (e.g. Baden 1986), they are not specific about essential attributes of these styles and how they are tied to gender. Yet, even the construction of male and female 'ways' should not be over-generalised. For instance, I witnessed

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opinion (see also Mansbridge 1980).

occasional tensions among attendees at the women's week (see also Elliot 1984). While the women were usually tolerant of and interested in incorporating others' differences in negotiating solutions, one bargaining exercise resulted in women competing and personalising outcomes. By the end of the course, however, they had gained a positive frame of mind about the skills they could apply elsewhere and were more aware of how some male unionists in the wider union might exploit tensions among women.

4.4   Summary

This chapter examined three types of WG in MSF: its National and Regional Women's Sub-Committees, Black and Ethnic Minority Women's Network and National Women's Week Course (Negotiating Skills). The assigned roles and formal operations of each were found to sit within the aims of a wider women's structure in the union. They extended to the union and beyond, and largely fitted with the wider aims of MSF. They revealed the different emphases of different WG types, with RWS-Cs shown to be the most 'action oriented' and the women's week the most union-centred of the WGs under examination. Only the women's structure as a whole explicitly sought to impact on women's union *experience* by making MSF 'women-friendly'. However, this review revealed little about the equality ideas by which they are informed, stressing the need for a closer examination of their actual operations. Significantly, it emerged that the WGs' actual aims complement and extend their assigned aims, with implications for formal aspects of their operation. An analysis of WG equality aims in terms of their goals relating to key dimensions of union identity enabled a systematic analytical response to the second and third research questions: what aims do WGs pursue and how?; what equality ideas underpin their pursuits?; and what effects do WGs have on gender equality in MSF?

Women's committees at national and regional level were found to mostly pursue 'sameness' equality aims in respect of a number of their agenda concerns relating to the union and beyond, women's representation (i.e. proportional representation) and power. 'Difference' equality goals were implicitly linked by the committees to a number of other agenda matters and the representation of women. 'Transformation' equality was sought in

respect of a few agenda issues, agenda setting processes, aspects of power, interest representation, and social processes and modes of operating. The Black and Ethnic Minority Women's Network pursued mostly sameness equality aims in relation to many of its agenda concerns, minority women's representation and their pursuit of power-sharing. Difference equality goals were embodied by their pursuit of certain forms of representation for minority women, aspects of power and interest representation. Transformational equality was linked to certain agenda issues, and social processes and modes of operating pursued by the network. The national women's week (negotiating skills) pursued sameness equality via many of its agenda issues and women's representation. It pursued difference equality in respect of other agenda issues and transformative equality goals in relation to certain agenda matters, power, and social processes and modes of operating. The women's committees and BWN thus pursue a wider array of equality goals than the Women's Week. At the same time, the analysis indicated that WGs emphasised different equality goals to different extents via their union-centred aims. The pursuit of sameness equality generally consumed more WG time than the pursuit of difference and transformation equality ends. Furthermore, to some extent, these findings emphasise different WG types' delineated roles; in other respects, they indicate their role 'overlap' and location in a wider women's structure.

While most of the WGs' pursuits linked to 'sameness' equality aims, the WGs and sources of evidence did not articulate them as such. Furthermore, all WGs adopted multi-faceted responses to the respective aims, incorporating both conventional and innovative initiatives. This partly reflected the need for women to pursue their aims through conventional measures, and via alternative routes through and around the existing union system when conventional channels are more difficult for them to utilise as women. This also helps to explain why WGs often employed more than one measure to respond to an issue or aim. Their initiatives, and sometimes a single initiative, were found to be based on an unarticulated and uncoordinated range of equality approaches. Significantly, no cohesive strategy to achieving gender equality in MSF was identified in terms of WGs' equality approaches or goals. Nonetheless, the analysis detected a notable though uneven

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shift away from 'sameness with men' equality endeavours to those with a more political edge and reflective of 'longer' equality goals which stress the achievement of union unity through the valuation of constituents' particular circumstances and characteristics.

In terms of WG effectiveness in promoting gender equality in MSF, applying the revised union identity model, it was found that they generally had notable, positive influences. Different WG types varied in their impacts but influenced aspects of all key features of union organisation. They were found to influence aspects of union features with respect to various equality aims (i.e. sameness, difference, transformational) though much of their effect was classifiable as a 'sameness' impact. At the same time, there was some conflation by informants of different equality approaches and goals, meaning that WG achievements varied in magnitude for them. For example, most informants saw WGs as a difference approach (i.e. a means) to equality, while a few saw them as embodying a difference goal, still others as a transformational approach or goal.

Despite their achievements, there is persisting inequality in all areas where the WGs have sought change, underscoring the gradualism of their efforts and effects. Although they have influenced aspects of all key union features, the evaluation indicated that they had 'tinkered' with, rather than fundamentally changed, those features in respect of bringing about gender equality (variously conceived). This gradualism reflects variations in the emphases and ambition of the aims and approaches of each WG type; the particularities of their members and circumstances; and the opportunities for and constraints on their effectiveness, emanating from the union in particular (see Chapter 3). WGs thus respond pragmatically to the influence of context rather than to an ideological position. However, the isolation of measures of WG impacts was also complicated by the aims and impacts of WGs not examined here, as well as those of 'general' or 'integrated' equality initiatives (e.g. the new EO Officer and Team).

All types of WG were seen as having the potential to effect greater change in the union for women, alongside the newly established 'integrated' equality structures. In sum,

therefore, the findings showed that WGs are agents for change within MSF and beyond, demonstrating their motivation to determine the shape of spaces made available to them by constitutional vagaries and other opportunities; the relationship between the union setting and these mechanisms is not one-way in terms of influence.

Significantly, WGs were found to have brought about incremental change within MSF over a considerable period of time. This finding emphasised WGs' 'evolutionary optimism' and recognition of constraints on them, particularly in the union setting. As Colgan & Ledwith (1996a:178) observed of individual GPMU and Unison activist women,

> although socialist feminists and feminist socialist women have provided the engine to introduce and gain support for a feminist agenda and a strategy of interim separatism within trade unions, they have been able to do so only with the support and participation of allies of both sexes within the union movement.

The relative effects of each WG type for each aim was broadly identifiable. RWS-Cs are particularly notable for their contribution to recruiting women. The NWS-C, RWS-Cs and women's weeks were significant influences on women's access to mainstream and special posts. All WGs, particularly the women's week and RWS-Cs, elicit, and in the case of the women's committees, profile and gain responses to issues of concern to women. Women's committees in particular have influenced the transformation of aspects of the union's structures, agenda and ways of operating albeit in a limited, piece-meal fashion, particularly via their interaction with them, while women's week operations embody many transferable transformational measures. Although the findings indicated greater union transformation than suggested by Kirton & Healy (1999) who focus on specific changes only in respect of union culture, WGs were not found to fundamentally challenge MSF's identity, their achievements tilting toward 'shorter' over 'longer' equality aims.

5 WOMEN'S GROUPS IN USDAW

5.0 Introduction

This chapter undertakes a similar exploratory analysis to that in Chapter 4 but for USDAW and its WGs. It seeks to discover what equality aims WGs pursue and how; to identify the equality ideas which inform them; and to consider WGs' effects on gender equality in the union.

5.1 Women's groups in USDAW

The following WGs were examined: the National Women's Committee (NWC), Divisional Women's Committees (DWCs) and the National Conference of Women's Committees (NCWC).

Assigned roles

The union-endorsed aims of the overall women's structure are:

- to encourage greater involvement of women in USDAW;

- to get a better deal for women in the workplace and society by making sure that women's voices are heard and acted upon at all levels; and

- to ensure that the bargaining agenda fully reflects the concerns of women and that they are kept high on the union agenda (USDAW EC 1997, 1996).

Informants understood the above aims in terms of various, uncoordinated equality ideas. For example, greater involvement of women was seen to mean seeking proportional representation while a gendered bargaining agenda was generally perceived with reference to a range of equality ideas.

As in MSF, the specific, formal aims of the NWC and DWCs reflect their organisational level and structural form. The recognised 'roles' of the NWC are:

- to identify the problems that are of concern to women members;

- to develop policies (sic) to act on them; and

- to make members aware of the progress being made and the activities taking place (USDAW EC 1985).

The first role relates to women's concerns in the union and beyond. The second and third 'aims'/functions emphasise the committee's pursuit of women's concerns, the latter specifically concerned with raising consciousness about WG progress and initiatives.

The Annual Delegate Meeting has set DWCs tasks to 'ensure' that:

- women's voice is heard and acted upon by working with other union parts towards getting a better deal for women at the workplace;

- USDAW is welcoming, relevant and accessible to female and potential members, and retains and consolidates that membership;

- women members are fully involved and participate at every level of the union;

- the collective bargaining agenda and negotiating machinery are developed to reflect fully the needs, experience and involvement of women;

- they have maximum impact on the union's political work; and

- women members can discuss issues of interest to them (USDAW EC 1997).

DWC aims also emphasise the pursuit of women's equality in the union and beyond. They stress DWCs' action orientation and proximity to female members. Their first, broad aim relates to raising and profiling workplace concerns for women. It links to the fourth which stresses changes to union arrangements to better accommodate female members, a more ambitious aim than those assigned to MSF's RWS-Cs. The second and third aims are 'internally' focused on women's membership, involvement and progress. The fifth emphasises DWCs' connection to the union's mainstream political processes. The sixth (function) stresses WGs' unique ability to provide a collective space for women within USDAW where they can raise their concerns.

The stated aim of the National Conference of Women's Committees (NCWC), a common WG form (see SERTUC 2000), is:

- 'to assess [the work of the DWCs and NWC] over the past year and to plan their work for the forthcoming year' (Women in USDAW 1996a:2).

This focus emphasises the NCWC's importance as an initiative for examination here. It also stresses the conference's strategic and intermediary role and its role as a 'means to an end'. This downplays it as a form of positive discrimination - important in a union which is generally opposed to positive discrimination measures (see Chapter 3).

Location and meeting frequency

The National Women's Committee is a national level body while DWCs are located at divisional level in USDAW's formal structure (see Figure 3.2, Chapter 3). The NWC meets bi-monthly at central office in Manchester. DWCs also meet bi-monthly but in various locations as their meetings are often combined with workplace visits (e.g. USDAW Midlands DWC 1998a, 1998b). Activities organised by the committees occur at various locations within USDAW and beyond. The National Conference of Women's Committees is an annual weekend event in late October, organised by the National Women's (now Women and Equalities) Officer and NWC. It is usually held in Liverpool, reflecting the location of many 'vanguard' female members who strove for a women's structure.

Size and participants

The NWC comprises eight DWC Chairs. Other members include senior officials: the Women and Equalities Officer as Secretary, the (currently female) President as Chair, officers from bodies like the Education Committee, several Research, Political and Divisional Officers, a TUC Women's Committee member, female EC members, the General Secretary and his (male) Deputy. Other roles are assigned as agenda concerns

develop. Members are selected according to the posts they hold elsewhere in USDAW. Unlike MSF's NWS-C, the smaller NWC with its 20-odd members does not explicitly represent sectors and has two senior male officials.

The eight DWCs expanded in their first years from six to eight members to alleviate operational difficulties. There have been calls for them to expand to 10 members for the same reason (Women in USDAW 1986) but many DWC informants viewed the small size of their meetings as helpful in maintaining their cohesion and flow, thereby assisting them to promote DWC aims. DWCs have fewer designated posts than their counterparts in MSF. They elect their own lay Chair and a link member to the Divisional Political Committee (DPC). The role of the DWC Co-ordinator who acts as its Secretary is assigned to a FTO by a Divisional Officer on the basis of her experience of union, workplace and women's issues. The committees' 'closed' character and absence of women's officers from branches (cf. MSF's RWS-Cs) mean that branches are not equally represented.

Custom and practice has led DWCs to comprise female members only. Every two years, branches nominate lay women to sit on a DWC. The nominee list is forwarded to the Divisional Council who try to select (cf. elect in MSF) nominees who represent a cross-section of trades, occupations, geographical areas, full- and part-time workers, and union sections (Women in USDAW 1996b). Councils are influenced in this process by existing DWC Coordinators and branches and tend to appoint women with union, work and sometimes DWC experience[15] in order 'to get into workplaces, represent women and spread the word' (former Midlands DWC Co-ordinator). Consequently, DWCs house a number of experienced lay activists who are often shop stewards. In certain divisions, DWC numbers dwindle at times, particularly when the union loses members or DWC members step down. Rather than merge with other equality bodies, DWCs then draw on a 'reserve list' of women where possible. They also invite guests/speakers to meetings as 'non-core' participants.

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[15] This practice differs from a Constitutional decree that DWCs should only include women who were not involved in other union

With 90 or so attendees, the NCWC is smaller than most mixed conferences but is the largest WG studied here. Most attendees are DWC and NWC members, heavily weighting it towards lay members. It also currently includes two male EC speakers (the General Secretary and Deputy), an MP/guest speaker (male or female) and male and female observers. While men and ordinary lay female members are not 'banned', they are not present during workshops which take up the bulk of Conference time.

Remit

The NWC is centrally funded and DWCs mainly receive funds from the Education Department, Area Organiser and branches. However, as in MSF, USDAW's Constitution is silent about many aspects of WG operations; there is no reference to them in the Rule Book. While neither committee makes policy and their work is subject to EC endorsement, women predominate on the EC (see Chapter 3) and some are NWC members. The parameters for DWC operations are formally set by the EC (cf. at regional level in MSF), stressing the centralised nature of USDAW's operations, but informants emphasised that their guidelines are broad, enabling DWCs to develop divisional responses to national strategies.

The NCWC is designed to review DWCs' progress in the preceding year and plan forthcoming DWC work programmes in accordance with priorities established in the ADM report. It provides an important thematic and strategic frame to DWC operations. Unlike many national mixed conferences, there is no vote-taking at the NCWC. It is non-policy making, a feature about which some attendees have complained. Its 'decisions' and DWC work programmes are ultimately subject to Council and/or EC verification.

Linkages

Like their counterparts in MSF, DWCs and the NWC have many formal, internal union links (cf. Harrison 1980). NCWC reports indicate that these continue to strengthen. For

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bodies. The first DWC, North Western, never adhered to this policy and other DWCs followed suit.

example, senior officials on the NWC have places on other important structures (e.g. the Education Committee, the EC), some in key posts (e.g. the General Secretary). The NWC has a strong relationship with the National Political Committee and Officer. DWC Chairs at NWC meetings provide regular links to and from DWCs, and through their DWCs, to divisional and branch bodies and members. DWC Coordinators also meet with the Women and Equalities Officer at 'Co-ordinator meetings', which are sometimes combined with NWC meetings.

DWCs' links mostly occur at divisional and local levels. While the union does not emphasise positive discrimination measures, each DWC has a link member on the Divisional Political Committee and another attends Council meetings. Many DWC Coordinators are Council members. There are also meetings and activities between DWC, DPC, Council and/or (Deputy) Divisional Officers. As will be discussed shortly, WG relations with USDAW's political structures are quite elaborate. DWCs are further tied to USDAW by the involvement of branches and Councils in DWC members' nomination and selection. Unlike MSF's women's committees, USDAW's DWCs have little formal cross-over with other equality fora, which a number of interviewees linked to minority women's under-representation in USDAW. However, several have recently tried to make more, often informal links (e.g. via joint youth/DWC events).

Both levels of committees have external links. The NWC's ties are more numerous than those of individual DWCs due to its national location, and the union posts and experience of many of its members. For example, the Women and Equalities Officer and President are heavily involved with the TUC and Labour Party. The General Secretary, his Deputy and other participants are similarly well connected. NWC and DWC members attend outside conferences and hold posts on outside fora (e.g. the former National Women's Officer sat on the TUC Women's Committee). DWCs' external ties are often divisional or local. For example, each has a representative on a regional TUC and Women's TUC Committee. DWCs were found to have more links than MSF's RWS-Cs with community groups (e.g. Women's Refuge, Rape Crisis, Citizen's Advice Bureau), reflecting different

emphases in members' concerns and modes of organising. DWCs have some wider links, both directly and via other bodies (e.g. NWC and DWC members attend the annual TUC Women's Conference, Manchester DWC recently participated with GPMU women in a FIET project (USDAW DWC Coordinators 1997)). While WGs' pursuit of interests for women involves alliances with bodies of other social movements and structural arrangements to accommodate these links, DWC members indicated that their outside links are still evolving. Unlike MSF's RWS-Cs, however, they 'don't really put out feelers to see what other *unions* are doing for women as women feel their primary role is to be active within the DWC and USDAW' (South Wales & Western DWC Co-ordinator).

Conference attendees have many ties with, and roles within, union and external bodies. These echo the links of women's committee members who constitute the bulk of its attendees. Links with USDAW's political structure have increased, according to NCWC reports and interviewees. Like MSF women's weeks, however, the NCWC is an annual event. Between Conferences, its links need to be maintained by women's committee members and other female activists.

5.2   Women's Groups in operation

As in MSF, analysis of the evidence revealed that the *actual* aims of different WGs complement and extend their assigned aims. The following section is structured as Section 4.2 to respond to the second research question: what equality aims WG pursue within USDAW, how do different WGs address their aims and what equality ideas inform their efforts? USDAW's women's committees and the NCWC are examined together as the latter is a key women's committee activity.

'Sameness' equality

Agenda

According to a large number of informants and 'Women in USDAW' Conference reports, most concerns pursued by the women's committee and NCWC are externally-orientated. Informants' comments indicated that they embody 'sameness' (with men) equality aims. This suggests the influence of wider union agendas (see Chapter 3). It emerged that there is some overlap in the issues raised by WGs in USDAW and MSF but differences in their emphasis, reflecting unique aspects of individual WGs, sectoral coverage and members' needs. Long-term issues include established priorities at ADM such as low pay and unequal pay for work of equal value. More episodic concerns have included problems relating to the 'poll tax' in the late 1980s, inadequate and privatised council services, increasing living costs and education cutbacks.

In respect of matters relating to the union, women's sameness equality within USDAW has been a central concern for the WGs since their inception. Issues have included women's recruitment, proportional representation and involvement in union (and wider, political processes despite the weak connection found between WG women's political preferences and WG initiatives - see Chapter 3). As with MSF's RWS-Cs, there are few divisionally specific concerns but DWCs vary in their emphasis on issues as a result of local conditions and members' preferences. The NWC tends to pursue national and supra-national issues which are more difficult for the DWCs to coordinate. Minority union issues discussed at Conference and by committees have included asian women's involvement in USDAW (and the Labour Party) and the lack of action against racism within USDAW and beyond (Women in USDAW 1994, 1998a).

To draw attention to, and responses from, the wider union to their concerns, WGs have spearheaded a number of campaigns (i.e. used a 'difference' approach), increasingly in

conjunction with other parts of USDAW (i.e. a 'mainstreaming' approach). For example, in relation to low and unequal pay, DWCs have accessed ADM, Divisional Conferences and trade conferences with the aim of helping these issues to take centre stage; they have sought to keep them there via fringe meetings, stalls and so on. They have used USDAW's low pay booklet and targeted the public, members, potential members and politicians with leaflets; discussed the issues with members and branch officers in workshops; encouraged their coverage in Federation schools (see Chapter 3); and participated in rallies. On equal pay and equal value, DWC members have looked at their own workplaces and branches and examined job evaluation systems to check for sex bias and ensure that equal value is built in (a positive action approach). 'Women in USDAW' have produced an equal pay booklet and called for the extension of divisional equal pay workshops. While the NWC and DWCs do not organise women's weeks or regular women's weekends, they coorganise national and divisional skill- and issue-based day and weekend workshops for women (i.e. a difference approach) on the basis of perceived 'need'. Some have been opened to all members. DWCs have also encouraged the inclusion of low pay, unequal pay and collective bargaining since the 1980s via home study circles and courses supported by the Education Department (see Women in USDAW 1987).

To increase women's involvement in the union's political processes, DWCs in particular have augmented their 'difference-based' strategies in the last decade. At the 1994 NCWC, for example, delegates discussed measures to encourage links between WGs and women members with USDAW's political fund campaign and structure. These included linking into the fund campaign via divisional action plans, workshops and evening get-togethers after workplace visits; briefing stewards and shift workers who cannot attend branch meetings; distributing literature through recruitment channels; targeting women's issues on the campaign; and raising the campaign at DWC meetings. DWCs and the NWC have liaised closely with the union's political structure on campaigns via joint meetings, workshops, social evenings, weekend schools, speakers and so on. An externally-orientated but related activity has involved calls at NCWC for women's involvement in

and membership of the Labour Party and full integration of WG work with the Party (e.g. see Women in USDAW 1998a).

Interest representation

As in MSF, the vast majority of interviewees in USDAW defined the aim of encouraging women to be active in the union in terms of their proportional representation in existing, 'ordinary' posts (i.e. a 'sameness' equality aim). In USDAW, however, this refers to women holding a majority of posts. According to NCWC reports and EC Statements at ADM, women's increased involvement at all union levels has been an assigned, long-term aim of women's committees (e.g. Women in USDAW 1987, 1997) on which DWCs have increasingly focused.

Women's committees have employed various 'difference strategies' to this 'sameness' end. Recruiting efforts have increasingly stressed the significance of recruiting women (e.g. Women in USDAW 1987, USDAW EC 1997) with a view to increasing women's union involvement though the sectors covered by USDAW have meant that women have traditionally formed the bulk of new recruits for WGs and others anyway (see Chapter 3). Initiatives have included efforts to strengthen links with other parts of the union (e.g. DPCs, local officials) on divisional recruitment campaigns by distributing leaflets (some of which focus on women's issues such as health and low pay as a recruitment tool, some of which are recruitment leaflets aimed at women (Women in USDAW 1997)), and with social events and meetings which tie in with branch and Area Officer recruiting activity, and recruiting at workplaces with Area Organisers[16]. Workshops on issues of interest to women and get-togethers targeted at women in co-ops and other smaller retail outlets have been used to attract women from particular sectors.

Significantly, women's committees were seen by most informants to have been in the vanguard for recognising the importance of lay representatives in recruiting, presaging the 'New Unionism' approach embraced by the wider union. WG members have long felt

[16] In 1997, discussions began with DDOs to consider how at least two DWC meetings could directly link into divisional

that 'members are more receptive to the views of lay representatives than officials' (Women in USDAW 1986:13), well-placed to pick up part-time and casual workers with whose conditions they are familiar, and able to draw new members into USDAW after recruitment (*ibid.*, Women in USDAW 1988). WG members observed that WG members' (i.e. women's) involvement in recruiting emphasised a 'like with like' approach with personal contact which recent TUC research has shown to be the most effective way of recruiting (see USDAW EC 1997, Women in USDAW 1987). The pursuit of training by some to assist them with recruitment beyond their own workplaces was generally seen by informants to have the potential to extend their effectiveness. Furthermore, the women's committees and NCWC have tried to take account of the diverse characteristics among women in recruitment initiatives. For instance, DWCs' survey of part-time workers in 1987 was the first of its kind in British unions (Women in USDAW 1987) and viewed as a resource for use in targeted recruitment.

NCWC delegates have long recommended greater back-up from the wider union to augment recruitment activity. For example, they have called for the establishment, servicing and training of a shop steward structure within newly recruited workplaces and for stewards to consolidate links and contacts with new members; the development of on-site induction/meeting facilities and training of new members; and the facilitation of members' attendance at branch meetings by being sensitive to issues of access and interest - 'anything which will cement the identity with USDAW' (Women in USDAW 1987:8). Recent activities within the NCWC have addressed recruitment. For example, a skills development workshop in 1997 focused on 'Running a Recruitment Induction Session' to build female delegates' confidence and equip them with the skills to capitalise on recruitment opportunities. One NCWC workshop asked delegates to consider general and gender-specific reasons why women should join USDAW and become involved. This discussion was subsequently used to inform WG recruiting efforts. In 1998, Conference developed a more 'applied' approach, asking delegates to consider how workplace rights

recruitment work (USDAW EC 1997).

(now enshrined in law) could be used to recruit and involve more women (see also Creamer, correspondence, 8 December 1998).

More directly related to involving women in USDAW, DWCs have pursued various 'difference' measures. Indeed, they appear to undertake more activities than MSF's RWS-C, possibly because there are fewer of them. Initiatives include efforts to get women elected as shop stewards (Women in USDAW 1997) and to augment their involvement in negotiating structures, conferences, the TUC and Labour Party delegations (e.g. Women in USDAW 1988). DWCs have staged women's (health) meetings, informal 'get togethers' and social evenings/meetings, frequently forming the union's 'first line of contact with women members' (Women in USDAW 1994:8). Their irregular but long-running issue and skill-based workshops and weekend/day schools (e.g. on equal pay, women's health, communication skills) aim to attract women who 'have never previously been involved in union activity' (USDAW EC 1997:7) by building their self-awareness, confidence and a strong sense of group solidarity (see also Kirton & Healy 1999). Weekend scheduling of these events was generally seen to recognise the difficulties for members, particularly women, in obtaining paid release from work. One workshop at the 1998 NCWC asked delegates to examine how the then Fairness at Work white paper, minimum wage and EU directives would impact on their workplace. Several participants commented that this had been designed to made them feel more comfortable about their stewarding roles, and to encourage them to help other women to participate in the union. Young women's involvement in USDAW has been pursued via joint WG-union and -external youth events (e.g. with university students).

WGs' ties with the union were also seen to encourage women's participation in the mainstream. For example, the former National Women's Officer spoke of the 'unique opportunity' provided by the NCWC to consider organisational questions, and the continuing role of women's committees in USDAW's campaigning work. The NCWC has examined 'the structures of the union to improve accessibility and promote participation and involvement' (Women in USDAW 1988:17) (i.e. a difference (positive

action) approach). Furthermore, WGs have pursued greater identity-based collective organising in non-decision making, *mainstream* fora. For example, DWCs have asked for more USDAW (cf. WG) training schools for women to this end. Each division has organised workshops and training courses since the late 1980s, some of which emphasise WGs, women's issues and their union involvement.

An important element of DWC work has been their sustained campaigning to improve part-time workers (mainly women) and minority women's mainstream representation. For example, they have recommended that part-timers are supported by positive action measures to become lay representatives. These include Area Organisers and shop stewards' active encouragement of part-timers' involvement; shop steward training to fit with part-timers' hours; national agreements with provisions for part-time stewards and improved terms and conditions; efforts by negotiating committees to ensure access to part-time representatives; and the removal of barriers to part-timers' participation by examining the Scale of Contributions (Women in USDAW 1986, 1987). Furthermore, the 1997 NCWC emphasised a difference strategy by recommending the use of women's get-togethers to target black and asian women, part-time and night-shift workers, returners, rural and disabled women to encourage their union involvement. Workshops for black and asian women, coorganised with the Education Department, are occasionally arranged to attract long-standing female members who have not previously attended an USDAW event. DWCs increasingly combine their own meetings with workplace visits and staff inductions to support and involve existing members. Positive action measures such as avoiding pubs for get-togethers (so as not to deter asian women's participation in particular) have also been taken to encourage a diverse range of women to attend WG and subsequently union events.

As in MSF, many informants felt that DWCs themselves (a difference approach) provided a key source of women who become involved or sustain their involvement in the mainstream. DWCs' women-only membership was seen as key in providing a supportive and 'egalitarian' space where women can gain confidence and equip themselves with

skills to better operate in the mainstream (i.e. DWCs were seen to support a 'deficit' approach). The decision to open even a few DWC activities to men and women has thus been taken very cautiously and with DWC members' consent. While the presence of two men on the NWC (see earlier) might indicate less regard for a 'safe environment' for women among women, its members stressed that women still form 90% of the committee's members and 'it operates like a women-only body' (NWC member). Similar comments were made about the NCWC. Some men are present at plenary sessions but women-only workshops were seen as one of the most informal, supportive, women-friendly contexts within USDAW. They were viewed as important in helping women to raise their concerns, network, re-energise and become more confident about operating in the rest of the union.

The range of women in DWCs and the NCWC was seen by many informants to encourage women from minority groups to participate in WGs, as well as mainstream positions, supporting Heery & Kelly's (1989) 'role model' idea. For instance, the Midlands DWC comprises two black women and several members have young or adult children. About 25% of NCWC participants are part-timers, commensurate with their membership share (Women in USDAW 1988). Although DWCs are not 'open' like MSF's RWS-Cs, their members felt that the heterogeneity of their membership was enhanced by the existence of 'reserve' lists (see earlier), 'women-friendly' measures (e.g. meeting times and venues which suit the women involved), and in some regions (e.g. the Midlands), a higher ethnic minority membership. As in MSF, however, a number of participants felt that they had had to make 'tough choices' between their union and personal lives. The heterogeneity of NWC members was less pronounced, with many members being older, single women without caring roles, and in senior positions with considerable union experience. However, the NWC comprises several 'exceptional' women, DWC Chairs attend NWC meetings, the NWC links with many women's bodies (e.g. the NCWC) and co-opts some women, thereby widening the diversity of its membership.

Agenda

Most informants felt that women shared certain issues and recognised the gendered character of many 'mainstream' concerns. Their concerns were seen as long-term WG matters which relate primarily to women's lives beyond the union; a key aim of the NCWC in 1987 was 'to make progress on issues of concern to women in collective bargaining activity' (Women in USDAW 1987:18). 'Women's issues' have included the relationship between the workplace and women's health and safety, violence against women, sexual harassment and maternity rights. Gendered union concerns have included established 'priorities' at ADM such as problems relating to casualisation and part-time working, inadequate support for carers, parental leave, social security changes, job insecurity, changes in work hours at short notice, difficulty in getting time off for family responsibilities, and reflecting the character of the union's sectoral coverage, the absence of statutory premium payments in the Sunday Trading Bill (Women in USDAW 1988, 1994). Minority issues covered by the women's committees and NCWC have included women and youth crime (Women in USDAW 1994, 1998a). These matters were seen to have generally grown in significance for women's committees and the NCWC, and written records (e.g. women's committee minutes) revealed that their range continues to expand, perhaps reflecting the view that women's committees often adopt a 'general' equality remit in order to gain wider union support (Elliot 1984).

Several key WG 'difference' issues have centred on women's situation *within* USDAW, albeit usually in relation to raising women's concerns in other settings. For instance, the NCWC has examined DWC size, location, venue, funding, paid release for their meetings, activities at ADM, links with other DWCs and their method of formation (Women in USDAW 1986). It has also discussed the extension of branch communications to more effectively convey DWC work; the compilation of a list of women not currently involved in USDAW but who have signalled interest; and the extension of contact lists to a 'link' person in every workplace. In respect of minority 'difference' issues, WG topics

have included the targeting of younger women to encourage their union membership and involvement) and several issues for sub-groups of women which they themselves have been loathe to raise for fear of being 'singled out' in some way (e.g. sickle cell anaemia and thalassaemia which mostly affect black people (Women in USDAW/Race Relations Committee undated(a, b)).

WG responses to these concerns have been multi-faceted. Women's committees have sought to increase the profile of women's concerns and themselves at ADM, Divisional Conferences, trade conferences and on divisional and branch bodies, often emphasising them in terms of their significance to union recruitment efforts (see earlier). The NWC and Women and Equalities Officer have coordinated input from DWCs to produce booklets and a leaflet series on women's health matters, help publications (e.g. 'Having a Baby - Know your rights' - Women in USDAW 1998b), and latterly, women and recruitment materials (Women in USDAW undated(a, b)), sometimes with other WGs or parts of the union. As a Scotland DWC member observed of the NCWC,

> it's an eye-opener. Conference makes us aware of each other's concerns and how to help each other.

The North Western DWC was seen by several senior female officials to have been at the fore in producing materials in the mid-1980s. while others (e.g. South Wales & Western and Midlands DWCs) have recently begun newsletters for activists and women (e.g. USDAW South Wales & Western DWC 1997a, 1997b, 1998; USDAW Midlands DWC 1998b). Some WG written material supplements issue-based campaigns.

WG efforts to raise the profile of issues in USDAW have been tailored to reflect the nature of the issue at hand. For instance, in respect of sexual harassment, as well as seeking more information on the subject, the NCWC has recommended to delegates that they encourage the anonymous publication of cases, its higher prioritisation in training programmes for FTOs and stewards, and raise its profile at branch meetings and Divisional Conferences. The NCWC and women's committees have also sought to raise

women's confidence at women's workshops about discussing sexual harassment and their responses to it. DWCs have promoted themselves as a service for women who need to talk with other women about this problem. On the problems experienced by casual and part-time workers, in 1986, NCWC delegates pushed for a part-time workers' charter with *pro rata* bargaining demands. They have encouraged part-timers to more strongly identify with USDAW, and full-timers to support their demands. Reflecting a more refined approach, in 1988, NCWC delegates focused their concern with flexible workers on the retail sector, noting that part-timers were becoming increasingly important to the 'food' workforce, with extended trading hours and the use of twilight shifts. Other initiatives have included seeking enforcement of the 1950s Shops Act, resisting casualisation by negotiating hours that fit women's lives and supporting the implementation of external developments such as the Working Time directive (Women in USDAW 1991, 1994).

In respect of internally-oriented matters, it was found that DWCs increasingly send out information to branches and members about the women's structure (Women in USDAW 1997) and women's situation within USDAW. Although written documents indicated that minority women's concerns have received less attention from WGs than 'broad' gender matters, this looks likely to change in view of recent and proposed DWC activities. DWCs increasingly invite speakers from minority groups to their meetings and have links with other identity groups within and beyond USDAW through which they elicit minority women's concerns.

Interest representation

Women's committees and the NCWC stress identity politics in their organisation around gender. However, most informants did not view women's involvement in WGs and their activities as directly augmenting their presence in the union because WGs were not viewed as mainstream bodies - despite their increasing links to the rest of USDAW. Unlike women's committees in MSF, USDAW's WGs were not recognised by informants to have pursued identity-based (positive discrimination) arrangements in the wider union such as 'permanent' reserved seats for women which could be interpreted as a form of

'difference' goal. However, DWCs have sought 'difference' representation by encouraging members, especially women, to become involved in USDAW as branch/workplace 'contact points' when they cannot commit to more structured involvement (USDAW EC 1997). They have urged this form of involvement during visits to members in their workplaces.

'Transformational' equality

Agenda

As in MSF, it emerged that WGs' agendas have increasingly spanned different spheres of women's activity and been viewed as interlinked (e.g. women and stress has increasingly been couched by the committees as overlapping with smoking, alcohol and tranquillisers issues (Women in USDAW 1988)). This partially reflects WGs' growing experience and understanding of the concerns they respond to, and has required WG initiatives which embrace multiple issues. For instance, the link between women and low paying jobs has been extended by WGs to their experience of a lack of childcare, limited scope for transport for seeking better paid jobs, fewer opportunities for training and promotion, and undervaluation of their skills - problems seen to be exacerbated in the early 1990s by the weakening of the now defunct Wages Councils, loss of rights (e.g. premium pay, holidays), lack of enforcement, the threat of increased unemployment, and working in jobs as isolated and difficult-to-organise workers. At the NCWC 1998, it was felt that many issues for women can be initially addressed by encouraging the use of the individual and collective rights contained in the raft of measures brought in by Labour (see earlier) via campaigns, shop steward training, producing leaflets, organising on-site briefings and so forth. Issue links were also made evident by the NCWC's thematisation of issues and linkage of them to external political initiatives, contrasting with the more narrow industrial and political foci of most mainstream bodies.

As in MSF, however, WG members recognised that raising an issue does not make it a priority. This has encouraged them to recast several 'women's issues' as 'general'

concerns. For example, the 1997 NCWC advocated workshops on sexual harassment for women *and* men, couching it as an issue around which members can unite while emphasising its differing, gendered impacts. During the South Wales & Western DWC's visit to Tesco in Cardiff in February 1999 and at the 1998 ADM, I heard several male members comment that they attended women's events because they felt they were relevant to them and their relationships/families. Similarly, several senior female officials felt that a number of women's issues 'have become seen as based less around individual concerns and more around relationships' (Southern DWC member). For instance, some of their women's health pamphlets consider the impact of health issues for women *and* their relationships. A number of DWC members also felt that the opening of some of their activities (e.g. workshops, fringe meetings, social gatherings) to a mixed audience helped to spread women's concerns in the union and enabled existing shop stewards (i.e. mostly men) to better handle the concerns of the membership majority. Furthermore, WGs' growing permeation of mainstream bodies and joint WG-mainstream responses (see earlier) were seen by many informants to encourage WG issues to be viewed as significant to all union members. At the same time, the increasing breadth of WG agendas was seen to partly reflect a growing view that 'everything is of concern to women' (former National Women's Officer).

In contrast to MSF's WGs, USDAW's women's committees and NCWC were not found to be concerned with non-union women's concerns or the union-related problems of WG members. Avoidance of the latter was linked to fears about intruding on others' 'patch', in contrast with WGs' approach to many other matters. For example:

> Women are on a DWC for a reason. If they want to get involved as a branch secretary, I divert them to an organiser. (North Western DWC Co-ordinator).

Informally, however, get-togethers and women's health meetings were viewed as giving women the opportunity to talk about any of their concerns, exchange experiences and ideas and put forward solutions.

In respect of agenda setting, WGs were generally found to supplement and alter aspect of USDAW's channels of communication. For example, the NCWC's 'agenda' reflects the combined concerns of DWCs and the NWC which have flowed up from the grassroots via DWC Chairs' reports to NWC, the NCWC report to which all delegates can contribute, meetings, women's weekends and days schools. It is extended by input from other attendees such as the General Secretary and the EC in the form of resolutions from ADM. As more WG links with the union are established, however, more issues are passed to WGs from other union sources (reflecting a 'sameness' or 'mainstreaming' approach). The NWC also has input into issues and guidelines passed down to DWCs and other WGs from bodies like the EC or TUC.

With the exception of non-union women and WG members' personal union concerns (see earlier), DWCs were not seen by informants to have any policy 'no go' areas. They continually add 'new' issues to their agendas, resources permitting. For example, a Midlands DWC member commented: 'we'd discuss whether something stays or go. There's no hidden list of things we don't speak about'. (As in MSF, the NWC and NCWC view concerns more strategically, reflecting the need to coordinate a manageable range of issues across DWC work programmes). The overall expansion of WGs' issue bases was seen to reflect in part growing confidence in WGs and efforts by the union to understand and respond to their concerns. The NCWC's diverse range of attendees and small, informal workshops were singled out by many informants for helping to elicit a wide range of concerns. Its virtually all-female participant base, supportive atmosphere and opportunities for networking were also thought to deepen delegates' identification, as women with the issues, and encourage the pursuit of issues raised by women who prefer to talk to women (see Women in USDAW 1995). For example, the North Western DWC's (1997:1) minutes note that delegates 'enjoyed the panel session ... they had an opportunity to have an input'. Indeed, reflecting its limited duration, the NCWC's thematic approach has encouraged its organisers to formally emphasise certain issues or approaches so as to develop particular areas for women, and ensure their 'fit' with union priorities and that certain issues are not 'lost' or forgotten.

Although WGs seek the prioritisation of women's concerns on union agendas (in line with mainstream ways of operating - e.g. the EC Statement at ADM, on which the work at the NCWC and committees builds, concentrates on issues at the top of the women's structure), this is less apparent in their own operations due to their relatively 'inclusive' and 'bottom up' approach to eliciting issues (e.g. DWC workshops are arranged according to women's demands; the NWC and NCWC's rolling programme originates from members' concerns). Many WG members felt that this participative approach was driven by WGs' desire to be seen as listening and responding *directly* to women members rather than having 'officers thinking they can guess what women want and in what order. So, it's difficult if someone asks, 'What are the top issues' (former National Women's Officer). NCWC reports, EC Statements and women's committee minutes show that WGs have responded to an ever-widening range of issues. At the 1986 NCWC, nine broad issue areas were addressed. A year later, there were 17 and many more have been added since.

Power

The NWC and DWCs are not policy-making bodies and are subject to national control (see earlier). However, most interviewees asserted that the NWC was seen as a significant body within USDAW, partly because the General Secretary and Deputy are members and most senior officials hold the NWC and its report (included in the EC Statement at ADM) in high regard in their own work. Furthermore, as in MSF, many informants saw the committees and NCWC as powerful in their adoption of a 'transformative' approach in that they constitute a space for women where they can realise and pursue their collective, gendered interests. As a result, women were seen to be empowered by their experience of WGs and better able to enter the wider union with a view to changing power relations between women and men.

Furthermore, many WG members shared a particular view of their influence within USDAW as women and WG members. They wanted to bring influence to bear *for* other

women by providing role models, giving visibility to women in leadership, profiling women's concerns and challenging stereotypes (see also Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Briskin 1999). This form of influence, they stressed, does not seek to replace one form of domination with another and divide USDAW. Rather, it was seen to augment USDAW's influence over *outside* forces by challenging inequality in relationships within the union (see also Inez McCormack, cited in Kinnock & Millar 1993).

Social processes and modes of operating

Assigned DWC aims include making USDAW welcome, relevant and accessible to women. A number of female informants linked this aim to that of developing the collective bargaining agenda and negotiating machinery to reflect women's involvement in the union (see Section 5.1). A recent EC Statement (1997:6-7) similarly acknowledged that '(w)omen want to have their own say in what they want and how they get involved', implying women's increased empowerment on their own terms within USDAW.

As in MSF, many informants felt that WG women introduce and actively encourage different, gendered ways of approaching unionism, thereby challenging existing bases of power in the union. WG women generally saw themselves as having their own styles of operating as individuals and committee members, preferring to interact with others in an open, tolerant, friendly and informal manner. A number indicated that the longer they had attended WGs and their activities, the more inclined they had felt to seek change in the wider union's dominant modes of operating and gendered attitudes.

In terms of modes of operating, WG women have pushed for the removal of all jargon and sexist language from union materials and discussions. They cited their general dislike of 'excessive procedure and waffling as women don't have time to muck about' (South Wales & Western DWC member). This was emphasised by WGs' own ways of operating and their resulting successes, interviewees indicated. The women's committees and NCWC's 'flat' organisation, minimal status differences among participants, direct communication channels, openness to grassroots members, and flexibility in respect of

the varying levels of time and resources that participants can provide to WG operations were seen to be advocated by members in other parts of USDAW to encourage women's involvement. For example, a workshop at the NCWC 1997 aimed to build women's skills and confidence so that DWC members could run discussion groups in the wider union by drawing on their *own* (i.e. female) experiences and self-developed guidelines. In another workshop, delegates considered changes to union operations such as adopting more informal and caring ways to make it 'more effective in dealing with [members'] problems' (Women in USDAW 1997:4). NCWC delegates also indicated that they would like to form stronger links and networks with other women in USDAW. The NCWC's format, which has altered little since its inception in 1986, was also seen to have a transformative effect on attendees by encouraging everyone's active yet self-determined level of involvement, an approach that its attendees were encouraged to take into other parts of USDAW. For instance, most of NCWC time is devoted to staging of workshops of small groups comprising members of various DWCs except for the last workshop where members of the same DWC plan their work programme. These are followed by 'report backs' by workshop members (often newcomers) in a plenary session where 'you feel the other women silently egging them on to do well' (South Wales & Western DWC Coordinator).

Other ways in which WG women were seen to advocate 'women-centredness' in WGs and the wider union was indicated by the NCWC's emphasis on women's get-togethers '(starting) with where women are at, with their agenda' (Women in USDAW 1991:11). This supports Stinson & Richmond's (1993) contrast of male and female representatives' work styles. In the dominant male model, staff act as authority figures, experts and 'white knights' who charge in to rescue weak 'locals'. By contrast, female staff tend to promote a participatory approach aiming to develop the confidence and skills of members (see also Heery & Kelly 1989) and elicit their concerns. Furthermore, WGs encourage open communication about women's concerns on women's own terms. For example, in NCWC workshops (cf. the common format of most policy-making, mixed conferences), tutors facilitate while attendees personalise much of the workshops' operation around stated

objectives. This was seen to help sensitive and minority concerns to emerge, and to enable women to gain the skills and confidence to operate effectively in the wider union in their own ways. The NCWC has also recommended that more lay representatives should be members of negotiating committees in USDAW. This was seen by many informants as having the potential to help women's union representation as well as increase their influence of the ways in which they proceed.

Some WG operations were contested by informants, however. For instance, several DWC women supported the staging of women's day or weekend workshops on a 'needs be' basis to conserve women's resources. Others felt that they should be routinised so that more women are reached and feel empowered by the knowledge that those mechanisms are permanent.

5.3   Women's Groups' effectiveness

Having analysed how WGs address their different (equality) aims via different equality approaches, this section mirrors the evaluation of WG effectiveness in MSF in Section 4.3 but for USDAW's WGs. Significantly, NCWC and informants' assessments were often found to stress WG achievements in terms of 'advancements' rather than final outcomes, reflecting a view of their struggles as on-going.

Structure and democracy

Most informants' comments indicated that they saw WGs as a 'difference' approach to gender equality (usually conceived of in 'sameness' terms). However, a few viewed them as a 'difference-based' achievement because of their longevity within the traditional organisation of the union. Although an annual event, the NCWC was generally seen to have a continuous presence and influence on the union via the NWC's coordination of DWC work programmes. While WGs were not generally seen to have brought structural positive discrimination arrangements in the union mainstream (cf. MSF's WGs), they have established a WG link member on Divisional Councils and Divisional Political Committees, and were key in successfully proposing the introduction of separate voting

lists for women and men for TUC and Labour Party Conference delegations. Several DWC members felt that DWCs' activities within mainstream structures (e.g. ADM), growing number of links (see USDAW EC 1996) and coorganised workshops and schools with mainstream bodies, reserved lists, and ties with trades councils and other external bodies had altered procedural aspects of the union as well as, to a small degree, its overall structural shape. Some links between DWCs and other divisional bodies were seen as better than others. For instance, the Scottish DWC was regarded as particularly well-connected, partly due to its internal cohesion and historical ties.

As in MSF, few informants felt that WGs, particularly when they were 'institutionalised' within USDAW, reflected the achievement of a transformational approach to equality. A NCWC report observed, for instance, that linking into Conferences (such as ADM - see Chapter 3) and other events had been key to making 'the presence of the Women's Committees felt' (Women in USDAW 1997:9), bringing structural change 'from within', particularly as more DWC members have been encouraged to speak at ADM. The inclusion of many mainstream lay members in DWCs (and by extension the NCWC) was seen to help successfully take WG practices (e.g. the absence of internal hierarchy) into the mainstream. Joint WG-union organising was seen to have used union resources more effectively and altered aspects of the power relations between men and women in the union.

Many informants also felt that the location of key mainstream postholders on the NWC and NCWC had helped to transform aspects of the union's structure and democratic arrangements by WG women, thereby reflecting women's values while emphasising benefits for the wider union. WGs were also seen to have helped to encourage a partial (re-)democratisation of certain union practices, particularly at the local level, via their advocacy of the practices associated with New Unionism.

Not all aspects of WGs' influences on the wider union were viewed positively; some were seen to have reinforced existing (masculinist) practices. For example, several senior

officials commented that, since DWCs' inception, there has been considerable argument as to whether their members should continue to be selected rather than elected. Some saw selection as 'replicating the prejudice' of wider union (non-democratic) practices (Women in USDAW 1986) and as not sitting easily with the participative, egalitarian internal operation of DWCs. Others recognised difficulties with electing DWC members because not all women are equally predisposed to gaining union experience, a valuable DWC entry 'qualification' (see earlier). Similarly, some saw the NCWC's restricted size as curbing the expression of a full range of different views about WG aims and activities and the extent of change for women it could bring:

> We'd tap in to more women, get better feedback and hopefully bigger numbers than we currently do on DWCs. An annual conference of women from all branches would mean that it's inclusive and would feed back into branches better. (President)

Others saw it as enabling the Conference to present a unified image to the rest of USDAW and that the current inactivity of some branches could mean that the inclusion of their female members at the NCWC might not provide additional feedback and could lead to logistical worries. They also viewed its unitaristic processes which require face-to-face interaction, and time and commitment as an improvement on larger (and typical union) conference structures which can institutionalise 'adversary' procedures or intensify social pressure for discussion (see Mansbridge 1980).

Despite perceptions of their various effects, WGs were generally assessed as having had a positive yet uneven and minor impact on USDAW's structural and democratic arrangements. Their efforts were not seen to fundamentally challenge the patriarchal organisation and practices of USDAW as a whole, nor its sectoral and industrial arrangements. This had, in turn, impacted on the extent to which women's work had been taken into certain areas of USDAW. As in MSF, many informants felt that greater change to USDAW would require an enhancement of WGs' roles and powers. Several NWC members stressed their concern over the increasing interdependency of WGs and other union parts in terms of curbing WGs' influence on USDAW's organisation. They saw the extension of other, more innovative, flexible measures (e.g. informal meetings for

women, home study circles) as pivotal to altering the organisational *status quo* and providing a level of grass-roots organising by women for which there is currently no equivalent in MSF. The extension of DWCs' informal ties, many felt, would not mean the emulation of 'old boy networks' which were seen to give an unfair source of influence to certain men at others' expense (see Caputi & MacKenzie 1992). Rather, they would enable all those who wanted to contribute to WG aims on their own terms. Significantly, a number of informants felt that USDAW would become more receptive to further structural and procedural change via increasing WG-union links as it saw more evidence of WGs' successes for women and the wider union (e.g. with recruiting, women's union involvement). For instance, the South Wales & Western Divisional Council recently examined the possibility of allocating a member to 'look after' one committee (including the DWC) and including a representative from each committee on the Council.

Agenda

Most informants commented that issues pursued by women's committees and the NCWC that embodied 'sameness' equality ideas and were not union-centred received most attention in the union. Although WGs themselves were loathe to rank their concerns (see earlier), the need to gain support for them in the union required their prioritisation. Many informants felt that the presence of NWC members (e.g. the General Secretary) on mainstream bodies and the female membership majority encouraged the EC and other platforms to take WG concerns seriously, particularly as the significance of women's membership to USDAW's survival has drawn into sharper view. For instance, Bill Connor, then Deputy General Secretary, recently stressed that 'negotiations would still be determined by male values unless women became involved' (Women in USDAW 1995:14) (i.e. use sameness representation to a 'difference' agenda end). In the same vein,

> before DWCs, women's issues in USDAW were rare. Women's concerns are now recognised and dealt with as vital union issues. (Area Officer, Midlands)

NCWC reports and EC Statements at ADM also reported a growth in the number of concerns for women that have been raised via WGs to negotiation and other union fora since the mid-1980s (e.g. USDAW EC 1996), including some issues for minority women.

Yet, analysis of EC reports revealed that WG concerns *seldom* gain priority in union agendas despite their relative 'shortness' in equality terms. Indeed, several officials felt that WG issues would struggle to gain even the profile they currently had without WGs. They also asserted that, with the exception of pay issues, the union had pursued issues for women, often following WG campaigning, which did not significantly threaten existing 'bread and butter' issues and men's position on them.

This said, significantly, the skills training of the NCWC and DWC weekend courses was also seen to have helped bolster women's ability to raise WG issues at branch or Council levels. Furthermore, women's committees, the NCWC and individual female activists were seen by many informants and in WG documents as crucial for profiling and prompting action on a number of their concerns, irrespective of their perceived priority in the union. The 1995 NCWC report, the most recent to assess progress on six WG concerns in some detail (cancer screening, sexual harassment, domestic violence, child abuse (i.e. 'difference' issues), black and asian women's union participation, low/unequal pay (i.e. sameness matters))[17] supports this claim. For example, in respect of cancer screening, the report indicated that suggestions in a women's committee booklet (Women in USDAW 1990) had helped to place this issue firmly on the bargaining agenda and negotiated into many workplace agreements, with

> over 75% of USDAW members being covered by an agreement providing either paid release or workplace based facilities[18]. [It] also provided vital information to encourage women to go for screening and resulted in this difficult and sensitive subject being discussed openly .... (EC Statement 1996:11)

On sexual harassment, described in the report as a 'key union issue', several informants commented that members now encourage the negotiation of specific procedures relating

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[17] The limited number of issues under evaluation may reflect limited discussion time at Conference; the report was also generated by the delegates whose efforts were being evaluated.

to harassment in the workplace, while women's committees support women who are directly dealing with the matter and disseminate information about who to contact in management to handle the issue, with particular attention to the vulnerability of young workers. The 1995 NCWC report indicated that domestic violence was on the agenda at ADM while child abuse had been on the first NCWC agenda, taken to ADM where policy was established and filtered back to divisions and branches. Some in-roads were noted on black and asian women's union participation (see earlier) but it was not cited as a wider union matter.

Curiously, low and equal pay were also not listed in the report as union agenda issues despite the frequency of the latter on ADM agendas (see Chapter 3) and their citation as key issues for women in other NCWC reports. Yet, NCWCs have encouraged USDAW to tackle unequal value via a collective approach to challenging national agreements, with individual cases backing up this strategy. This has included developing links with Low Pay Coordinators; discussing the membership of lay representatives from low paid sectors on the Low Pay Action Committee so that these members will identify with it; adopting a more interesting, informative approach in relevant circulars; increasing awareness through written materials using successful USDAW pay cases; and looking at agreements with Area Organisers to review grading systems to ensure that women workers' training skills and experience are appropriately reflected (Women in USDAW 1987, 1988). DWCs have supported women taking and negotiators making equal value claims; encouraged women to become involved in negotiations and job evaluation exercises and to claim equal access to grading and promotion opportunities; and encouraged the use of equal pay rights in collective bargaining and pursued legal claims. Since the early 1990s, European developments and case law have been used to demand more information from employers on wage structures and rates. Political solutions have been linked at NCWC and via workshops with political committees to Labour gaining office. On low pay, DWCs have progressed claims locally as shop stewards; supported women taking and negotiators making equal value claims; encouraged women to question grade and pay

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[18] In 1987, the union successfully negotiated agreements to cover over 70% of its membership (Women in USDAW 1987).

structures; continued to fight at companies for equal pay; participated in reviews of pay structures in major retailers (e.g. Tesco, Co-op); and campaigned for a minimum wage, a review of the benefits system and stronger equal pay legislation - areas where there have been some recent developments.

The report did not assess progress on other major WG concerns such as part-time work, casualisation, maternity rights (difference issues), parental leave and the situation of women generally within USDAW (sameness issues). Yet, these matters are formal ADM priorities, seen as key by senior officials and cited in other years' reports. Other evidence indicated significant progress in these areas. For instance, even by the mid-1980s, women's committees' campaigns had won over some full-time workers who feared that part-timers could undercut their own circumstances at work to support equal rights for part-timers (Women in USDAW 1986). The NWC has also influenced USDAW's position on single parents' allowance,

> (w)hen New Labour created a single parent's allowance, the NWC was unhappy. Our political officer tried to defend the Party but couldn't so she said, 'I'll let the Party know your views'. It wasn't just the NWC or USDAW that made a difference but she got the union's feelings into the heart of what was going on. (Southern DWC Co-ordinator)

Links between WGs' political alignments within USDAW and progress on WG issues were more difficult to detect than for MSF WGs. However, certain male-dominated mainstream bodies were seen to have impacted on the level and pace of union responses to WG issues. For instance, several women on Councils perceived that WG issues were often given lower priority and apportioned less time:

> Councils and DWCs run in parallel. There isn't a relationship unless you make one. As a Divisional Officer, I take DWC minutes to Divisional Council. Nobody ever talks about them. They just endorse them. (President)

> Women's committees aren't flavour of the month with a lot of officials, particularly men. It can be difficult to push the message through them to branches. (Southern DWC member)

Increasingly decentralised bargaining arrangements and variation in the commitment of officials to particular aims were also seen to have reinforced divisional, workplace and local differences in progress on DWC issues.

Many informants identified broad divisional variations in DWCs' level of work on and effectiveness in progressing issues (see also Women in USDAW 1986). Divisional variations were seen to reflect different equality 'starting points' in divisions and varying DWC resources, organising histories and wider divisional influences. For example, many informants concurred that the North West DWC was the first to become active, reflecting its highly active members who were in the vanguard for establishing the women's structure in the mid-1980s. Yet, while most participants felt that DWC activity and effects were still varied, relative to earlier times, active DWCs were seen to have stayed busy while others (e.g. Southern DWC) have become busier (see also USDAW NWC 1998(a,b), 1999; USDAW Southern DWC 1997, 1998a, 1998b). WGs were seen to have accumulated experience on how best to seek to raise and gain active responses to their issues in the mainstream, and their gradualist, piece-meal approach to change as helping WGs to be more effective. Similarly, the rolling programmes of the NWC and NCWC were seen as helping to consolidate gains and edge forward WG aims, albeit in a gradual, context-driven and pragmatic manner.

Significantly, many informants felt that the 'voice' and influence of each DWC was augmented by its location within a supportive women's structure. For example, the NCWC was seen as the key forum where DWC women could 're-energise and regroup' (Women in USDAW 1997:24), often (re-)discovering the common aspects of their concerns. Issues that DWCs were unable to pursue on their own were often 'kept alive' through the support of other WGs, reflecting role overlap between different WG types.

On agenda setting, WG documents and interviewees' comments stressed the importance of women's committees and their activities (particularly women's workshops and courses), the NCWC, individual female activists (particularly shop stewards), officials

and home study groups in gathering, collectivising and campaigning on issues that concern women. Indeed, although NWC meetings adopt a conventional format (see USDAW National Women's Committee 1999, 1998a, 1998b, .USDAW National Women's Committee/DWC Coordinators 1998), informants related this to their extensive agenda rather than to over-proceduralism or poor management. Women's weekends and day schools were viewed as particularly important for raising minority concerns though these were given less overall attention than 'broad' gender matters and WGs were not generally viewed as a substitute for self-organisation by minority women. The WGs were seen to elicit and raise consciousness of a greater range of issues than had previously been examined in the wider union. by virtue of their growing links with the union mainstream. As in MSF, interviewees' comments about WGs' inclusive and egalitarian approach to eliciting and pursuing issues indicated a transformational approach.

As in MSF, several senior officials felt that WGs' pursuit of a wide range of issues, efforts to couch them within wider workplace concerns (e.g. see Women in USDAW 1998) and increasing links with the mainstream reinforced the relevance of WGs and their concerns in USDAW. There were some problems, however, in terms of overcoming opposition and conservatism within the wider union to WGs' pursuit of some issues. For instance, a South Wales & Western DWC member commented that two Muslim men would not let a shop steward/WG member take action about their complaint because she was a woman. Several WG members also felt that some DWCs tried to be 'all things to all people' via their broad agendas and thus deterred some women from bringing gender-specific and/or sensitive issues to them. Informants attributed transformative (if uneven) changes in the wider union's approach to particular issues (e.g. recasting women's (difference) concerns as issues for all members to the way in which the NCWC and women's committees had campaigned on them, and to growing union recognition of the need to make its agendas attractive to the membership majority and potential members. A recent EC Statement at ADM (1996:13) noted:

> The work of the Women's Committees is crucial to raising awareness of the issues which confront women ... What happens to women affects us all.

The direct communications between women at the grass-roots via DWCs, NWC and female officials was also seen to have contributed to WGs' ability to accurately represent female members in the union rather than impose an agenda or particular viewpoints. However, several committee women observed that their attempts to broach minority women's concerns had been curbed by the perceived remit of 'specialty' equality fora (e.g. race committees) - even though they assessed other bodies as not having adequately addressed the gendered aspect of concerns - due to 'complicated spheres of influence type arguments' (Midlands DWC member). Several DWCs were seen to have successfully countered this by presenting themselves as supportive bodies open to any issue (e.g. via their developing links with other equality bodies) *and* able to 'sub-contract' them to the appropriate mechanism elsewhere in USDAW.

WGs were generally seen as vital to making further progress on women's concerns within and beyond USDAW. The former National Women's Officer (Women in USDAW 1995:19-20) commented on the NCWC in 1995 that,

> while the weekend had marked a decade of progress, it also marked the start of the next decade of work. The Conference discussions had clearly illustrated the growing list of tasks which face Women in USDAW in delivering a better deal for women.

Most interviewees felt that as WGs achieved more, they were asked to address more issues - 'it's self-perpetuating growth' (South Wales & Western DWC member); there had been a number of calls for the duration of the NCWC to be extended as 'there's lots to squeeze in' (Midlands DWC member) though union funding has inhibited this. However, in 1998, the President and colleagues reduced the conference's scheduled programme so that workshop sessions take place earlier in the weekend to enable more discussion time. Many women's close identification with the issues raised in their WG was also thought to create a 'will' to do more by WG members, particularly in the face of opposition. Few WG members saw WG issues as 'start and finish jobs' but rather as on-going concerns, with changes in the wider union and environment necessitating the

continual re-setting of goals. To facilitate the progress of more women's issues to bargaining and internal negotiating structures, several informants advocated that DWC members make more use of their branches as individual women to put forward propositions at ADM. Several senior female officials speculated that the new Women and Equalities Officer and growing WG-other party linkages would help to cross-fertilise the equality concerns of different constituency groups, thereby influencing mainstream agendas. Many informants also felt that, despite the slow pace of progress, many WG achievements were building as USDAW became more familiar with their demands and ways of pursuing them.

Interest representation

Informants and WG records and reports indicated that women's committee involvement and activities, in conjunction with the NCWC, were important in improving their participants and other women's union position since the mid-1980s (see Chapter 3). In particular, membership of a DWC was seen by many interviewees to provide an important springboard to women to become involved in the wider union:

> Hillary's an organiser and was on Manchester DWC. An organiser in Sheffield and another in the Midlands were on the North Western. DWCs give women that confidence and support. (President)

DWC workplace visits were credited with 'being successful in ... encouraging existing members to get more involved in the union by, for example, becoming shop stewards or agreeing to become branch or workplace contact points' (EC Statement 1997:7) and 'making contact with female members and representatives who feel forgotten and need a boost' (South Wales & Western DWC Co-ordinator). Jointly organised get-togethers, social events, workshops and weekend/day schools were deemed 'incredibly successful' in encouraging participation (EC Statement 1997:7):

> two Women and Health evening meetings held in 1996 attracted over 200 women to a union event. The majority of those women had never attended a union meeting before. The shop stewards reported the get-togethers as extremely helpful ... in recruitment and organisation ... Workshops, both weekend and day schools ... have

been very successful in attracting women who have never previously been involved in union activity.

Coorganised campaigns were also seen to have encouraged the recruitment and involvement of members. For instance, the EC Statement (1997:8) noted that issue-based campaigns

> are the most effective ... [They] address directly the experience of our members and potential members in their homes, workplaces and communities. The Women's Committees act as a direct line, reaching members and potential members that the union's traditional structures and ways of working may not be able to reach very easily.

This highlights the importance of WGs' flexible approach in encouraging women with differing circumstances and needs into union activity. Further, DWC members stressed that the NCWC's increasing use of an approach whereby delegates apply the skills they develop during workshops helped them to recruit and organise more people, particularly women. Several interviewees stressed WGs' significance in raising the participation level of part-time women in USDAW. They singled out women's application of skills learnt in workshops at the 1998 NCWC (e.g. using agreement and legislative information, rehearsing the arguments for part-timers' equality with full-timers for raising their recruitment and involvement.

The analysis identified an absence of regular WG initiatives to encourage minority women's union involvement (cf. MSF's BWN). Despite this, and the 'general weakness of divisional race bodies' (Midlands DWC member), many felt that the heterogeneous characteristics of women in WGs; occasional DWC and NWC workshops for black and asian women; DWCs' targeting of minority women's issues; and WGs' 'women-friendly' features (see earlier), made WGs, DWCs in particular, important initial influences on minority women's involvement in WGs and the mainstream. DWC members also commented that their activities (e.g. workplace visits, workshops, get-togethers, conferences, publications), based on their *experiences* of targeting black and asian, part-time, shift and other isolated women, had successfully involved sub-groups of women. They cited instances where they, often in conjunction with other union bodies, had

encouraged a minority woman to become a shop steward or sit on negotiating committees in companies such as Iceland, and had successfully represented minority female members. At the same time, informants noted several paradoxical outcomes of WGs' own increasing membership diversity on women's involvement elsewhere in USDAW. For instance, DWCs' ethos of inclusivity has led several to have a high proportion of retired women. Several members felt that this hindered their ability to send a representative to bodies such as a Youth Committee or try to recruit and involve working-age women on a 'like with like' basis.

Although WGs did not formally recognise their pursuit of 'positive discrimination' initiatives as in MSF (cf. their link members on DPCs and Councils), interviewee and written evidence suggests some success with 'radical' measures in the union *non-mainstream* and non-decision making bodies. Several informants saw these measures as representation achievements in themselves, moreover. For example, DWCs have successfully encouraged Federations to run more schools for women, as well as women's discussion groups in the workplace and community (originally developed in the early 1980s) to continue the momentum generated by their experience and learning on women's workshops, weekends and union courses. These groups were strengthened in some areas, according to interviewees, by the establishment of women's committees and a wider women's structure (see also Elliot 1984).

As in MSF, many informants and other sources linked recruitment of women by WGs to the provision of a larger pool of members who could potentially involved in the union mainstream. For instance, a recent EC Statement (1997:7) recognised that women's committees are central to USDAW becoming 'better drawing more women into membership ... keeping those members and ensuring that women have a voice at every level'. This was seen as more significant in light of the absence of recent merger activity to check membership decline. Shop stewards were seen by senior officials to have played a crucial role in curbing membership decline (Women in USDAW 1997); many DWC members are stewards and have successfully recruited, particularly women in their

workplace with whose concerns they are familiar. The supportive culture of the WGs, the NCWC and NWC's high profile, DWCs' diverse membership and their ability to elicit issues from women were seen as key influences on their recruiting success.

Of women's committee activities, NCWC delegates asserted that:

> the most successful ... for recruiting and linking in to the union's work are Workplace Visits, Workshops, Get-togethers, Conferences, Newsletters, Publications and Political Involvement. (Women in USDAW 1997:5; see also USDAW EC 1997)

WG interviewees verified this claim, adding women's health meetings and recruitment activity at shopping centres as key sources of members. They felt that the longevity of health meetings and get-togethers (cf. in MSF) was 'testimony to their successfulness' (Southern DWC member). They viewed workplace visits as important for helping Area Organisers who often cannot meet all members in their area because of varying shift patterns (e.g. in large supermarkets). At the South Wales & Western DWC's meeting/visit at Tesco in Cardiff in January 1999, I observed that the long duration of the visit (from 10.30am through to mid-afternoon) provided staff with enough time to ask DWC members questions, think about the information they received and, in a dozen or so cases, join the union. In respect of workshops, a recent EC Statement to ADM (1997) stated that women's committees would be considering their further development, with the aim of linking into recruitment and organisation wherever possible.

While the NCWC and NWC do not recruit directly, they were seen as important for enabling DWC members to meet to pool experiences. For instance, delegates' formulation of practical guidelines for recruiting at the NCWC was seen to help 'to maximise effectiveness' (Women in USDAW 1997:5) by equipping women with generic and women-friendly skills. Recruitment activity was found to vary across DWCs and divisions. For example, the South Wales & Western and North Western DWCs several emphasised them over other initiatives because they saw their 'priority as getting out there to meet the membership' (South Wales & Western DWC Co-ordinator). Others, like

the Midlands DWC, placed greater emphasis on skills development in workshops. All DWCs supplemented their general recruitment initiatives by focusing on particular groups defined according to workplace, employer, types of job (e.g. part-time, casual) and social identity (e.g. youth, female). Significantly, they felt that they had more success with targeting due to their greater identification with these recruits.

However, most interviewees and written sources indicated that while progress had been made, and women's mainstream participation had encouraged participation by other women (see also Heery & Kelly 1989), more needed to be done to increase women's involvement in USDAW and make it a union priority (e.g. Women in USDAW 1988, 1997). Women's committees were seen as 'an under-tapped resource with great potential' (Women in USDAW 1993:11) in respect of recruiting. Ethnic minority women's representation was stressed as a particular areas for development (see Women in USDAW 1995).

WG measures to recruit and involve women were also seen to need continual development 'as working practices change, industries and commerce change with them and new generations of workers enter the labour market' (EC Statement 1997:8). Proposals to increasingly represent sub-groups of women continue to be discussed at NCWC. These include black and asian women's get-togethers' highlighting USDAW successes (e.g. deportation campaigns), women's committees' support of asylum seekers and greater contact with minority women to elicit their concerns. The North Western DWC has proposed a joint meeting with the Divisional Youth Committee to discuss the recruitment and organisation needs of women and youth (USDAW North Western DWC 1998, 1997). In respect of other sub-groups, creative measures to circumvent barriers to women's access (e.g. long trading hours in some industries) have been proposed. Some DWC women want to see certain personal and social characteristics given more weighting in the selection of DWC members. The replacement of the National Women's Officer with a Women and Equalities Officer was generally seen as providing some impetus for greater representation of minority women though few informants felt that

WGs had run their course[19] and would continue to be needed alongside 'multi-equality' bodies.

Power

As in MSF, informants viewed women's committees and the NCWC as having gained some formal and informal powers for women members in 'sameness' terms in the wider union. For example, senior female officials asserted that women's influence on the EC has grown as a result of women holding the majority of posts *and* key EC members' involvement in the NWC. As a result, the NWC was generally viewed as having greater status and 'clout' than other national equality bodies in the union. The growing history and achievements of the women's committees, the NCWC and their activities, and their growing links with the union mainstream were also generally seen to have accorded WGs some influence and respect in decision-making and other union bodies.

Virtually all informants felt, however, that women still had less formal and informal 'sameness' power than they should. Several senior officials felt that this helped to explain the union's tolerance of WGs, and reflected the nature of WGs' past actions, ambitions and responses to union constraints and opportunities. A few senior officials argued that certain WG links (e.g. women's committees' input at ADM) contributed to a view of them as 'having sway' but that their acceptance in USDAW was subject to the perceived complementarity of their aims with those of the union, making it difficult to assess WGs' real influence. For example, several DWC members asserted that they would not be encouraged to stand again if they pushed for change that went against union aims although women could try to raise issues as individuals at branch. Moreover, even the achievement of women's full mainstream representation was not seen by some informants to deal effectively with women's gendered roles and lack of power beyond the union, stressing the need for change within and beyond USDAW. For instance, the former National Women's Officer noted that at the 1996 NCWC,

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[19] For instance, in 1997, there was an unsuccessful branch proposition at the 1997 ADM to have WGs disbanded.

one attendee kept 'phoning home to see if her mum was okay, absorbing that stress into her life when it's already tough. Other women had 'farmed out their kids' and got meals labelled in the fridge. It's partly the political climate. You're responsible as individuals.

Thus, many viewed women's proportional (i.e. majority) representation as a *precursor* to their equal empowerment with men (on sameness and other terms) within USDAW and the pursuit of union transformation, reflecting the links between and the different 'lengths' of their equality ideas.

As in MSF, however, they felt that the women's committees and NCWC had in themselves created new loci of power in USDAW for women. The collective, supportive 'spaces', and in the case of the NCWC, its duration, were seen as key to providing women with a rare, sustained period to 'eat, drink and sleep' (Midlands FTO) about the union and reflect on how it could be improved and to cultivate their confidence and politicisation so as to use their collective and personal agency to influence the wider union.

Many informants held the view that the women's committees and conference had a transformative effect on women in USDAW in that they functioned well over political differences. This contrasts with the political factions underpinning internal battles in the wider union (McIlroy 1998). Many WG members viewed politics as subordinate rather than tied to the pursuit of WG aims and equality. This tolerance was seen to expedite WG operations and the pursuit of equality, albeit still at an incremental pace, in the wider union. It was also viewed as enhancing WG strategy and tactics in the wider union by helping to inform WG initiatives with a wider range of viewpoints. As in MSF, however, WG members acknowledged that they had still encountered considerable opposition to the changes they sought, particularly from certain men (see Chapter 3). They recognised that more traditional unionists viewed WGs as 'competitors' who threaten their position and power. Nonetheless, they also felt that the view of WGs as a device to empower women and thereby the whole union was starting to gain ground, particularly as women's numbers increased on decision-making structures. Many WG women felt that they not only had to represent members and emphasise women's equality as representatives, but

also to defend themselves as individual women in undertaking these roles (see Elliot 1984), with implications for finding the time and energy to do this. Many were buoyed to do so, however, by their identification with WG aims and their collective support.

Significantly, none of the interviewees felt that WGs had been 'ghettoised' within USDAW (Briskin 1993; cf. Cockburn 1995, Elliot 1984). Several shop stewards even felt that branch committees can be more isolated because of their physical location. Further, rather than seeing it as an avenue to their isolation from the wider union, the NCWC (Women in USDAW 1986) and individual women felt that intra-WG communication should be *augmented* to strengthen the women's structure and its relations with USDAW.

Social processes and modes of operating

Virtually all informants felt that the women's committees and NCWC had had an important effect on aspects of USDAW's 'softer' organisational features. In respect of social processes, although the WGs have fewer opportunities to influence the union via identity-based posts in the mainstream, individual WG women with mainstream roles (e.g. on Councils, branches) were reported to have encouraged, albeit unevenly, mainstream bodies to be friendlier, more 'open' and enthusiastic in their approach. WGs have encouraged women to attempt to self-determine their levels of contribution in WGs and the mainstream (i.e. the use survival/transformative strategies), with many interviewees arguing that this approach augmented women's *overall* participation level from what it otherwise is in the mainstream). Partly as a result of this, WG women felt, sexist attitudes and behaviour and the use of jargon were attributable to a *diminishing* group of (white) men. This was seen as helping to partially achieve WGs' stated aim of making the union welcoming, relevant and accessible to women though most informants stressed the importance of maintaining women-only spaces to provide women with a point where they could 're-group and re-energise' before pursuing change in the mainstream again.

Most informants noted that women had also successfully raised awareness and encouraged the use of gender conscious ways of operating (see also Women in USDAW 1995) in practices in parts of the union mainstream. For instance, the NCWC's increasing emphasis on building skills was generally viewed as encouraging women to learn how to operate within the existing union *and* challenge aspects of it with which they were not comfortable as women. The NCWC and DWCs in particular were found to include 'women-friendly', flexible (social) processes which were effectively transferred to some parts of the union. For example, the South Wales & Western DWC Co-ordinator observed that the run-down transport system in her division presented problems to some women members so she drives them to work sites for DWC visits. Where possible, meetings are held at times and locations which fit the circumstances of members, personal invitations are issued, childcare and transport is provided. Having seen the effectiveness of these positive action, flexible and member-centred (difference) measures in terms of higher productivity, increased membership and members' union involvement, more effective communication between lay activists and officials, improved learning (see Women in USDAW 1991), re-energised activists and so on), all of which I observed at meetings in 1998 of the Southern DWC[20], a number of branches and Councils have incorporated them.

Because of their union links, some WG practices were noted for their transferral to wider union operations. For instance, USDAW's WGs were found to be distinctive in their level of preparation for and follow-up of agenda-related events. To ensure that DWC Chairs raise issues effectively at NWC meetings, they receive exceptional support from their DWC:

> We say, 'Report on what we've done here. We'll help you. We'll write it out. If you don't like it, I'll go the next time'. I've never known other committees to be as supportive. (Area Officer, Midlands)

At the same time, this 'extra effort' was often seen to respond to a view that 'women's groups have to work harder to prove themselves' (Southern DWC member) (i.e. a 'deficit' approach) and the difficulties of some 'feminised' tasks (e.g. recruiting and

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[20] I also witnessed these effects at the TUC Women's Conference in 1998.

involving women who have casual jobs). Furthermore, the practices were seen to have helped women to operate more effectively in the mainstream and sometimes with key mainstream position-holders, able to convey how *they* want to be involved and represented. As in MSF, WG women were seen to have often successfully encouraged more compromise and the pursuit of consensus (votes are seldom used - see also Phillips 1992) in some parts of the mainstream. WGs' emphasis of informal liaisons and meeting formats (which some felt reflected their creativity in finding alternative ways of functioning due to their non-mainstream status), and team-based, participative, democratic operations were also seen to have helped elicit greater and more accurate information about the diverse realities of women member, encouraging other union parts to apply these practices. The flexibility of NWC, NCWC and EC guidelines (see earlier) and the absence of divisional terms of reference (cf. MSF) were also seen to provide DWCs with 'room to move' and introduce their perspectives into USDAW. For instance, the Southern DWC Co-ordinator stressed, 'my branch no longer operates in a traditional, procedure-bound way - many members are put off by that'.

Several participants were critical, however, of how certain WG practices and approaches may limit their impact on the wider union. For example, while a relative lack of designated roles may encourage an entire DWC to work on a project (e.g. newsletters), the President stressed that this feature and reliance on volunteers to undertake tasks sometimes led to participants not being used to best effect. Indicative of union influence on WGs, a NCWC attendee asserted that 'causing waves isn't required. You won't get voted on again'. Several delegates felt that the emphasis on consensus and tolerance of diversity in WGs could be 'too' strong, making WGs 'manage out' criticism from within and questioners feel 'like trouble-makers, even though their aim is just the opposite' (Southern DWC member). This supports Mansbridge's (1980) view that the assumptions of feminism - that the interests of all women are valid, that all forms of oppression must be fought and that solidarity is key - make disagreement painful. This was not seen to properly address some concerns women have about the union, conflicting with attendees' perception of their role as 'doing something for other women' (see also Kirton & Healy

1999), and to not sit easily with an inclusive ethos. Others, including senior female officials, defended the consensual aspect of WGs for providing a united and 'reasonable' image to the rest of the union so as to diminish the voice of their opponents. Finally, several informants were critical of their WGs for not tending to examine what other British unions' WGs do to improve women's circumstances within the union.

5.4 Summary

This chapter examined two types of WG in USDAW: its National and Divisional Women's Committees, and the National Conference of Women's Committees. The assigned roles and formal position of each WG were seen to fit within the goals of a women's structure, and to largely complement the aims of the union. Analysis of the assigned aims of particular WG types in USDAW revealed their different emphases. The formal goals of the NWC and DWCs were found to be similar to those of MSF's women's committees and reflected their organisational location and structural form. The DWCs, like MSF's RWS-Cs, were shown to be 'action-oriented' while the NWC and NCWC operate more strategically to improve women's situation. DWCs' formal stress on their involvement in the union's political work was assessed to be greater than that of RWS-Cs, and they also differed in their explicit, sanctioned intention to 'feminise' the union's bargaining agenda and machinery to reflect women's needs. The largest WG examined in the study, the NCWC, formally emphasises an intermediary and coordinating role in its annual assessment of women's committee work and assistance in planning their next work programme. The emphasis of the NCWC and other WGs as a 'means to other ends' was seen to downplay them as a form of positive discrimination approach - significant in a union which remains generally opposed to special representation measures for women in view of its female membership majority and the impression that this would give of the fairness of the existing union system.

It was only possible to learn about the equality ideas that inform the WGs and their operations by examining them more closely. An analysis of WG equality aims in terms of the key dimensions of union identity enabled a systematic analytical response to the

second and third research questions (see Section 5.0). Using the equality typology to examine WGs' actual aims, it emerged that these complemented and extended their assigned aims. The women's committees and NCWC were found to pursue 'sameness' equality goals in respect of a number of agenda issues relating to USDAW and beyond, and women's representation (i.e. proportional (majority) representation). 'Difference' equality ideas permeated their pursuit of some agenda issues relating to the union and more widely, as well as women's union representation (albeit to a lesser extent that in MSF - see above). 'Transformational' equality aims informed the pursuit of some WG concerns, agenda setting processes, the pursuit of power, and social processes and modes of operating. These equality goals virtually echo those identified for MSF's women's committees, and imply that WGs possess a collective agency with which they seek to shape their union setting, in spite of common and specific union influences on them.

As in MSF, the analysis indicated that USDAW's WGs emphasise different equality goals to different extents via their union-centred aims. The pursuit of 'shorter' sameness equality goals was found to take up most of WGs' efforts. To some extent, these findings emphasised different WG types' delineated roles; in other respects, they reflected their role 'overlap' and location in a wider women's structure. The women's committees and NCWC adopted a wide array of responses to their aims. As in MSF, these incorporated both conventional and innovative, 'trial and error' measures (e.g. 'gendered' workplace visits to recruit and organise mainly women). The latter appeared to be emphasised when there was a need to circumvent gendered attitudinal and institutional obstacles to women's activity in conventional union operations. Practical, contextual considerations rather than an articulated, cohesive ideological approach to a particular vision of equality were found to inform USDAW WGs' activities and aims. As in MSF, however, the assessment of the evidence with reference to the equality typology revealed that the WGs had become more likely to be more radical in their pursuits and consideration of 'longer' equality goals involving women's experiences and power relations within USDAW.

Applying the union identity model to WGs' effectiveness in bringing about gender equality in USDAW, it was generally found that they have had a notable, positive impact. Indeed, women's committees were recently touted at a NCWC as 'one of the greatest achievements for and of women in the union' (Women in USDAW 1997), particularly given the opposition they encounter. While the women's committees and NCWC were found to vary in their effects, they were assessed as influencing aspects of each key dimension of USDAW's organisational identity. While many of their effects could be categorised as 'sameness' equality impacts, the women's committees and NCWC also influenced aspects of the union with respect to other equality goals. As in MSF, there was some conflation of equality goals and approaches by informants which partly reflected different points of reference when assessing how much change WGs and their activities had brought to USDAW. Furthermore, the same WG achievements in USDAW and MSF (e.g. proportional representation) were sometimes found to hold different meanings for women (e.g. proportional representation in MSF's NEC means minority representation for women; in USDAW, it means majority representation for women though many did not equate this with equal power sharing with men).

While WG achievements were notable, the sources of evidence all indicated that there was some distance to travel in relation to gaining gender equality (variously conceived) in respect of all dimensions of union identity. Many felt that WG achievements could only ever be advancements rather than final outcomes in light of changing contextual considerations. USDAW's identity was not seen to have been fundamentally altered by WG pursuits. This was assessed to partly reflect WGs' pursuit and extension of aims which complement the wider union's goals, their incremental approach to change, WGs' varying levels of ambition, the circumstances each faces and how they have engaged with their union circumstances, and the absence of an articulated and cohesive strategy for change. As in MSF, however, the isolation of measures of WG effects was complicated by the aims and impacts of non-gender equality initiatives (e.g. the Women's and Equalities Officer) and WGs not examined here.

As in MSF, the relative effects of each WG type for each aim were broadly identifiable. Like RWS-Cs, DWCs' impact on women's recruitment was notable. It emerged that DWCs elicit, and with the NWC, effectively profile and gain an active response to issues of concern to women. The NCWC, DWC women's workshops and DWC membership themselves were found to be significant influences on women's involvement in the mainstream and WGs. Significantly, WGs were seen as key agents for introducing a conception of 'union power through diversity', underpinned by the idea that it is necessary to work with union men and persuade them of the importance of WG concerns for *all* members. Women's committees were found to have transformed aspects of the union's structures, agenda and 'ways of operating', albeit in minor ways, via their interaction with the rest of USDAW and their own operations. The NCWC was found to embody transformational features, a number of which have been transferred to the mainstream via active women. Given that their achievements and their goals are yet to be fully achieved, it is not surprising that most study participants viewed moves towards replacing WGs with 'general' equality fora in which women's equality is only one focus as premature.

6   WOMEN'S GROUPS AND UNION EQUALITY: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

6.0   Introduction

This study addressed three main research questions. What union factors influence the overall configuration of WGs in a union? What aims do WGs pursue, how do they address them and what equality ideas underpin them? What effects do WGs have on gender equality in their union? In this chapter, the findings relating to the two unions, MSF and USDAW, and a selection of their WGs are discussed together with implications for theory, research and policy. In so doing, they underscore the general thesis arguments that: i) the union setting constitutes a significant influence on WGs' aims and operations; and ii) a lack of attention to women's union activism in the past has helped to downplay women's contribution to gender equality and union effectiveness.

The objective here is not merely to summarise the research results but to place them in context and evaluate their wider implications. The chapter begins with an overview of the key union features that were shown in Chapter 3 to influence the number, types and general 'shape' of WGs in MSF and USDAW. Based on the findings in Chapters 4 and 5, it then summarises and where possible compares the aims of particular WGs in the two unions, the equality aims which underpin them, and how WGs address them. The following section reviews key findings concerning the impacts of WGs on gender equality in the unions. Each summary of the main findings is followed by a discussion of their implications for women and WGs in unions, union strategy and effectiveness, and nascent theory about union identity and WGs. The chapter then discusses possible limitations of the research which could inform wider testing of the thesis ideas in later studies. The final section presents a summary of the chapter and final remarks.

6.1 Research aim 1: Union-Women's Group relations

Women's progress within unions has generally not quickened beyond a 'snail-like' pace (SERTUC 1994), raising it as a subject of concern. The analyses of secondary survey data here revealed the expansion of WGs across many British unions, including MSF and USDAW. The scale of WG development partly reflects efforts to accelerate change for women. It also stresses unions' dynamic relations with their environment (e.g. Cobble 1990, 1993; Warskett 1996; Hyman 1990). For example, feminist pressures and the TUC's call for unions to set up women's structures have favoured WG growth since the late 1970s, even against an increasingly individualistic political context and the Labour government's embrace of the macro-economic prescriptions of neo-liberalism (Howell 1999).

While taking account of wider contextual factors and women's particular circumstances, the analyses in Chapter 3 focused on the influence of a union's organisational 'identity' on its WG arrangements. This helped to redress prior inattention to intra-union operations (see Heery 1998, McLennan 1995). MSF and USDAW were found to house two of the most extensive WG ranges in all British unions, comprising similar and different WG forms. The application of a model of union identity helped to show that the union setting has a considerable bearing on the shape and number of their women's structure.

A large number of union features were assessed to impact on WG arrangements. A number of commonalities in MSF and USDAW's key features were found to connect to similarities in their WG structures. In respect of union structure, for example, the considerable number and diversity of recorded WGs in both unions supports the wider finding that larger, mixed gender TUC affiliates and those with a substantial female membership are most likely to comprise a greater range and total of WGs. The two unions' hierarchical structure and organisation of a certain number of regions/divisions directly impacted on the number and scale of operations of WGs at intermediate and local levels in both unions. Growing WG-union links were assessed to be useful for the pursuit of WG equality aims and to have

implications for the arrangement, and indeed existence, of WGs in both unions. The introduction of 'integrated' equality posts (and an equalities team in MSF) was seen by study participants as likely to impact on the scale and approaches of WGs. Structural 'inertia' in many parts of both unions was found to 'cap' WG organisation and initiatives, as well as encourage WG activities to start from different 'equality starting points'. In respect of interest representation, the absolute number of women in both unions was linked to their extensive WG arrangements, and the growth in women's numbers to the planned extension of WG arrangements alongside new 'general' equality initiatives.

A number of specific *and* common union features emerged as determinants of variations between the two unions' women's structures. In respect of structure and democracy, for example, USDAW's less tiered structure was seen to impact positively on WG-union communications though informants in both unions stressed WGs' efforts to directly communicate with others, reflecting the networking, horizontal approach adopted in many social movements which help to empower those under-represented in conventional organisational arrangements. The disproportionate impact of TASS and ASTMS' merger on women's already low representation encouraged the establishment of WGs in MSF. Equality initiatives undertaken in MSF and USDAW broadly differed in that MSF sanctions positive discrimination measures while USDAW does not. In MSF, this reflects an effort to be seen as a progressive union, supportive of identity-based organising in order that the substantial minority (and growing) female membership recognises that it has a 'voice' in the union. In USDAW, the strong promotion of WGs as a 'means' or as interim separatist bodies (see also Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Briskin 1993) to promote positive action measures with women's 'sameness' equality in mind, rather than as a form of positive discrimination, is based on the arguments that the female memberships majority 'should' be able to progress through the union and that radical measures 'wrongly' imply problems with the union system itself. Women's majority membership share was seen by many to emphasise the need for WG arrangements in USDAW, however, because women remain under-represented in the union

and lack a 'voice' which is commensurate with their number. The industry-centred union agendas, which both overlap and reflect their specific areas of sectoral coverage and circumstances, both provided parameters for WG operations and issued a challenge to WGs to pursue their expansion to include more women's concerns. On interest representation, MSF was characterised as a 'general technical union' and USDAW as a union dominated by 'female manual workers'. Their sectoral emphases were found to influence the nature and level of certain WG initiatives as well as their agenda foci. They also presented specific problems for existing WG arrangements, prompting WGs to alter aspects of their configuration to accommodate members (e.g. by developing less structured grass-roots WGs in USDAW such as women's home discussion groups which recognise the competing demands on women's time, and the location of many female members in non-autonomous, low paid, weakly represented jobs). In respect of power, the centralised operation of USDAW vis-à-vis MSF was found to have implications for the formal scope and nature of WG operations and activities. This encouraged WGs to develop their own collective bases for power. On social processes and modes of operating, sexist attitudes, language and behaviour, particularly in male-dominated and key decision-making fora, coupled with structural barriers to women's full union participation, were widely seen to reinforce the need to maintain or augment the presence of WG arrangements in the two unions.

The in-depth analyses also emphasised how common and specific union features may combine to act as a more complex influence on WGs. For example, both MSF and USDAW promote the organising ideas of 'New Unionism', with implications for extending WGs' initiatives with more 'like with like' and local, one-to-one recruiting and organising. Yet, recent rationalisation of local union structures in MSF has disproportionately impacted on female members' ability to be involved in the union, and this has influenced the scale and existence of local WGs. In terms of interest representation, however, the presence of women's collectives in both unions qualifies some existing assertions such as Streek's (1988) argument that increasing differentiation of interests within union constituencies means that

intra- and inter-union conflict is containable only where centralised authority prevails and Turner's (1962) view that activist democracy is only viable in small unions with an occupationally homogeneous membership.
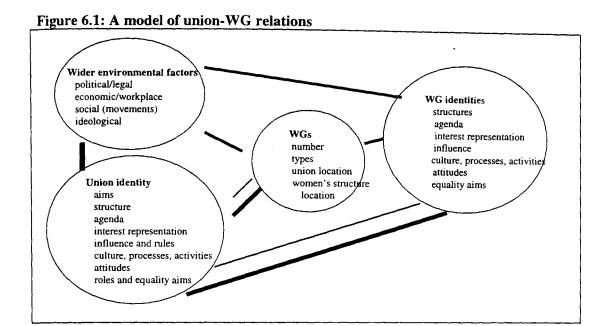
Discussion and implications: the significance of union context

Our analyses focused on the significance of union's organisational circumstances for WGs. Applying Hyman's (1994) union model to MSF and USDAW, some complex relations between dimensions of union 'identity' and the presence and nature of WGs were found. The extension of his model to include a fifth union dimension, 'social processes and ways of operating', and to broaden the 'democracy' category to include 'structure' enabled the development of a more comprehensive understanding of union organisation and its links with WGs. While Hyman's model centres on 'harder' union features which only appear to operate in a gender 'neutral' fashion, the additional dimension incorporates 'softer' aspects of unionism and underscores the 'human' and thus more evidently value-bound nature of organisational identity which had important implications for WG form and operations.

Operationalising each union feature according to constructs used by existing works and our empirical sources ensured that the model was not 'imposed' on the latter's perceived realities of union organisation. This enables us to propose an initial model of the relations between union features and the scale and character of union WGs (see Figure 6.1). The width of the lines between the union features and WGs indicates the perceived level of influence while the arrowheads stress the direction of influence, based on the study findings. That common aspects of both unions' features have both common and different meanings for WG arrangements, while peculiarities of MSF and USDAW's organisation impact on WGs in unique ways, stresses the utility of the union identity model for demonstrating the influence of the union setting on WG arrangements. It also indicates that it needs to be refined in subsequent studies if it is to be used for predictive purposes within these two unions and more generally.

While the model describes the relationships between key dimensions of a union and its WGs, the analyses in Chapters 3 to 5 helped to stress their strategic implications for various parties by detailing and explaining these relationships. For example, better grasp of the significance of particular union factors for their operations may encourage existing WGs to more effectively focus their efforts and/or extend particular aims. Understanding of WG-union relations could prove useful for women in these and other unions who want to develop women's collectives, forearmed with insights into the potential opportunities and constraints of the union context on their proposed activity and goals. Unions that view WGs as structures which complement their aims might use the model to re-examine their own practices to assess how to better accommodate and enhance WGs' pursuits and effectiveness. For example, local rationalisation of practices and processes in MSF may need to be counter-balanced by the need for local WGs, as emphasised by the revival of the BWN. The significance of undertaking such assessments is underscored by union's need to reverse long-term general membership decline and find more effective strategies for accessing and representing growing sections of the workforce.

Chapter 3 evaluated how those aspects of union identity were assessed to have a notable influence on WG arrangements, according to the evidence. Subsequent studies could examine factors of union identity which are found to be less significant in shaping the number and configuration of its WGs. These features may help strategists to recognise, for example, where limited resources relating to WG-union relations are best allocated to the benefit of WGs and the union. The analysis also revealed that certain union-WG relationships are direct and readily identifiable (e.g. a union's organisational arrangements directly impacts on the number and scale of WGs). However, the ways in which other factors influenced WG arrangements were subject to greater interpretation. This needs to be borne in mind when, for example, gauges of the effectiveness of union-WG relations are derived.

Figure 6.1: A model of union-WG relations

Figure 6.1: A model of union-WG relations

Wider environmental factors
political/legal
economic/workplace
social (movements)
ideological

Union identity
aims
structure
agenda
interest representation
influence and rules
culture, processes, activities
attitudes
roles and equality aims

WGs
number
types
union location
women's structure
location

WG identities
structures
agenda
interest representation
influence
culture, processes, activities
attitudes
equality aims

6.2   Research aim 2: Women's Group aims - equality through pragmatism?

Chapters 4 and 5 focused on the union-centred equality aims of different types of WGs, how they were pursued and the equality ideas that informed their pursuit. This focus responded to the second study question and the dearth of literature on the detail of women's union activism, particularly women's sustained yet often less structured collective activism.

Chapter 4 examined three types of WG in MSF: its National and Regional Women's Sub-Committees, Black and Ethnic Minority Women's Network (an example of a 'multi-dimensional' model of networking (cf. Kirton 1999)) and National Women's Week (Negotiating Skills). Chapter 5 examined two types of WG in USDAW: its National and Divisional Women's Committees, and the National Conference of Women's Committees. In both unions, the assigned roles and formal position of each WG were seen to fit within the goals of a women's structure, largely complement the aims of the union and extend to the union setting and beyond. Analyses of the assigned aims of particular WG types revealed their different emphases, partly reflecting the logic of their organisational location and

structural form. For example, regional/divisional women's committees were shown to be the most 'action oriented' WGs, MSF's women's week was the most 'union-centred' WG, and the national women's committees in both unions and USDAW's NCWC, the largest WG studied here, operated in a more strategic fashion in respect of improving women's situation. While MSF's women's structure as a whole explicitly sought to impact on women's union *experience* by making the union 'women-friendly', this role was assigned to DWCs in USDAW. It also emerged that DWCs formally stress their involvement in the union's political work more than MSF's RWS-Cs, and they were unique in their explicit aim to 'feminise' USDAW's bargaining machinery to reflect women's needs. The NCWC formally emphasises an intermediary and coordinating role via its annual assessment of women's committee work and assistance in planning their next work programme.

The reviews of formal WG roles revealed little about the equality ideas by which they are informed, stressing the need for a closer examination of their actual operations. WGs' roles were often conflated with their functions in the literature and sometimes in the empirical evidence of this study. When their roles and functions were isolated, significantly, it emerged that WGs' actual aims complement and extend their assigned aims in both unions. Women's committees at national and intermediate level in both unions and the NCWC in USDAW were found to mostly pursue 'sameness' equality aims in terms of their agenda concerns and women's union representation (and power in MSF). 'Difference' equality goals informed certain agenda matters and forms of representation for women pursued by women's committees. The pursuit of identity-based representation was more extensive in MSF (see earlier). 'Transformation' equality was implicitly sought in respect of a few agenda issues, aspects of agenda setting, power-seeking, interest representation, and social processes and modes of operating. The similarities in MSF and USDAW's women's committees' equality goals stress WGs' common yet dynamic approaches and their collective agency with which they seek to shape their union setting and the spaces made available to them - despite and sometimes due to common and specific union influences on them. MSF's Black and Ethnic

Minority Women's Network mostly pursued sameness equality aims in relation to its agenda concerns, minority women's representation and power-sharing. Difference equality goals informed its pursuit of certain forms of representation for minority women, aspects of power and interest representation. Transformational equality was linked to certain agenda issues, and social processes and modes of operating pursued by the network. MSF's national women's week course pursued sameness equality via most of its agenda issues and women's representation. Some of its agenda issues were informed by difference equality ideas, while transformative equality goals permeated other agenda matters, power relations, and social processes and modes of operating. To some extent, these findings emphasise different WG types' delineated roles; in other respects, they stress their role 'overlap' and location in a wider women's structure. This qualifies existing works that suggest specific aims and functions for particular WGs (e.g. Elliot 1984, Briskin 1998a).

The pursuit of 'shorter' sameness equality generally consumed much WG time and effort though the sources of evidence did not articulate them as such. All WGs adopted multi-faceted responses to their respective aims, incorporating initiatives often on a 'whatever works' basis. This partly reflects the need for women to pursue their aims through both conventional measures and alternative routes through and around the existing union system when the former were more difficult for them to utilise as women due to gendered attitudinal and institutional obstacles. This also helps to explain why WGs often employed more than one measure to respond to an issue or aim. Significantly, WG initiatives, and sometimes a single WG initiative, were based on an unarticulated and uncoordinated range of equality approaches. Practical, contextual considerations prevailed over a stated ideological position in encouraging the adoption of WG initiatives informed by a mixture of equality approaches to equality aims which were themselves informed by various equality ideas.

Thus, no cohesive or conscious strategy to achieving gender equality in the unions was identified in terms of WG equality apprroaches or goals. Yet, while the above finding

indicated that a linear and progressive move from one equality approach or aim to another has not occurred, the analyses detected a gradual and uneven shift away from 'sameness with men' equality endeavours to those with a more political edge and reflective of 'longer' equality goals which stress the achievement of union unity through the valuation of constituents' particular circumstances, concerns and characteristics. It emerged that WGs' operations and interactions with the rest of the union often implicitly embody piece-meal challenges to union identity and seek transformation of the *status quo*. In respect of agenda issues, for example, women's committees, and MSF's women's week and USDAW's NCWC have recast many issues originally tackled as 'women's' or 'difference' concerns as issues for all members and sometimes non-members (e.g. sexual harassment). Furthermore, an increasing number of WG demands reflect a 'coalescing strategy' (Chhachhi & Pittin 1999) via their creation of a new political space where identities are developed, new demands are articulated and the dividing line between the public and private, union and other domains loses some of its meaning via multi-party endeavours. MSF's women's week and USDAW's NCWC's own operations, in particular, were found to challenge existing union arrangements. WGs, including the BWN and women's week, increasingly stress differences among women as well as their common circumstances as women.

Discussion and implications: the strategic pursuit of equality?

Union WGs embody a belief in the significance of gender as well as class as a defining factor of inequality, both between workers and capital *and* among unionists and workers. They also manifest the view that women's collective agency can challenge these inequalities - women's under-engagement with unions is seen as constructed rather than inevitable. The growing number of WGs in British unions reinforces the shift away from the general situation described by Hyman (1994) in which traditions of decentralised, participative democracy have been strongest among skilled, male, manual workers in whose image unionism itself has been traditionally formed.

The perception within the case unions of WGs as non-mainstream bodies and as a 'means' to other, often liberal/sameness/formal equality 'ends' stresses Jewson & Mason's (1986) point that radical measures can 'masquerade' as liberal ones. The view of WGs as vehicles to other ends appears to be particularly important in USDAW where there has been considerable antipathy towards radical initiatives (see earlier). However, the identification of WGs' growing integration into union arrangements to make women central to union identity has implications for the prevailing view of WGs as non-mainstream entities and their likely significance in the union setting. The assigned and actual aims of women's structures in both MSF and USDAW stress the validity of WG interests and their relevance for the wider objectives of the union.

It was shown earlier that certain particularities of MSF and USDAW's organisational identities influence the unique development and shape of their women's structures. Applying the union identity model to WGs' union-centred aims helped to structure an analysis of them. Particular WG types emphasise particular union-centred aims which stress the specificities of their union setting as well as their own organisation and agency. However, overlap in WG remits reflects their location within a women's structure, their flexible and pragmatic operation (vital in the face of opposition), and the heuristic categorisation of their aims. Viewing WG role specificity and overlap in context helps to explain earlier disparate findings about the roles of similar WG types (e.g. compare with Colgan & Ledwith (1996a) and Braithwaite & Byrne (1995) on women's committees). It also strengthens the case for examining each WG initiative as a part of the wider, complex structure within the union and in relation to other WGs.

The discovery of the union-centred character of many WG aims is significant given women members' overall under-engagement with unions. Few previous works have connected their under-engagement to specific positive initiatives for women in unions. The findings suggest to unions the need to proactively help women via their arrangements rather than to assume,

as they have traditionally done, that all members are in a position to approach them when they need help. They are also significant given the stress or assumption in earlier works of WGs' externally-oriented aims (i.e. around bargaining concerns) and the observation that unions tend to focus on policies directed at employers rather than on inequities in their own operations (e.g. Cockburn 1989). These emphases and the general absence of close examination of women's activism have encouraged an under-valuation of women's activism *within* unions. This is important given that women may be *more* inclined to join unions than men (Forrest 1993) and have at least as strong a belief as men in the principles of unionism (Sinclair 1995). The extent to which WGs were found to focus on the women's circumstances in the union context is also significant given the continuing feminisation of the workforce and growing pool of potential female unionists for the case study and other unions; many women's location in vulnerable sections of the workforce; and WGs' only partial attainment of their aims to date. It implies that WGs need to balance and examine further the links between women's situation in the union and their circumstances elsewhere in their goal-setting. For example, by encouraging women to develop skills and confidence, MSF's women's weeks encourage women's union involvement and more effective pursuit of non union-centred concerns.

The argument that inattention in prior work to women's union activism has implicitly downplayed women's contribution to gender equality and union identity is also supported by the finding that WGs' *actual* aims are more extensive than their assigned goals, and tend to emphasise 'longer' equality ideas to a greater extent than is often realised. Indeed, the non-statement of these more ambitious aims may reflect that they are not identified by WGs. Another interpretation would be that they are unarticulated as a result of WG caution; stating them could provoke opposition (e.g. see Briskin 1999). If this is the case, WGs appear to still face a major challenge in convincing their union that women's independent collective organisation will ultimately unify and strengthen the union.

WG initiatives were notable for their range, flexibility and creativity. This finding supports Safiotti (1978) and others who argue that, because of many women's marginalisation in the workplace, and by extension unions, they are thus more able to imagine innovative and alternative ways of operating to respond to its dominant (white) male power bases. Relatedly, WGs' numerous and varied activities, often undertaken on a 'trial and error' basis, may underscore WGs' need to raise consciousness among union members in various settings, some of which are relatively difficult to access via conventional channels. The diversity of WG activities also reflects a feminist inclusion of women's diverse understandings of how their interests should be pursued given women's heterogeneous as well as shared circumstances and characteristics. WGs' more 'refined' view of women's diversity and their interests has implications for developing formal union statements of interest representation which were found to lag behind actual practice in their assumption of the homogeneity of members' circumstances and interests.

The discovery that the equality ideas that underpin WG aims are mixed emphasises the practical emphasis of WG endeavours, building on gains where possible. However, the broad shift that has occurred within the ideas that inform WG aims (see previous section) also stresses the dynamism of opportunities and constraints within the union context, a growing sense of WG agency and ambition, and the importation of developing ideas from the women's movement. It indicates a growing realisation among WGs that getting women into unions is not enough for their effective representation, even when they achieve proportional representation, due to lingering 'patriarchal' arrangements and attitudes. This supports a developing view in the literature that gender equality derives from the equality of women's *experience* and power relations within unions (e.g. Colgan & Ledwith 1996a, Cockburn 1995). At once, several paradoxical outcomes were found to have resulted from WGs' adoption of equality approaches and aims of different 'lengths'. For example, DWCs' endeavours to include a wide array of women has led several to comprise a high proportion of retired women who have more time to commit to WG activity. This has not always

facilitated their ability to recruit working-age women via a 'like with like' approach or send a representative to bodies like the Divisional Youth Committee. Further, several WGs' efforts to address as many issues as possible was found to have discouraged some women from approaching them with sensitive and/or gender-specific concerns because they viewed WGs as 'too generalist'.

Such findings imply that WG effectiveness could be enhanced if they examine the emphasis of equality ideas which inform their pursuits and goals, and the interrelated impacts of these initiatives. Attempting to balance what is feasible given union and other influences with a *considered* approach to their aims and equality could augment the effectiveness of existing WG efforts to 'gender' their unions. Such an approach would not necessarily negate the adoption of a broad democratic approach that stresses the inclusion of various equality ideas. However, it could help to maximise progress towards intended goals and minimise or eliminate contradictory impacts that derive from uncoordinated WG approaches and goals. As future-oriented bodies, the NCWC and MSF's equivalent could provide important starting points for developing an ideologically (and practically) consistent programme of work for other WGs while acknowledging the differing and dynamic circumstances in which they build and re-set their goals.

Threading cohesive WG aims and equality ideas through union strategies could also enhance rather than divide solidarity by introducing a more complex pattern of specific collectivisms (cf. Kelly 1998, Gallie 1989). Unions need to respond to equality in their interest representation, values, beliefs and agendas if they are to become and remain relevant for women workers irrespective of wider environmental conditions. Shaped by their history and environment, British unions have reached a critical juncture in terms of determining the extent to which their identities, in strategic interactions with their constituents and external interlocutors, can effectively emphasise conventional economistic aims alongside social justice goals. My evidence indicates, as Hyman (1994) observes, that union effectiveness is

increasingly dependent, not on making gains for a supposedly monolithic grouping of workers, but on recognising and responding to their diverse interests. As mature social movement organisations (Martin & Ross 1999), unions need to redesign themselves as a central feature of a wider progressive social movement that reaches beyond immediate workplace concerns (Neary 2000), recognising the links between political, social and economic equality (Phillips 1999). The nexus between unions and the women's movement embodied by WGs helps unions to move in this direction, stressing, as Cockburn (1995) advocates, that WGs should come to be seen as among the long-term requirements of any radical union democracy.

6.3   Research aim 3: Women's Groups' impacts on gender equality in the union

The examination of WG aims and the equality ideas which inform them in Chapters 4 and 5 generated an original description and evaluation of WG impacts on gender equality in the union. Responding to the third research aim highlighted WGs' collective agency and the finding that union-WG relations are not uni-directional (see also Figure 6.1). The equality framework, and gauges of WG effectiveness according to the data sources and earlier works, strengthened the assessment of the magnitude of change that WGs deliver for women in their unions.

Applying the revised union identity model, it was found that WGs in both unions generally have a notable, positive influence on *aspects* of their structures and democratic arrangements, agendas and agenda-setting processes, representation of women, power relationships, and social processes and modes of operating in terms of sameness, difference and transformational equality goals. Their impacts are effected via their own operations, initiatives and a growing number of joint measures with other parts of the union. As Chhachhi & Pittin (1999:73) observe,

> (t)he very process of conscientizing, mobilizing, and organizing inherent in struggle undermines the power and intended certainties of dominant discourse, and, as significantly, creates new perspectives for those engaged in confrontation.

WGs can thereby be seen, as Briskin (1998a:3) suggests, as 'both a mechanism to politicize and a result of politicization'.

WGs balance both transformational and *status quo* objectives in working towards gender equality in the union, as well as union survival and renewal. The findings support Coote (1980b), Colgan & Ledwith (1994) and others in their assertion of WGs' significant influence while challenging Aldred (1981), Cockburn (1995) and Briskin's (1993) discussion of their limited or 'ghettoising' effects. WGs' increasing effects on gender equality via dimensions of union identity also indicates that they emphasise questions relating to women's separation 'from what' (organisational practices) as well as 'from who' (i.e. men) with which they have been overly associated (Briskin 1998a). Furthermore, the discovery of specific areas of union organisation on which WGs were found to have a degree of 'transformational' impact corroborates and extends Cockburn (1991) and Kirton & Healy's (1999) assertion that, in addition to women's own activism, feminist ideologies have influenced union agendas and structures, and to a lesser extent, culture.

The context within WGs were often found to draw women (including minority women) to WG events and then provide them with the skills, on-going collective support and politicised views which then help them to keep trying to effect change in the union, particularly in male dominated environments. Different WG types varied in their effects on aspects of key features of union organisation. Significantly, they were found to influenced aspects of their union with respect to different types of equality goals (see earlier) but much of their impact was classifiable as 'sameness' (with men) effects. At the same time, conflation by some informants of different equality approaches and goals reflected their different points of reference when assessing how much change WGs and their activities had brought to the union. For example, while most informants saw WGs as a difference approach (i.e. a means) to equality, strengthening union practice which favours collective solutions, some saw them

as the embodiment of a difference goal, still others as a transformational approach or goal when they were formally institutionalised within the union. Furthermore, there was some evidence that the same WG achievements in USDAW and MSF held different meanings for women. For example, women's proportional representation in MSF's NEC means minority representation; in USDAW, it means majority representation though many women did not equate this with equal power sharing or an equal union experience with that of men.

Despite their achievements, there is persisting inequality in all areas where the WGs have sought change. For example, although WGs and individual female activists were found to be pivotal in helping women to progress through their union (particularly via positive discrimination initiatives in MSF; see also Cobble 1990, cf. Coote 1980b), women in MSF and USDAW remain under-represented in many powerful structures and posts. Neither union's 'identity' was seen to have been fundamentally altered by WG efforts. WGs were commonly perceived as having 'tinkered' in a piece-meal fashion with aspects of union identity with respect to gender equality (variously conceived). This was assessed to reflect WGs' pursuit and extension of aims which complement the union's goals; their incremental approach to change which emphasised their 'evolutionary optimism'; WGs' varying levels of ambition, the circumstances each faces and how they engage with their union circumstances; the need for WGs to gain support for a feminist strategy of interim separatism within their mixed unions; and the absence of an articulated and cohesive strategy for change. In both unions, however, the isolation of WG effects was complicated by factors such as the aims and impacts of non-gender equality initiatives and WGs that were not examined here.

The relative effects of each WG type for each of its aims were broadly identifiable. RWS-Cs and DWCs are particularly notable for their contribution to recruiting, particularly of women, via their proximity to women members and their flexible, local, gender-sensitive organising. At the same time, the essentially defensive recruitment strategy in USDAW, and the intense need to recruit generally in both unions has not enabled WGs to recruit women exclusively.

Nor have they recruited as much as they might like given other demands on their time and resources. The women's committees in both unions, MSF's women's weeks, USDAW's NCWC, and DWC women's workshops were assessed to be significant influences on women's access to mainstream, special posts, less structured mainstream roles and WGs. This highlights the complex relations between women's mainstream and WG involvement (see also Elliot 1984). All WGs, particularly the women's week, RWS-Cs, NCWC and DWCs, elicit, and in the case of the women's committees, profile and gain responses to issues of concern to women. Women's committees in particular have influenced the transformation of aspects of the union's structures, agenda and ways of operating albeit in a limited, piece-meal fashion via their interaction with them while MSF's women's weeks and USDAW's NCWC's operations embody many transferable transformational measures. USDAW's WGs were seen as key agents for introducing a conception of 'union power through diversity', underpinned by the idea that it is necessary to work with union men and persuade them of the importance of WG concerns for *all* members.

Significantly, all types of WG were evaluated as having the potential to effect greater change in the union for women, alongside the newly established 'integrated' equality structures. For instance, the increasing emphasis on learning and applying skills in MSF's women's week and USDAW's NCWC is informed by the aim of greater union participation by women. WGs are central to campaigns for *proposed* positive action and discrimination measures to improve women's representation (e.g. see MSF NWS-C 1994a). A greater impact by a revitalised BWN and new 'integrated' equality posts on minority women's representation also looks likely. The replacement of WGs with 'general' equality fora in which women's equality was generally seen as premature as the one was seen to potentially enhance the effects of the other. This hybrid arrangement fits with Briskin's (1998a) view that to avoid marginalisation of women's concerns and to ensure effective alliances among diverse constituencies, integrated equity initiatives need to be *combined* with constituency-based organising such as WGs. This could help to respond to the claim that 'diversity is at the heart

of solidarity' (*ibid.*:23) and resolve the tensions between difference (which encourages separate organising) and commonality (which encourages alliance) (see also Briskin & Newson 1997, 1998).

Discussion and implications: the significance and limits of WG contributions

The findings underscored WGs' importance as a current and potential influence on aspects of union identity. They helped to redress any assumption that women's activism is not significant. The detailed evidence of WGs' notable yet partial achievements provides a basis from which to defend and seek their extension (cf. ETUC 1995). This is particularly significant for MSF and USDAW where the scale and nature of their women's structures may be called into question by developments such as the recent establishment of 'integrated' equality mechanisms.

WGs were found to pursue a number of union-centred aims. Their supportive, collective spaces within the unions enable WGs, particularly as part of a wider women's structure, to have a greater impact than the additive influence of individual women in these respects, emphasising the empowering effect of the collectives for their female participants. Against the traditional situation outlined by Hyman (1994) (see earlier), women workers, often without similar labour market advantages and patriarchal assertiveness, have shown that via WGs, they can find a basis for organisation and upward influence. The findings also support Nicholls-Heppner's (1984) assertion that WGs (i.e. women's committees) are a more effective strategy to evoke responsiveness from unions than merely seeking greater electoral representation. Further, given that individual WGs, sometimes of the same type, have differing levels and types of impact, they could find some utility in examining their individual and shared strengths and weaknesses to determine how each can more effectively support, and be supported by, the rest of the women's structure. This could better direct responses, for instance, to calls from WG members for greater inter-WG communication.
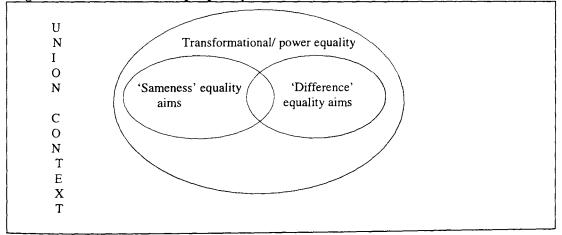
WGs' efforts to alter their immediate setting have implications for unions' ability to be self-critical of their own effectiveness (see Terry 1994) and take measures to improve it. As Munck (1999:20) notes '(f)eminist scholarship on labour worldwide and on the working women organizing has revealed new problems and new visions, it might just help revitalize labour's prospects'. The impacts of WGs on MSF and USDAW, particularly their (limited) transformative effects, extend beyond a survival strategy to cope with the pressures of operating in a male-dominated environment (cf. Heery & Kelly 1990). By comprehensively understanding WGs' effects *and* potential, unions may use them more strategically to counter some of their problems. The successful marriage of 'new' recruiting and organising approaches in the unions with WG activities illustrates their contribution to union aims and unity, helping to both throw off their image as separatist bodies which cause divisions among the working class (cf. Orr 1995) and highlights constituents', especially women's, diversity. Such findings suggest unions' ability to incorporate membership diversity when it suits their broader aims. They have the potential to construct a new model of organic solidarity which recognises and respects differing interests while constructing an externally-oriented agenda to unite members (Hyman 1997). The findings here indicate that the same applies in respect of related *internally*-oriented interests for women and other constituency groups.

However, although the analyses indicated that the two unions are slowly developing in terms of their overt acceptance of WGs and their 'shorter' equality aims which complement their own (e.g. recruitment), it is questionable how far they have really moved beyond what Warskett (1992) calls 'defensive solidarity' and are able to renew themselves (see also Fairbrother 2000). For example, certain union quarters still resonate with opposition even to 'shorter' WG aims. The attainment of women's proportional representation on structures in MSF and USDAW has involved WGs and other proponents of change in long, often fierce struggles. Even women's proportionality on USDAW structures has not conferred women and men with a commensurate level of influence, nor altered underlying attitudes though it has helped to ensure that women's concerns are not lost or forgotten. Rather, the focus is on

adaptation and (piece-meal) development of established policies and practices rather than their transformation (e.g. Heery 1998, McIlroy 1997). The finding that WGs pursue aims that are informed by a mixture of equality ideas implies that they need to consciously address 'longer' ideas of equality and view certain 'shorter' equality aims only as stepping stones to attaining more ambitious equality goals.

The interrelated nature and impact of various equality ideas which emerged from the empirical analysis is illustrated in Figure 6.2. 'Sameness' and 'difference' equality goals are viewed as overlapping in approach and impact. 'Transformative' equality is represented as encompassing and extending beyond 'shorter' conceptions of equality. The generic nature of the model stresses its applicability to the case study unions and beyond, and the need for particular WGs and unions to find their own equilibria in pursuing goals which embody a considered approach to equality ideas.

Figure 6.2: Women's Group equality ideas in context

Significantly, *within* WGs, the successful application of solidaristic/unitarist principles appeared to be more advanced than in the wider union setting. Women together are able to manoeuvre and operate in their own ways. Related to this, it was found that the prevailing conception of power in WGs and the union diverge. WG operations imply power-sharing and the unification of diverse interests and ways of operating to the benefit of the WG as a whole.

The unions were characterised more by power struggles between groups. WGs felt that the wider setting needed to pursue more of a 'positive sum' approach to power, helping to empower all constituency groups, to increase its ability to exercise power *over* external parties. This extends existing theory about union power by referring to *internal* power relations (cf. Hyman 1994). At the same time, in practice, participants recognised that WGs' approach to power-sharing is less likely to prevail in their union if the union is 'challenged' rather than persuaded to see its utility and validity.

The perceived 'transferability' of WG 'ways' implies their constructed character, conditioned by organisational constraints and opportunities and wider social mores. Significantly, there was some evidence that the equality groups of other under-represented constituency groups (e.g. the mixed NREC in MSF) adopt similar 'ways', suggesting that they reflect the dynamics of those in a position of a relative lack of power rather than gender. Yet, even with their developing links and maturing relationships with the union, WGs' ability to effect fundamental change, either on their own or without significant change to union strategies, appears questionable. They endeavour to balance their autonomy from the union with a need to integrate into it, and as they are increasingly institutionalised (see also Briskin 1999), seem unlikely to generate enough momentum to transform the basic tenets of union identity. There has been considerable debate among (socialist) feminists over the 'level' of gender equality that is attainable within the institutions of capitalism (including unions) and for whom it is attainable. Some maintain that full gender equality will derive from the displacement of the existing system and that those who value the challenge of patriarchy amid challenges to capitalism will continue to merely 'tinker' with the union and wider system of society, probably benefiting only a minority of women and providing reforms which can be removed or countered (e.g. Orr 1995, Waterson 1999). Indeed, the analyses indicated that WGs, as union sub-structures, have an interdependent relationship with the union in which their role are likely to remain subordinate or largely complementary to its goals. Their mobilisation is always subject to efforts by other union parties to control or coopt them (see Field 1983,

Virdee & Grint 1994). They have also expended considerable energy in on-going measures to support women in the union mainstream, diverting resources away from the pursuit of alternative and more extensive aims. Their relationship with the rest of the union thus needs to continue to develop yet also gain stature.

Given our position that WGs in MSF and USDAW are not strong enough on their own to sustain and augment an alternative feminist project to achieve full gender equality, their adoption of a considered approach to equality ideas and better direction of their activities (see earlier) will provide important yet partial steps toward that end. They might therefore also examine how to consolidate and extend the support that they already have from other parties. Within the union, for example, WGs may aim to work more strategically with other constituent identity groups and general equality bodies to pursue overlapping aspects of their interests. While the problems of women and ethnic minorities are by no means the same, lessons can be learned and exchanged between the two (Coote 1980b). There are also possibilities in respect of augmenting men's participation in certain WG activities to expose their ways of working to more individuals involved in the union mainstream and male-dominated workplaces.

Furthermore, it was discovered that unions play an important but not exclusive influence on WG roles and operations. Significantly, this implies that there is scope for WG effectiveness to be influenced from other quarters. For example, WGs could self-organise more outside the union setting (see Cockburn 1989). This could help to overcome the difficulties inherent in their need to balance autonomy from and integration with it. Greater links and coordinated activity with other social movements such as peace, human rights and community groups (see Ritchie 1993) and their associated politics of reconstruction could be vital for encouraging greater change in women's situation within and beyond the union (see Chhachhi & Pittin 1999). As WGs emphasise in their own operations (see above), in social movement politics, power is no longer seen as something 'out there' ready to be seized, but as a diffused

and plural quality woven into the very fabric of society (Munck 1999). Feminist and other movements' strategising on identity, alliance, and leader-member relations provides unions movements with essential pointers.

Authors such as Rowbotham & Mitter (1994) point out that 'the experience gained by Third World poor women, in developing forms of survival and resistance, are becoming increasingly relevant to women of the First World' as evidenced by their increasing organising outside unions in various ways linked into the community. They are contributing, as Munck (1999:14-15) puts it, to unions 'moving beyond the factory gates and breaking with a narrow, economistic conception of trade unionism' in their organising, agenda and other ways'. WGs and their unions could thereby become 'populist' campaigning organisations, with prospects given that new ways of imagining the workings, forms and ends of collective struggle have not yet been fully established or stabilised (Fisher & Kling 1993). The transformative *potential* of WGs could qualify the findings of existing studies (e.g. Cobble 1990, Virdee & Grint 1994) which stress that WG aims tend to align with those of the union, reflecting a pluralist approach whereby neither the goals pursued by groups nor the methods used to achieve them threaten the basis of existing institutional relationships.

While building of multi-identity alliances in relation to mobilising issues of labour has been significant, it has long been beset by difficulties. It has resulted in coalitions sometimes working around formal union structures, rather than through them, indicating the need for appropriate new organisational forms and modes of struggle. At the union level, Waterman (1999) comments that there have been different responses to the rise of what he calls 'new alternative social movements' on the left. One has been to reassert the primacy of the capital-labour contradiction (e.g. see Meiskins Wood (1986) who argues that while new social movements stretch politics beyond immediate class interests, it is vital that class interests remain the guiding thread of any political movement for the construction of socialism). Another has been to see ours as a post-capitalist, -industrial, -Marxist, -historical or -modern

era, and to view new social subjects, identities and movements as replacing the working (or any other) class. A third has been to reconceptualise and broaden the understanding of work and the role of labour movements. Waterman argues that given the decreasing relative number, increasing differentiation and geographical spread of workers, any self-proclamation by unions of the priority of their struggle leads to the danger of self-marginalisation.

6.4   Study limitations and areas for development

This study responded to a relative inattention in social sciences, and more specifically industrial relations, to women as the subjects or shapers of research. It helped to address the dearth of empirical and theoretical work at the sub-union level. It applied and extended Hyman's (1994) model of union 'identity' at the level of individual unions, and derived a typology of equality ideas which helped to penetrate complex phenomena and assess them more rigorously than before. Nonetheless, the evolving analytic frameworks and largely exploratory character of the study underlined methodological and theoretical areas which could be developed further in subsequent work. The following discussion is not exhaustive; it reflects immediate areas for development raised by the study.

First, this study emphasised key union characteristics over national contextual features to explain the nature and aims of WGs. As stressed by earlier research and some of our findings (see Figure 6.1), however, environmental factors also shape and in turn are shaped by unions and their WGs. For example, relationships between the economic cycle and union potency and growth have been observed (e.g. Kelly 1998, Bain & Price 1983). Periods of turbulent environmental changes have been linked with greater fluidity of existing union structures, providing opportunities for organisational transformation (e.g. Colgan & Ledwith 1996a) though such a situation has not recently presented itself in our case unions. Yet, there is little work which compares the relative significance for WGs of organisational *and* wider environmental features (nor, indeed, the relative significance of union features). Furthermore, no British studies make connections between the environment, union identity *and* union sub-

structures though some relate environmental features to women's representation within unions generally. This is significant in that although national-level factors may flatten out complexity, they can reveal patterns about women's organising that might not be visible in the detail which is valuable for developing union strategy. Briskin's (1999) latest work makes a significant contribution in relating the broad nature and level of WGs in Swedish and Canadian unions to national economic, institutional, legislative and political considerations and dominant union arrangements. The need for equivalent studies of UK union WGs is underscored. At another level of analysis, while women's personal circumstances, preferences and characteristics were examined here to some extent, future work could further evaluate the relative significance of 'micro-level' considerations for union identity, WG forms and roles.

A connected avenue for future research relates to the focus here on WGs' union-centred aims. It was argued that their successful pursuit is linked to the WGs' simultaneous pursuit of externally-oriented aims. While earlier works have emphasised the latter (albeit in a broad-brush manner), their consideration in relation to WGs' union-centred aims needs further investigation to indicate the full role and impact of WGs. In terms of strategy, this could help WGs to prevent or minimise the contradictory effects of their initiatives. For example, while many union-centred WG measures (e.g. locations and times for meetings) acknowledge women's wider circumstances to help encourage their union involvement, paradoxically, they simultaneously reinforce women's gendered roles beyond the union setting.

Methodologically, the use of a loose, inductively-oriented case design could translate into more deductively-oriented research in future work given the utility of the analytic frameworks shown here and their contribution to a developing bank of applicable concepts and observations. Chiefly, the study derived and extended constructs from disparate literatures and the data sources which operationalised equality approaches and goals, and dimensions of union identity. For example, although the study supported earlier work (e.g.

Dickens 1993) in showing that 'women's' issues seldom become union priorities, it also detailed the less documented union processes which further them. Such findings stress the importance of finding fuller measures of the nature and impact of the study phenomena, in ways which have meaning for the study participants. It also implies that there is a need for future studies to draw widely from both empirical and literary sources in the construction of union, WG and equality dimensions, potentially recasting existing assumptions in industrial relations about what constitute significant union experiences and gender relations. Liff (1996), for example, sub-divides equal opportunity and diversity equality approaches in her study of work organisations. Her categories may be usefully applied to the union setting in future studies. At the same time, studies of work organisations and equality emphasise the role of the manager in facilitating equality approaches. In unions, the emphasis of democratic organisation means that, theoretically, equality efforts are undertaken by those who are guided by them - members. In workplaces, equality policies apply mainly to those who have already gained organisational 'membership'. In unions, even this aspect of engagement can be difficult for certain workers. The equality focus within work organisations tends not to examine the transformation of the organisation; this study focused in part on transformative equality and its implications for union organisation and beyond.

Fourth, the interpretivist case study approach adopted here proved appropriate for exploring union-WG relations, and WGs' aims, achievements and conceptions of gender equality. It stressed the significant need to elicit multiple viewpoints to better understand complex social phenomena, and more particularly, to respond to claims that areas of knowledge have been masculine (see Lennon 1995) by including female study participants. In this way, the research emphasised collaborative and democratic research ethics, and feminist theorising and strategising on the 'standpoint' theory of knowledge (Harding 1992). Reflecting the limited research on the subject area on which to build, however, it did not engage particularly with unionists and workers who are not directly involved with WGs yet who may be affected by their activities and achievements. While it endeavoured to assess a number of men's

sentiments about WGs, future research could more comprehensively assess views of WGs held by, for example, inactive lay union members and/or a greater number of active men.

Fifth, the study was largely bounded in its focus on two unions and seven of their WGs by practical research constraints. It is re-emphasised here that it did not attempt to be representative in its findings of all British unions or WGs. It aimed to provide a richness of insight at particular analytic levels about MSF and USDAW and some of their WG initiatives. While the findings are only fully applicable to the two union cases and selected WGs, wider testing (cf. exact replication) of the study in these unions and beyond is possible. This could refine our understanding of WGs and increase confidence in our findings and conclusions. Indeed, a more representative examination of WGs could contribute to the development of understanding(s) of their significance to the union *movement*, with implications for analysis, theory and policy at that level.

Future work could use this study as a basis for longitudinal and comparative analysis of WG progress and isolate significant factors in their development, aim-setting and contribution. Particularly for the two case unions, this thesis could provide a reference point for detailing where WGs could make an even *greater* contribution, given that union women do not yet feel that WGs have reached their full potential. Finally, the evidence here that WGs increasingly link with the wider union and external bodies in trying to effect their aims has implications for future research. There is considerable scope to measure the impact of other equality initiatives (e.g. non-gender based equality bodies) to more comprehensively assess WGs' *relative* contribution to union-centred gender equality. This would provide a fuller understanding of the total and interrelated impacts of WGs on union identity for women, potentially encouraging a better directed approach by them.

6.5   Summary and final remarks

This chapter discussed the exploratory study's key findings and their significant implications for policy, research and theory. As the first known, in-depth examination of union WGs, further merited by the discovery of the growing presence of WGs across British unions, the thesis simultaneously examined the organisational identity of MSF and USDAW; the character and aims of their WGs; the equality ideas which inform WG aims and their pursuit; and the meaning of their relations with the unions. Central to this investigation was the application and extension of Hyman's (1994) model of union identity and the development of an equality typology for categorising WGs' union-centred equality aims.

While it emerged that particular WG types emphasise particular aims, WG aims were also found to overlap, stressing their location within a wider women's structure in MSF and USDAW and their need to respond flexibly to various situations. It emerged that WG arrangements, roles and achievements are significantly but not exclusively influenced by aspects of dimensions of union identity. At the same time, because of their own gendered life experiences, WG members, like individual female union officials, are well placed to identify working women's needs and concerns. They are uniquely placed to politicise women workers and collectively pursue their concerns, values and experiences from the spaces they have carved out within the union setting. The findings indicated that WGs are significant collective agents for change, particularly for women, outside their unions - and increasingly, within. The unions' inclusion of 'radical' bodies like WGs and targeted recruitment and organising may not signal a 'new model of unionism', with their incremental pursuits influenced and sustained more by contextual considerations than overt philosophical ideals about gender equality, but it does mark a recognition of the dilemmas of conventional unionism.

WGs' effects on gender equality in the unions were found to extend beyond those made by individual unionists or union equality policies. Significantly, they impacted on aspects, albeit

unevenly, of each of the key dimensions of union identity via an uncoordinated mix of equality ideas. While WG organising can be seen to constitute an important 'end' in itself, WG aims reflected the prevailing view of these mechanisms as a 'means' to other ends. While most WG aims were assessed to be underpinned by 'shorter' sameness and difference equality ideas, the analysis also detected a slow (unarticulated) shift towards 'longer' conceptions of equality in the pursuit of their union-centred goals. WGs' partial attainment of less ambitious aims and the discovery of their more ambitious aims stressed the need for future research which can further trace developments in WGs' effectiveness in terms of marrying gender equality with union effectiveness, particularly if their activities are better directed.

At the same time, the research concluded that WGs face a tension between becoming more integrated with existing union arrangements in order to gain legitimacy, and maintaining some autonomy in order to provide a critical voice of its operations for female members. Alone, WGs seem unlikely to achieve the extent of change needed for their unions to fully reflect women's values and interests, even if their internal effectiveness improves and they develop a coherent set of consistent gendered beliefs and values (cf. Kirton (1999) on individual women). As well as better coordination and direction of existing WG strategies and conceptions of equality, the study findings pointed up a clear need for transformation-seeking initiatives to ensure that women's representation by their union is central to strategies to ensure union survival and effectiveness. As different voices, experiences and interests come to the fore, possible alternatives to enhance WG influence within unions include the extension of WG alliances with other non-gender union equality mechanisms, female members' self-organisation outside the union and the extension of their alliances with outside social movements and community groups.

This is not to suggest the abandonment of the traditional idea of the working class as the central unifying feature in union strategies but rather to reflect more pluralist politics which

engage with the multiple identities and diverse struggles of union memberships. The feminist vision, embodied in WG aims and operations, can continue to provide vital new perspectives which respond to the crisis of a specific, narrowly based type of unionism. Rather than stress women's 'separatism', WGs provide a vital location for developing more effective means for introducing feminist ideas into union operations to *enhance* their strength and unity. As yet, a good part of their potential to effect more transformative change for women in unions is waiting to be unleashed.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: PRELIMINARY FIELDWORK INTERVIEWEES FROM TUC AFFILIATES AND THE TUC

	Interview/Contact	Interview date	Interview time	Interview location	Position/Title at the time of interview	Organisation
1	Donna Covey	15/11/96	4.00-5.00pm	Headquarters, Wimbledon, London	National Officer	GMB
2		9/1/97	3.30pm-4.15pm			
3	Bernadette Hillon	23/10/96	3.45-5.30pm	Central Office, Fallowfield, Manchester	National Women's Officer	USDAW
4	Nancy Creamer	1/10/98	2.30pm-3.00pm	Telephone conversation	Assistant to the National Women's Officer	
5	Mary Howard	3/9/96	10.00-11.30am	Headquarters, Rednal, Birmingham	Principal Officer	NASUWT
6		10/9/96	11.00am-3.00pm	Telephone interview		
7	Olwyn Gunn	11/1/97	1.00pm-1.30pm	As above	Principal Officer, Chair of EO Committee	
8		2/2/98	11.00am-3.00pm	Headquarters, Rednal Birmingham		
9		11/11/97	11.30am-1.00pm	As above		
10	Amor Jones	13/11/96	4.00-5.00pm	Headquarters, MFS Centre, London	Researcher (Equalities Unit)	MSF
11	Barbara Switzer	16/8/97	3.30pm-5.00pm	As above	National Secretary (Equalities)	
12	Anne Gibson	27/1/98	4.00-5.30pm	As above	National Secretary (Equalities)	
13	John Lally	14/10/96	3.20-4.40pm	Headquarters, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent	Organiser (Education)	CATU
14		2/2/97	2.30pm-3.30pm	Telephone interview		
15	Sue Ledwith	15/12/96	3.30-5.30pm	Oxford Brookes University, Oxford	Lecturer and Researcher	for GPMU
16	Jo Morris	26/9/96	3.45-5.00pm	Headquarters, London Telephone interview	Senior Official, Equal Rights Department	TUC
17	Kay Carberry	6/7/97	3.00pm-3.45pm	Headquarters, London		
18		9/1/98	2.00pm-3.30pm	Telephone interview	Equal Rights Department Head	
19		23/3/98	2.00pm-3.00pm	As above		
20	Val Stansfield	12/8/96	10.00-11.30am	Headquarters, Clapham Junction, London	Equal Opportunities Officer	CPSA
21		6/1/97	2.00pm-2.45pm	Telephone interview		
22	Diana Holland	13/2/98	3.00pm-4.30pm	Headquarters, Palace Road, London	National Officer	TGWU
23	Megan Dobney	10/12/96	3.30-5.00pm	Headquarters, Great Russell Street, London	Chair, Women's Rights Committee	SERTUC WRC
24		20/1/97	3.45pm-4.15pm	Telephone interview		

APPENDIX 2: MAIN STUDY FIELDWORK

Table 1: Interviewees and interview schedule*

MSF Interviews				
Name	Title	Date	Time	Location/Event
Sandra Gooch	former Southern RWC coordinator	5/3/98	3.00pm-5.00pm	School of Education, Exeter University, Exexter
Anne Mellor	NWS-C Chair	25/2/98 1/3/98 10/3/98 13/3/98 17-18/4/98 6-10/6/98	10.30am-12.00am 4.00pm-5.30pm 7.00pm-9.30pm 7.30pm-8.00pm various times various times	Telephone interview As above Hotel Bar and Restaurant, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation) MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Weekend) MSF Conference, Bournemouth
Amor Jones	Research Officer, Equalities Department	11/3/98 13/3/98 23/3/98	6.30pm-7.00pm 3.30pm-4.00pm 3.30pm-4.00pm	Hotel Bar and Restaurant, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation) Telephone interview As above
Barbara Switzer	National Officer (Equalities)	23/10/98 various dates in 10/98 and 11/98	2.30pm-4.00pm na	MSF Centre, London E-mail correspondence
Anne Gibson	National Officer (Equalities), Acting Women's Officer	27/1/98 11/3/98	4.00pm-5.30pm 5.30pm-11.30pm	MSF Centre, London Hotel Bar and Restaurant, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation)
Sue Mallory	NEC reserved seat holder, NWS-C member	13/2/98	11.00am-12.50pm	MSF Centre, London
Sharon Allen	National President	16/2/98 11/3/98	12.30pm-1.45pm 5.30pm-6.00pm	Place of Work, Birmingham Hotel Bar and Restaurant, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation)
Amanda Richards	West Midlands RWC member, NWS-C representative	23/2/98 16/3/98	10.30am-12.30pm 7.30pm-8.00pm	Her home, Keresley, Coventry West Midlands RWC meeting, Birmingham Office
Joan Damiani	London RWC member	10/3/98	9.30pm-11.00pm	Hotel Bar, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation)
Naomi Bates	North West North RWC member, Shop Steward	10/3/98 13/3/98 2/6/98	10.00am-11.00am 9.30pm-11.00pm 2.00pm-3.00pm 8.30pm-9.00pm 2.00pm-4.30pm	Hotel Bar and Restaurant, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation) As above As above E-mail interview
Wendy Thorogood	Eastern RWC member	10/3/98 13/3/98	10.00am-11.00am 9.30pm-11.00pm 7.30pm-8.00pm	Hotel Bar and Restaurant, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation) As above
Maureen Gardner	London RWC member	13/3/98	8.30pm-9.00pm	As above
Pat Mortimer	London RWC member	13/3/98	8.30pm-9.00pm	As above
Rosemary Ruddy	Northern Ireland RWC member	13/3/98	7.30pm-8.00pm	As above
Deborah Fatile	West Midlands RWC	13/3/98 16/3/98	7.30pm-8.00pm 7.00pm-9.00pm	As above West Midlands RWC meeting, Birmingham Office
Vera Lomax	North West North RWC	13/3/98	7.00pm-8.00pm	Hotel Bar and Restaurant, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation)
Pat Leeman	RWC member	17/4/98 10/6/98	5.30pm-6.00pm 4.00pm-4.45pm	As above Women's weekend, MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Weekend)
Ann Grovenor	West Midlands RWC	16/3/98	7.00pm-9.00pm	West Midlands RWC meeting, Birmingham Office

Gloria, Patsy and Joyce (group discussion)	West Midlands RWC	16/3/98	7.00pm-8.00pm	West Midlands RWC meeting, Birmingham Office
Maureen Connolly	West Midlands RWC member, Regional Women's Officer	16/3/98 11/5/98	8.50pm-9.30pm 11.00am-1.30pm	As above Place of work, Moseley, Birmingham
Jo White	NEC reserved seat holder, NWS-C member	31/3/98 17-19/4/98	2.30pm-4.00pm 8.00pm-9.00pm	MSF Centre, London MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Weekend)
Jennie Scott-Reid	Women's Weekend Coordinator	17-18/4/98 5-10/6/98 10/6/98	various times various times 1.30pm-2.30pm	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Weekend) MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Week) Place of work, MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford
Lorene Fabian	North Thames RWC member, NWS-C representative	17-18/4/98 6-8/6/98	various times 7.00pm-9.00pm	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Weekend) MSF Conference, Bournemouth (North Thames delegate meeting)
Ester Persaud	London RWC member	17-18/4/98 24-25/4/98	various times various times	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Weekend) Hotel Bar, Cardiff (at TUC Black Workers' Conference) (MSF delegation)
Kashmira Shah	London RWC member	17-18/4/98 6-10/6/98	various times various times	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Weekend) MSF Conference, Bournemouth
Muff Sourani (man)	NREC Secretary	24/4/98 26/6/98	11.00am-11.45am 10.00am-11.15am	In session, Cardiff (at TUC Black Workers' Conference) (MSF delegation) Birmingham Office
Harminder Singh	former NREC Secretary	24/4/98 31/3/98	5.30pm-6.00pm 9.30am-11.30am	Hotel Bar, Cardiff (at TUC Black Workers' Conference) (MSF delegation) MSF Centre, London
Qamar Bhatti (man)	NREC Chair	25/4/98	12.30pm-1.15pm	Lunch, Cardiff (at TUC Black Workers' Conference) (MSF delegation)
Aliff Hoffman (woman)	North West North RWC member, NREC Vice-Chair	24/4/98	6.30pm-8.30pm	Hotel Bar, Cardiff (at TUC Black Workers' Conference) (MSF delegation)
Julian, Derek, Ester, Hazel, Qamar, Trevor, Aliff, Harminder (men and women)	MSF Delegation to TUC Black Workers' Conference	24/4/98	10.00pm-12.00am	Hotel Bar, Cardiff (at TUC Black Workers' Conference) (MSF delegation)
Gail Cartmail	LAGIM Secretary, Regional Officer	7/5/98	2.00pm-3.30pm	CPHVA Office, Southwark, London
Gary Fabian	former President	6-8/6/98	various times	Embassy Hotel bar, MSF Conference, Bournemouth & North Thames delegate meeting
Maureen and Shirley (group discussion)	North Thames and Scotland RWC members	17-19/4/98	various times	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Weekend)
Lesley Mansell	LAGIM Chair	23/7/98	2.30pm-4.00pm	Shopping Mall, Bristol City Centre
Peter, Lorene Fabian, Gary Fabian, Greg, Phil, Liz, Maureen and others	North Thames delegation	6/6/98 7/6/98	7.30pm-9.00pm 7.40pm-9.00pm	MSF Conference, Bournemouth (North Thames delegate meeting) As above
Gwen	London RWC member	1/7/98	2.00pm-3.00pm	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts) (Women's Week)
Linda Whitehead	Secretary to Anne Gibson	13/3/98	various times	Hotel Bar and Restaurant, Scarborough (at TUC Women's Conference) (MSF delegation)

USDAW Interviews				
Name	**Title**	**Date**	**Time**	**Location/Event**
Bernadette Hillon	National Women's Officer	23/10/96 2/3/97	3.45pm-5.30pm 2.00pm-2.45pm	Central Office, Manchester Telephone interview
Sue Merrell	Area Organiser, London, Southern RWC coordinator	31/3/98 12/8/98	2.00pm-3.30pm 1.00pm-1.45pm	MSF Centre, London USDAW Office, Croydon, London (Southern DWC meeting)
Marie, Jean, Sally & Sharon (group discussion)	Southern DWC members	12/8/98	1.45pm-2.45pm	As above
Marie	Southern DWC member	12/8/98	3.00pm-4.00pm	Train (back from Southern DWC meeting)
Sally	Southern DWC member	12/8/98	4.00 -4.20pm	As above
Joanne McGuinness	Full-time officer, Midlands former Midlands DWC coordinator	13/3/98 24/4/98 1/5/98	2.30pm-3.15pm 11.00am-12.30pm 1.45pm-2.15pm	Telephone interview University of Warwick Campus Telephone interview
Linda McFadden	Area Organiser, Sheffield former DWC member	20/4/98	2.00pm-4.00pm	Union office, Glossop Rd, Sheffield
Diane Williams	Shop steward, Southern DWC member	5/6/98 30/6/98	4.00pm-6.00pm 7.50pm-8.30pm	Place of work, North Cheam, London Telephone interview
Christine Richardson	South Wales and Western DWC coordinator, Area Officer	7/7/98 11/1/99	2.00pm-3.30pm 12.30pm-2.00pm	USDAW Cardiff Office Tesco, Cardiff (South Wales and Western DWC meeting and workplace visit)
Two contacts (anonymous)	South Wales and Western DWC members	11/1/99	12.15pm-12.45pm	USDAW Cardiff Office Tesco, Cardiff (South Wales and Western DWC meeting and workplace visit) (during lunchtime leafleting exercise)
Anne Meacock	Shop steward, South Wales and Western DWC member	27/8/98 28/8/98 7/9/98	4.00pm-7.00pm 7.00pm-9.00pm 9.00pm-10.00pm	Her home, Swansea Telephone interview As above
Nancy Creamer	Assistant to the National Women's Officer	2/10/98	2.00pm-2.30pm	Telephone discussion about the research and WGs
Sue Thomas	South Wales and Western DWC member	1/10/98 10/10/98	2.30pm-3.15pm 2.30pm-3.00pm	Telephone interview As above
Maureen Blake	Midlands DWC member	7/7/98	2.30pm-3.30pm	Birmingham office (Midlands DWC meeting)
Diane Croft	Midlands DWC member	7/7/98	3.30pm-4.00pm	As above
Alex Fraser	Midlands DWC coordinator	7/7/98 15/9/98 5/8/98	12.30pm-2.30pm 2.30pm-3.15pm 12.30pm-1.15pm	As above Telephone interview Carribean Festival, Leicester (Midlands DWC members' stall)
Marge Carey	National President, Divisional Officer	6/10/98	2.00pm-3.30pm	USDAW office, Edge Hill, Liverpool
Contact (anonymous)	-	5/11/98	2.00pm-4.00pm	Telephone interview (gave information about the USDAW Women's Conference)
Peter Farrell	Press Officer	4/8/98	2.30pm-3.00pm	Telephone discussion about WGs
Peter Carter	Head of Research	6/6/98	2.30pm-3.00pm	As above
Matthew, Colin, John, Jared	USDAW members	11/1/99	12.30pm-2.00pm	Tesco, Cardiff (South Wales and Western DWC workplace visiit)

* Total interviews (face-to-face, telephone, e-mail): 101; MSF interviews: 65, USDAW interviews: 36.

Table 2: Non-Participant Observational Activities*

MSF Observational Activities				
Activity/Event	**Date**	**Time**	**Location**	**Brief Description**
MSF Women's delegation's Informal Night at the TUC Women's Conference	10/3/98	4.30pm-11.00pm	Spa Complex, Scarborough	Informal discussion at the Hotel Bar, St Nicholas
MSF Women's delegation meeting at the TUC Women's Conference	11/3/98	9.00am-10.15am	St Nicholas Hotel, Scarborough	Full delegation including NWS-C Chair, Acting Women's Officer, Research Officer, Assistant to the Women's Officer and NWS-C delegates from each of the 14 RWCs
MSF Women's Delegation Informal Get-togeher and Dinner TUC Women's Conference	11/3/98	6.00pm-12.00am	St Nicholas Hotel, then an Italian Restaurant, Scarborough	Full delegation (see above) at both locations, informally discussing business of Conference and non-work related matters
West Midlands DWC bi-monthly meeting	16/3/98	7.00pm-9.00pm	MSF Birmingham Office meeting room	Eight RWC members discussed topics for RWC activity, past and planned
National Women's Weekend	17-19/4/98	various times	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts)	Main activities included speeches by women from external institutions (e.g. Anita Pollock MEP), workshops, videos, social times and events, informal sessions and meal times
MSF Race Delegation Informal Drinks TUC Black Workers' Conference	24/4/98	6.00pm-10.30pm	Hotel, Cardiff	Informal discussion of business at Conference, including ethnic minority women in unions
MSF Annual Conference (including Rules Changes)	6-10/6/98	various times	Bournmouth Convention Centre	Main activities included rule changes and motions, speeches, campaigning, stalls, fringe meetings, women's morning session
North Thames Delegation meeting at MSF Annual Conference	6/6/98	7.30pm-9.00pm	Embassy Hotel, Bournemouth	Meeting to plan delegates involvement in following day's events at Conference
North Thames Delegation meeting at MSF Annual Conference	7/6/98	7.30pm-9.00pm	Embassy Hotel, Bournemouth	As above
National Women's Week	28/6-3/7/98	various times	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts)	Main activities included workshops of 15 women, videos on skills training, group exercises, negotiating exercises, informal sessions at the bar and meal times, sports and leisure

USDAW Observational Activities				
Southern DWC bi-monthly meeting	12/8/98	12.30pm-3.00pm	Union office, Croydon, London	DWC members discussed topics for RWC activity, past and planned
Midlands DWC bi-monthly meeting	18/3/98	12.00pm-3.00pm	Union office, Birmingham	As above
Midlands DWC Caribbean Carnival Stall	13/8/98	all day	Leicester	Leafleting, recruiting and speaking with mainly female potential members
South Wales and Western DWC bi-monthly meeting	11/1/99	12.00pm-2.00pm	Tescos, Cardiff	DWC members discussed topics for RWC activity, past and planned
South Wales and Western DWC bi-monthly workplace visit	11/1/99	12.00pm-2.00pm	Tescos, Cardiff	Leafleting, recruiting, talking with staff, walking around Tesco premises
Midlands DWC bi-monthly meeting	12/11/98	12.00pm-2.30pm	Union office, Birmingham	DWC members discussed topics for RWC activity, past and planned
USDAW ADM (video)	?/4/98	2.00pm-5.15pm (afternoon session)	Manchester	Main activities included speeches, motions and composites, campaigning, fringe meetings, women's session and presentations

Other Observational Activities				
Activity/Event	Date	Time	Location	Brief Description
TUC Women's Conference	10-12/3/98	various times	Spa Complex, Scarborough	Main activities included speeches, motions and composites, social evening, fringe meetings and presentations. Much of the content of the conference related to women's organising as individuals and as groups within unions
TUC Black Workers' Conference	24-26/4/98	various times	Town Hall, Cardiff Central	Main activities included speeches, motions and composites, campaigning, fringe meetings, videos, social evening. Some of the conference related to women's organising as indviduals and as groups within unions

* Total number of events: 19; MSF: 10, USDAW: 7, Other: 2.

Table 3: Participant Observational Activities

Participant Observational Activities				
Activity/Event	Date	Time	Location	Brief Description of Researcher's Active Participation
MSF National Women's Weekend	17-19/4/98	various times	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts)	Facilitated three groups of women, directly involved in 'getting to know people' and report back exercises
MSF National Women's Week	26/6-3/7/98	various times	MSF Education Centre, Bishop's Stortford (Herts)	Facilitated three groups of women on negotiating skills course
USDAW South Wales and Western DWC bi-monthly meeting and workplace visit	11/1/99	12.00pm-2.00pm	Tescos, Cardiff	Assisted with leafleting, recruiting, talking with staff, walking around Tesco premises

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APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTION OUTLINE *

INTRODUCTION

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for making the time for our interview. The interview usually takes around an hour and a half but we can discuss issues for whatever length of time suits you. Are you comfortable with our interview being tape-recorded? *[Switch on tape recorder if yes].*

As I mentioned {on the telephone/in my letter}, I am speaking with people who are involved in or work closely with WGs in this union. I'd just like to overview what the research is about before we start discussing the WGs (or a particular WG) in your union. *[Background the nature of the thesis, its key aims, my role as the researcher, study participants' broad role and so on].*

As we progress through the interview, please let me know if there is anything you wish to comment on but do not want to be personally identified with. In addition, please feel free to stop me at any point if you want clarification of a question, to ask a question or feel in any way uncomfortable with the interview.

GENERAL AND PERSONAL BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

When did you join the union?

[If appropriate] What is your position in the union?

Can you please tell me about your involvement with the union (since you joined)?

What factors have positively influenced your involvement in the union?

In your opinion, have there been any impediments to your union involvement? If so, what were they? Did you overcome them? If so, how?

What is the nature of your involvement or association with WGs (or a particular WG) in the union?

What factors encouraged your involvement in the WGs (or a particular WG)?

Have any factors impeded your involvement in WGs? If so, what were they? Did you overcome them? If so, how?

Can you please tell me about yourself in terms of, for example, whether or not you have dependent children, your work background, your education and so on? *[If the interviewee seems comfortable about discussing her personal and social characteristics, ask her/him about her/his political views, marital status and so on].*

UNION-LEVEL QUESTIONS

[The following set of questions were asked of senior female officials in particular]

In your opinion, what features distinguish the union?

I'm particularly interested in the main features of your union's organisation**. What can you tell me about the union's general structure? Is it effective, in your opinion? Why (or why not)?

Can you please tell me what you understand by the term 'union democracy'? Given your definition, to what extent is your union 'democratic'? Why?

To your knowledge, what issues have been raised on union bargaining agendas, and union agendas

which focus on its internal operations in recent years? Have these agendas changed in any ways, in your opinion? If so, how?

What does 'interest representation' mean to you? Do you think the union represents the interests of all its members? Why (or why not)? Could it represent them better? If so, how?

What does 'power' mean to you? Given your definition, to what extent do you see your union as 'powerful? Who (and what bodies) wield power or influence?

In your view, what does union 'culture' refer to? How would you describe the culture of your union? Why?

In your opinion, how does the union generally operate (e.g. bureaucratically, formally, hierarchically, centrally)?

WOMEN'S GROUP(S) QUESTIONS

a) WOMEN'S GROUPS IN THE UNION

[The following set of questions were asked of senior female officials in particular]

Can you briefly outline the history of the women's structure in your union?

What factors encouraged the development of WGs in the union?

In broad terms, have the WGs changed over time? If so, how? What has caused these developments, in your opinion? *[This question acts as a check on earlier union-level questions]*

We discussed certain union features just before *[cite if necessary]*. Do you think any of these features influence or relate to the number and types of WGs in the union? Why do you think this? Can you give some examples of how specific features of the union have affected the establishment and/or development of (a) WG(s)?

b) SPECIFIC WOMEN'S GROUPS

i) Roles

I'd like to focus now on specific bodies which have been set up for women in the union.

What do you see as the key roles or aims of the overall women's structure?

[If appropriate] What are the key aims of the women's committee (or conference, network, course and so on)?

To what extent do you think the WG(s) have achieved *each* of these aims? What signs or evidence are there of the group(s) having this impact?

How do you think the WG(s) has/have been able to have this level of impact?

Do you think that the WG(s) could have achieved more since their inception? Why (or why not)?

Can you identify any union factors which may have helped or hindered the WG(s)' progress with any of these aims?

Are there any wider factors, in your view, which influence what WG(s) have achieved?

ii) Equality ideas

What does 'gender equality' within the union mean to you?

Do you think gender equality exists, then, in your union? Why (or why not)?

We talked earlier about the aims of the WG(s) *[run through aims to remind interviewee and myself of these aims own mind]*, do you feel that they pursue gender equality as you have defined it? If so, how? If not, why not?

Do you think the union could be made more egalitarian for women? If so, how and would these measures involve the WG(s)?

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

Those are all the specific questions I have. Would you like to add anything about the union, WGs or other issues we have discussed or related issues which we have not touched on? *[If issues were not discussed, try to arrange another interview with the participant at a time and location which best suits her/him]*

Do you have any questions you would like to ask me about the study?

[If appropriate] Can you think of anyone in the union I could contact about an interview on the union and its WGs? If so, do you have their contact details, please? *[If documents are referred to during the interview by the participant, ask if it is possible to obtain a copy for the study]*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thank you very much for giving your time for this interview. I'd just like to reassure you that only your union title or role will be cited in the study findings if your interview comments are directly cited and only if you are happy with being identified in this way.

If you would like a copy of the interview transcript, I will post a hard copy to you.

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* Interviews were semi-structured in character; hence, the above questions are those which framed the interview rather than an exhaustive list of the questioned asked of interviewees.
** These features extend those discussed by Hyman (1994).

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