

Acting Up?

**What the election of the first woman
General Secretary of Equity can tell us about
gendered disadvantage in the trade union
movement**

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Equity, the entertainment industry union

- Founded in 1930 (then called the British Actors' Equity Association). Represents 37,000 performers and creative personnel who work across the whole spectrum of entertainment in the UK, including visual broadcasts, sound recordings, film and live performance.
- 50:50 women/men in membership (split roughly same since foundation). Majority of members are actors; other groups include stage management, dancers, directors, clowns.

- **1945** Beatrix Lehmann first woman President of Equity (then, the British Actors' Equity Association)
- **2005** Christine Payne elected as first woman General Secretary
- **2010** Equity's ruling executive council – for first time ever, a (small) majority of women
- What is the significance of these facts?

(But first, a contextualising aside)

Snapshot of the US situation

- British Actors' Equity Association was helped in its foundation by the US equivalent, the Actors' Equity Association, founded formally in **1919**
- **1982** First woman President of AEA, Ellen Burstyn
- **2009** First woman Executive Director (General Secretary equivalent) of AEA Carol Waaser - as *Acting* Executive Director

- Acting a longstanding non-segregated occupation (in Britain, since 1660). Actresses one of first and most visible women worker groups in the 'public' sphere
- Equity co-founded by high-status women
- Membership always approximately equal numbers of women and men, all of whom doing the same job, using the same skills, in the same workplaces
- Further, *all* actors operate in an environment where there is minimum 85% unemployment and most work (when found) is low-paid

Some explanations of gendered patterns in TUs

- Traditional development of trade unions in UK: emphasis originally on exclusion, to protect privileged 'core' workers (advantaged groups creating social closure)
- Lower social status of women transferred to workplace; gender typing of jobs, with definitions of skill often withheld or downgraded; occupational segregation
- Gendered organisational assumptions and practices expressed through bureaucratic hierarchies (e.g. encourages replication); participation obstacles such as evening meetings clashing with childcare responsibilities

These explanations relevant to Equity?

- Non-traditional development of Equity as trade union – founded by an elite, many of whom women; no exclusion of any social group; its central objective to negotiate pay and conditions *minima*.
- Members' jobs not gender-typed in terms of skill or expectation of progression and there is no occupational segregation in its technical sense (here - same job, same skills, same workplaces at same time).
- However, despite Equity's non-traditional historical development, as a trade union it *has* displayed traditional gendered patterns in terms of male dominance of lay and official union positions.

- Given its atypical historical development, the even gender split of members and their identical job content, Equity **should be a deviant case** in terms of gender and union leadership/government. The fact that it hasn't been is precisely why it is interesting.
- Further, a closer look past the apparent equalities in members numbers and skills reveals similarities with other occupations, and therefore arguably union membership experiences and interests.

- In terms of members' access to work, *internal* stratification by gender is commonly rigid (men play Winston Churchill, women play Queen Victoria). So not segregated, but highly (demand-) segmented by 'type'.
- *All* actors, women and men, subject to the same 'type' boundaries; however opportunities for men both broader and more numerous.
- Thus women members experience gendered disadvantage in relation to access to work, pay, and career longevity. (generally, significant and systemic identity group variation in work patterns)
- What identified in previous research as to extent responsible for women actors' career disadvantages: how society identifies **authority**, power-holding and wielding. Affects what is written, produced and cast.

Members inadvertently constraining officials...?

- Connell (1987): Actors as 'identologists'; part of the *articulation* of the gender order, along with writers.
- So women performers inevitably colluding in perpetuation of their own disadvantage, while also affecting their own and others' views on what is appropriate.
- This arguably reflected back in the power/authority positions in their own union. What is seen as possible and desirable.

Union typology relevant?

- Turner's union types (1962): history of Equity's lay government suggests domination by the '*aristocracy*' type (here of actors, as the original closed occupational group).
- Also the '*popular bossdom*' type, identified with open unions with low membership participation and clear difference between members and FTOs.
- Equity could be seen in the past as a combination of these two types (despite being essentially a closed craft union). Might partly account for lack of political will in changing organisational assumptions and practices.

Development of acting as work

- Acting marginalised, first by church then by capitalism. Also, no qualifications required, or structured career paths available, highly insecure and generally low-paid, so 'professional' status uncertain.
- So, not 'real' work...
- This, and the foundation by an elite, arguably contributed to development of a defensive desire to run Equity as a "gentleman's club" -
- Domination of the elected ruling lay executive council by a (largely male) conservative grouping for many years.

Equality approaches

- Overall, implicit 'sameness' approach to equality in Equity as whole; a 'difference' approach from the Women's Committee (and the other Equality Committees).
- Lack of stimulus develop 'transformational'/radical approach. As roughly 50:50 gender split (and always will be) no gendered recruitment, bargaining strategies strictly *necessary*. Most (not all) members see gendered disadvantage as external and nothing that union could affect.
- = lack of an internal 'business case' in terms of addressing equality issues for members.
- = did not become routinely part of officials' views, behaviour, and the creation and maintenance of organisational culture.

Recent change

- 2006 appointment of Equity's first Equalities Officer and 2010 Christine Payne re-elected as General Secretary – unopposed.
- Shift of direction in relationship to members – emphasis from servicing towards organising model.
- Policy and operational changes since 2005 - broader questions around substantive differences resulting from women's leadership.
- Fundamental questions in this area around what is attributable to gender in the sense of a woman's experience of life and the workplace in shaping responses.

So, potential relevant factors in the traditional male domination of an apparently non-traditional union

- union typology;
- members' work patterns (individualised, dispersed, interests widely differing at any one time);
- **paradoxical effect** of the even gender split and doing identical work: lack of necessity re-focus strategy to recruit and retain women *per se*, unlike many other contemporary TUs; women members do not see Equity as relevant to affecting their gender disadvantage, so little or no pressure/expectations from members;
- wider gender norms - including identification of 'authority' with the masculine – structures access to work + perceptions of appropriate union government.

Any implications more widely?

- Suggests that overall numbers of women and even internal positions not sufficient, and that also 'political' awareness, internal support, and acquisition of strategic power necessary.
- Suggests that an internal union 'business case' is relevant.
- Suggests that gendered organisational culture confirmed as important.
- Suggests relevance of gender ideologies in producing and sustaining enduring institutions and material outcomes.

- Suggests union history, occupational segregation, gendered job types, and disproportionate gender representation often necessary variables (in accounting for disadvantage/underrepresentation) but not always/ever sufficient
- This connects to debates in IR as academic field of study on the form and extent of influence of wider societal influences on realities of IR -
- The Equity case contributes to the debates around gendered disadvantage in TU government/leadership in that we can strip away some usual explanatory 'structural' factors, and give due weight to the impact of wider gendered norms and interests.