

**‘The Many Faces of Eve’:
Women’s Groups, Diversity and Democracy in British
Unions**

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WARWICK PAPERS IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

NUMBER 76

February 2005

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Editor's foreword

The Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations series publishes the work of members of the Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU) and people associated with it. The papers may be work of a topical interest or require presentation outside the normal conventions of a journal article. A formal editorial process ensures that standards of quality and objectivity are maintained.

This paper is by Jane Parker, an ESRC-funded Research Fellow within IRRU. In it she presents detailed results from a national survey of TUC-affiliate unions exploring the nature of their women's groups. As well as mapping the extent, rationale and roles played by these groups, Parker analyses the results in terms of diversity and democracy within the unions. The findings show that WGs pursue various equality and democracy ideas via their own organisation, aims and agenda, and that diversity is also a concern of a significant minority (though more so in the larger membership unions). She thus demonstrates that women's groups need not be 'sectional' interest groups but can make a broader contribution to the pursuit of equality within trade unions as well as in the workplace and beyond.

Jim Arrowsmith

Author's acknowledgements

Many thanks to the TUC affiliate representatives who responded to the survey. I am also indebted to Jim Arrowsmith and Paul Edwards at the Industrial Relations Research Unit in Warwick University for incisive comments that helped to shape this project. The active support provided by colleagues at the TUC and Labour Research Department during the initial fieldwork phase is also much appreciated. This paper derives from a wider, TUC-supported study of women's groups in British unions funded by the Economic and Social Research Council

CONTENTS

Foreword and acknowledgements	2
Abstract	4
1. Introduction	4
2. Unions, democracy and diversity	5
3. Women's groups, democracy and equality	6
4. The research	8
5. Main findings	9
A chart of women's groups	9
Women's groups: aims and agenda - gender <i>and</i> diversity foci?	17
6. Discussion	26
Implications for WG and union organising	26
WG pursuits – the growing significance of diversity and consensus?	29
Subsequent research	30
7. Conclusion	31
References	33
Acronyms: British Unions	37-38

LIST OF TABLES

1: WG and other identity-based equality groups in TUC affiliates	10
2: Women's Group Types in TUC affiliates	11
3: Reasons for the establishment of Women's Groups	14
4: Aims of different WG types in TUC affiliates	18
5a: Union-centred issues addressed by Women's Groups	21
5b: Externally-centred issues addressed by Women's Groups	22-23
6: Perceptions of WG agenda	23

**‘The Many Faces of Eve’:
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Jane Parker

Abstract

Discussion of union equality and democracy usually locates women’s group (WG) organising as a special representative form within unions. This study adjusts the analytical lens to focus on how WGs themselves address the interests of diverse constituent member groups via their WG organisation, aims and agenda. Building on earlier case research, a nationally representative survey of TUC affiliates was conducted in order to ‘map’ current WGs across unions. The survey data also permitted analysis of WG attention to group diversity relative to gender in their pursuit of equality and better interest representation. A significant minority of WGs was found to address diversity relating to the union and beyond, and most union members belong to TUC affiliates where WGs tackle diversity concerns to some extent. Implications for WG and union practice, and for research and theory, are examined.

1. Introduction

The industrial relations literature is replete with comment on the need for strategies to stem declining union membership and political influence since the late 1970s. One thread of action has involved the expansion of unions via essentially defensive merger activity (Arrowsmith 2004a, Waddington 2004) and more proactive organising in non-union workplaces (e.g. Gall 2005). The increasing membership heterogeneity of the largest unions, due in part to the entry of large number of women and other historically under-represented groups into the workplace, has broadened the range of work and ‘social identities’ that define union members. In other words, the demise of union membership homogeneity as traditionally embodied by a skilled manual, male worker has become widely evident (Hyman 1992).

Growing membership diversity in turn has emphasised the need for enhanced representation of diverse groups in union ‘revival’ strategies. Ostensibly, this has occurred through the modification of union structures, sectional developments to respond to increasing workforce differentiation, and the introduction of special representative mechanisms for women, ethnic minority, disabled, youth, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) members. The latter have taken both individual and collective forms, within and alongside the union mainstream. Women’s group (WG) structures include women’s committees, conferences, caucuses, training courses, meetings, sections, branches, and networks. They have often preceded, or at least accompanied the establishment of separate organising by other constituency groups (e.g. see Terry (1996:101) on UNISON).

The following section discusses increasing union interest in diversity and democracy in the context of a search for renewal. Section 3 critically reviews the relevant literature on WGs, democracy and equality. The structure and key findings of a major survey of unions about their WG structures and operations are outlined in the next section. Before concluding, implications of the findings for theory, practice and research are outlined.

2. Unions, democracy and diversity

The industrial relations literature tends to examine identity-based organising within a wider discussion of union democracy and representation. Following Hyman's (1994) well-known conceptualisation of union democracy as 'representative' and 'participative', Flynn *et al.* (2004:320) define two major strands in terms of: 1) membership 'voice' or the influence which the ordinary member has over union policy, including the representation of differing constituencies within the membership, and 2) 'control' or how ordinary members exert influence over those responsible for implementing policy. Since the early 1980s, they observe, the notion of democracy as control over leaderships has lost ground while the notion as democracy as voice for partial constituencies has grown in stature. The latter includes consensus building amongst diverse constituencies, whereby 'all members can influence union policy, which everyone then unites behind' (*ibid.*:328).

Indeed, in the context of increasing competition among employers of labour, Briskin (1999) asserts, 'at the heart of restructuring and globalization ... , 'unity in diversity' must be central to union strategies' while Kirton and Greene (2002a) argue that democratic organisations such as unions 'are better able to promote social justice for all if different social groups are included in decision making ... (S)ocial group difference can be drawn upon as a resource if inclusive mechanisms are developed through which the diverse social groups can be heard'. One key reason to enable input from previously 'silent' groups within an overarching unity of goal, is to create a shared interest that is the best outcome for the union as a whole. For example, it can provide a richer array of meanings and representations of social reality, increase the knowledge available in policy-making (e.g. Young 1990), and assist recruitment and organising.

Particularly since the 1990s, however, the complementarity of diversity, representation and unity aims has been questioned, in both theoretical and practical terms. In terms of managing diversity in the workplace, for instance, Liff (1997:11) asks:

Can anything meaningful be said about the collective experience of all women or are any generalizations undermined by other cross-cutting identities? In drawing attention to different social identities ... are we addressing the straitjacket of white male norms or simply reinforcing outdated stereotypes? Underlying these questions are both practical concerns with how equality policies can become more inclusive and theoretical issues concerning forms of equality and the nature of identity.

In unions, others point up how (women's) diversity creates a tension between a focus on differences that may complicate the pursuit of 'tactical unity' while the emphasis of unity may bury the diversity among women (e.g. Franzway 1998, Colgan and Ledwith 2000). Others have denounced identity-based mechanisms for creating factions along gender and/or class lines, as well as for the 'unrepresentative' character of those thought to be involved in them. With regard to WGs, for instance, it has been argued that they represent only a small number of more privileged, educated

and professional working women (e.g. Orr 1995). These debates are likely to have been partly fuelled by an absence of analysis of generally representative evidence about union WGs.

Furthermore, the academic literature maintains that, although they are often expressed in terms of making unions more representative, revival approaches have been driven more by concern with 'growing' the membership (e.g. Heery 1997). Though unions have endeavoured to shift resources so as to open their structures and activities to a wider range of existing and potential members, this has resulted primarily from a 'practical necessity' to recruit rather than an ideological position, and in a context of service centralisation borne of membership decline (Flynn *et al.* 2004). Although new representative bodies are not only there for 'window dressing and tokenistic purposes',

(t)hey are products of multiple agendas, (operating) in contexts of competing power interests, and one must exercise caution in reading off greater genuine internal representativeness simply from the *existence* of such bodies (*ibid*: 337).

3. Women's groups, democracy and equality

Flynn *et al.* (2004) voice surprise at the comparative scarcity of academic attention paid to democracy, given that it provides 'the more persistent challenge' for unions. However, a growing collection of academic case studies has scrutinised intra-organisational initiatives with reference to union aims premised on equality, identity, mobilisation, representation and democracy notions that seek to broaden their appeal¹. For example, Kirton and Greene (2002a) recently drew on the liberal and radical notions used in Jewson and Mason's (1986) well-known analysis of workplace equal opportunity policies to consider women and race equality initiatives in particular British unions. The authors characterised 'earlier' efforts of WGs such as women-only courses and meetings in terms of unions adopting a 'liberal' approach. As devices for 'positive action', WGs enabled women to develop their skills and experience to compete more equally with men in unions while union structures and processes remained relatively intact. According to the authors, most large unions later shifted to a 'radical' approach involving 'positive discrimination' or the 'manipulation' of practices to obtain a fair outcome for disadvantaged groups. From this perspective, union organisation and processes themselves were seen to help impede women's interest representation. Related initiatives include target- or quota-setting for women, reserved seats, and gender-based proportionality on various union structures and delegations (see Southern and Eastern Region TUC (SERTUC) WRC 2000, 2004)².

However, Cockburn (1989:215) had previously argued that such 'modest' radical equal opportunities for a group formed merely an *initial* breakthrough, and that the dichotomous liberal/radical scheme 'is a straight-jacket that we need to escape'. She suggests that, in its place, what emerges from studies of equality policies and practice in workplaces are 'shorter' and 'longer' equality agendas:

At its shortest this involves new measures [i.e. positive action] to minimize bias in procedures ... At its longest, its most ambitious and most progressive it has to be recognized as a project of transformation for organisations' (*ibid*: 218).

¹ This resonates with investigations of women as individuals and as groups in other settings.

² Other studies of women's organising include Colgan and Ledwith (2000) on identity formation processes, Kirton and Healy (2004) on social identity approaches, and Foley (2000) on resource mobilisation theory; McBride (2001), Humphrey (2000) and Virdee and Grint (1994) examine identity, union democracy and representation in relation to organising by women, black, disabled, lesbian and gay members.

Gender equality is thereby stressed in terms of power and experience, as well as procedures and outcomes. Following this, and responding to the relative dearth of research on the equality notions that permeate WG organisation itself, Parker's (2003) research emphasised how WGs sought to further democratise the former Manufacturing, Science and Finance (MSF) union and the Union for Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) by pursuing elements of 'sameness', 'difference', and increasingly, 'transformational' equality ideas. Akin to the liberal agenda, sameness equality refers to situations where women seek to be treated the same as (white) men or to attain the 'male actual' (Greer 1999). Supported by the tenets of industrial unionism – universality, impartiality, liberal democracy and gender/other neutrality – 'an appealing argument often used to support this approach is that the equal treatment of all members develops a general sense of solidarity' (Parker 2003:85). By contrast, difference equality acknowledges and responds to differences between women and men by virtue of their (social) identity characteristics and circumstances so that members of neither group are disadvantaged by them. Transformational equality questions the basis of union organisation and the processes by which some groups build and consolidate their power over others. Initiatives informed by this equality approach encompass Cockburn's (1989) 'longer' equality ideas, and fit with Rees' (1998:46) conception of 'mainstreaming equality' in that they seek to '[build] upon the concept of politics of difference ... It involves a paradigm shift'.

Though less attention to such is given in Parker's (2003) study, difference and transformational equality ideas are also central to the pursuit of democracy as consensus building amongst diverse constituencies (cf. Jones 2004). Diversity builds on the more or less stable identities on which 'difference' ideas of (gender) equality are premised. As defined here, diversity has three key dimensions, encompassing differences between women and men (inter-gender), differences *among* women (intra-gender), and the shared 'trans-gender' features (e.g. culture, ethnicity) of different identity groups³. As Plantenga (2004:40) observes, a social identity group's 'identities are always multiple and interconnected, so that you cannot talk about gender in isolation; and ... all identities are gendered'. Diversity and transformative equality ideas are also connected by their acknowledgement of the power dynamics between different identities that privilege some and make others vulnerable, and which require challenging strategies to achieve equality for all via a questioning of the union *status quo* and the inequities of existing power relations.

Building on Cockburn's (1989) critique of the liberal/radical dichotomy, recent thinking stresses the need to locate diversity, consensus politics and equality at the centre of studies of organising by women (e.g. see the international contributions to Colgan and Ledwith's (2002) book, *Gender, Diversity and Trade Unions: International Perspectives*). However, Briskin (1999) is one of only a few authors who specify how WGs might be located within union strategy to help build 'unity in diversity'. She advocates a dual structure that 'combines integrated equity initiatives with constituency-based organizing for marginalized groups' to avoid the continued marginalization of women's concerns, while simultaneously building alliances among diverse constituencies. With a wide and significant mandate, she argues, the former will ensure that responsibility for equality is borne by the entire union, thereby preventing marginalization. The latter, including informal constituency-building caucuses for women (i.e. WGs) and other disempowered groups, will support equality interventions, and ensure that the specific needs of women and other groups are visible and simultaneously that equity is 'not simply a code word for women'. In this way, WGs might achieve

³ Although WGs may pursue equality that acknowledges the characteristics and circumstances of individual women at times, their collective basis for organisation and collective or group-based goals are the focus here. For recent work on a trade union perspective of managing diversity based on individual differences in the workplace, see Greene and Kirton (2004).

an effective balance between a position of relative autonomy from which they can critique their union's performance for women and encourage change, and one of union integration that enables them to help empower women and address their concerns about equality and democratic representation.

It seems intuitive that WGs will show a pre-occupation with the gender implications of various interests. And WGs have certainly emphasised women's homogeneity in their pursuit of political equality (see also Jonasdottir 1988, Young 1990). Further, there has been a lack of clear articulation of WG activities and goals in 'diversity' terms, perhaps partly due to a perceived need to play down criticism of their alleged divisiveness. However, the need to respond to diversity has been increasingly acknowledged by the union movement. For example, a TUC (1997) report emphasised the need to tackle the difficulties around organising young women. The first TUC (2003) equal opportunities audit of unions outlined the Transport and General Workers' Union's (TGWU) plans to address the under-representation of black, disabled, young and lesbian women over the next couple of years. While there is little academic work at the WG level, independent analysis of limited SERTUC WRC (2004)⁴ survey data on WGs revealed few examples of organising grounded in gender *and* 'other' identities. And although Kirton and Healy (2004) observe that the women's courses in the TGWU and former MSF pursue cross-cutting identity aims, it is noted elsewhere that the courses exhibited 'elements of a 'difference' approach, ... alongside ... a liberal 'sameness' conception of women's interests, perhaps to the detriment of other disadvantaged and under-represented groups. The courses tend to focus on participants' identity as women ... There were some comments from black women that the courses did not recognize the 'double discrimination' and qualitatively different experiences faced by them within organizational and union structures' (Kirton and Greene 2002b:55).

This article responds to an absence of representative information about WGs across British unions; the need to assess the extent to which they promote equality and democracy ideas, particularly where gender and other social identities intersect; and the relative dearth of analyses of intra-organisational phenomena and power relations (e.g. McLennan 1995).

4. The research

In late 2004, representatives of the 71 TUC affiliates were invited to respond to a survey about any WGs in their union. Potential informants were identified on the basis of their knowledge and/or experience of the union's equality arrangements. They included equality officers, and particularly in smaller unions without specialist officers, senior full-time officials, experienced lay representatives and staff including the general secretary, president, servicing, research and media officers. Combined with supplementary data from the SERTUC WRC (2004) survey and union websites for several non-responding unions, relevant information was produced for WGs in 55 unions (77%), covering 6.6 million (98.7%) affiliate members⁵. The reasonably high survey response rate may relate to: targeting initial union contacts; several telephone calls and emails by the researcher to encourage survey returns; and an option for respondents to reply by email, post and/or telephone. A number of respondents provided more in-depth information about WGs via e-mail and telephone exchanges, semi-structured interviews, and additional formal and informal material appended to

⁴ This survey is conducted every few years to provide a general picture of equality initiatives adopted by individual TUC affiliates.

⁵ Around the time of the survey, several unions were in the process of amalgamation, merger or transfer of engagement. By the end of 2004, the total affiliate population was 67, and other merger activity looks imminent (e.g. Arrowsmith 2004, Waddington 2004, Hall 2004).

their postal surveys⁶. WGs could thus be assessed against a highly representative cross-section of unions.

Data were used to chart the number, types and location of WGs across affiliates, and to assess the equality and democracy notions that inform their features, namely: the rationale for their establishment, aims and agenda. Building on earlier work (Parker 2000, 2003), an equality approach typology (i.e. sameness/liberal, difference/radical, transformational) was extended to include equality notions premised on group-based diversities. The equality approaches were also analysed in relation to democratic arrangements (representative and direct), as outlined by Flynn *et al.* (2004).

5. Main findings

A chart of women's groups

Analysis revealed that 38 of the 55 unions (69%) have some form of equality body (see Table 1). About half (26) house one or (usually) more WGs, and WGs always operate in unions alongside other equality mechanisms, including 'single-strand' identity bodies, general equality and diversity (multi-identity) groups. Unions without WGs are fairly evenly split in terms of whether or not they house other equality collectives. It should be noted that, with its focus on equality *collectives* (i.e. WGs), the table shows only a proportion of the total equality 'effort' emanating from British unions. Many, for example, also have general equality or identity-based posts for individuals (e.g. women's officers, reserved seats for women) as well as issue-based initiatives and campaigns that emphasise women and other constituent member groups.

As Table 1 shows, WGs are located in all of the 10 largest unions and a further 15 of the 26 'medium-sized' unions (i.e. those with 10,000-150,000 members). The only smaller union to have WGs is the National Association for Probation Officers (NAPO). As one might expect, few unions with WGs are overwhelmingly female or male in membership (i.e. have less than 10% female or male members). The only exceptions are the sector-specific RMT (the union for rail, maritime and transport workers, with 10% female membership), the Fire Brigades' Union (FBU, four per cent) which has one of the widest arrays of recorded WG forms, and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF, three per cent). WGs are also fairly evenly spread across public, private and mixed sector unions.

Weighting each *type* of WG as '1' (given imprecise data about the specific number of sub-national

⁶ Although WG data could not be generated for 16 affiliates (see Table 1), they aggregately cover only about 80,000 members, and most of the 150 non-affiliates that were not sampled are very small (Waddington 2004). Reasons provided by a number of affiliate respondents as to why their unions do not house WGs suggest, moreover, that WG and/or other group-based equality arrangements are unlikely to exist in many non-responding unions on account of their small membership size.

Table 1: WG and other identity-based equality groups in TUC affiliates

	Group-based equality mechanisms for other identity groups	No Group-based equality mechanisms for other identity groups
Women's Group(s)	Unison Amicus TGWU GMB USDAW PCS CWU NUT NASUWT GPMU (merged with Amicus in 2004) Unifi (merged with Amicus in 2004) Prospect NATFHE RMT EIS FBU Community (formed from the merger of the ISTC and KFAT in 2004) AUT Equity TSSA POA NUJ Connect ASLEF CATU NAPO	
No Women's Groups	ATL CSP BFAWU Accord SOR NGSU FDA AMO ALGUS NACO AFA	UCATT MU URTU ANGU SCP UCAC CDNA BACM-TEAM NULMW (transfer of engagements to TGWU in 2004) ACM NAEIAC HCSA AEP UBAC BSU WGGB DBSSA

Union n=55. Data not available for 16 affiliates: BALPA, BDA, BECTU, BOS, CSMTS, CYWU, DSA, EFTU, GULO, NACODS, NUDAGO, NUM, NUMAST, PFA, SWSWU and YISA.

Table 2: Women’s Group Types in TUC affiliates

Union Level	Committee		Conference		Course		Network		Email network	Seminar/meeting		Branch	Self-organising group		Section	Working/task/support group/caucus	
	Nat	Other	Nat	Other	Nat	Other	Nat	Other	Nat	Nat	Other		Nat	Other	Nat	Nat	Other
Union																	
Unison	•	•	•	•	•	•		•					•	••			•
Amicus	•	•	•	•	•												
TGWU	•	• (8 R) •	•		•												
GMB	•				•												
USDAW	•	• (7 D)	•														•
PCS	••	•••			•	••				••						•	•
CWU	•	•	•		••	•				••						•	
NUT	•				•	•	•			•	•					•	
NASUWT			••		••	•											
GPMU	•		•		•	•			•								
Unifi	•						•										
Prospect							••										
NATFHE	•		•		••	•	•		•	•	•				•	•	
RMT	•		••		○												
EIS	•																•
FBU	•	•••	•	•	•	••	•	••	•	•	••	•			•	•	•
Community	•	•	•		○												
AUT	•									•							•
Equity	•									•							•
TSSA					•											•	•
POA	•																
NUJ	•				•												
Connect							•		•								
ASLEF	•				•					•							
CATU										•							
NAPO			••							•							
Total	21	26≥	15	3≥	17	10≥	7	3≥	4≥	10	5≥	1≥	1≥	2≥	2	8	6≥

Where nat=national, D=divisional, R=regional.

Union n=26, WG n≥141.

Double or triple dots in a cell indicate more than one WG at national level, or WGs at more than one sub-national level. A ‘hollow’ dot indicates a planned WG.

WGs in each union⁷) yielded a rough ‘count’ of *at least* 141 WGs across 26 unions. Table 2 shows WG types in each union (in order of union membership size). It can be seen that their aggregate range is extensive. Most are national-level structures or operate nationally, usually taking committee, conference, training course form, supporting earlier partial information (e.g. Parker 2003, Morris 1992). Sub-nationally, more WGs are developing. Even taking account of the conservative sub-national estimate, women’s committees and training courses are still the most common WG forms. Although a wide range of WG types exists, these types are ‘generic’ in terms of their commonality across the unions. Few allude to the particular characteristics of their union or its structure though exceptions include explicit sectoral WG arrangements in the FBU, PCS (the main civil service union), TGWU (which has a women, race and equalities sector), Prospect (engineers, scientists, managers and specialists’ union), and the largest public and private sector unions, UNISON and Amicus. In all of the other unions with sub-national WGs, these relate to regional/divisional and local/branch union organisation. UNISON’s large size and diverse membership was emphasised by the presence of self-organising groups at all, including branch, levels. Across the unions, formal structures appear more frequently than less formal mechanisms (e.g. caucuses, email networks), though some forms of the latter are gaining currency.

Few clear links were found between WG ‘age’ (i.e. date of establishment) and structural form other than in the case of ‘virtual’ (email) networks, which are relatively recent developments. Further analysis revealed that some unions have housed WGs only relatively recently (e.g. the medium-sized Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association (TSSA)), and the range of WG types has expanded in at least 18 other unions since the 1990s. For example, the Domestic Violence Task Group in NUT, the teachers’ union, implemented a 2004 Annual Conference motion to augment existing women’s committee, course and seminar/meeting arrangements. Several unions intend to establish new WGs (e.g. RMT and Community plan to hold courses for women members).

Respondents from 24 affiliates supplied reasons for the establishment of what they considered to be their union’s ‘most significant’ WGs. Based on data for at least 62 WGs (located across affiliates that aggregately cover the bulk of British union members), Table 3 shows that most WGs were conceived almost equally as part of union internal organizing strategy as a response to growing rank-and-file consciousness of the need to better serve (women’s) interests via special representation (cf. Heery 1997). Moreover, in the few cases where WGs were seen to arise in response to environmental and ‘other’ factors, the specific examples cited by respondents link to union organising strategy and interest representation⁸. In terms of WG types, organising strategy and representation factors are equally relevant for the setting up of many women’s committees, conferences and task groups, but women’s courses and networks are more likely to be regarded as a tool of union organising strategy.

Respondents regarded virtually all of the reported WGs as ‘long-term’ (radical) arrangements within by and large, liberal democratic union arrangements⁹. In several cases, they observed a connection between growing emphasis on more decentralised democratic arrangements and an organising (cf. servicing) approach, and the setting up of WGs. For example, PCS’s development of a regional structure was regarded as pivotal to WG development. In 2003, the Union halted women’s courses

⁷ For example, in the Association of University Teachers (AUT), ‘(a)s part of its campaigning strategy, the [women’s] committee networks with and helps to support women activists and the setting up of women’s groups in local associations’ (AUT 2004) – data on the actual number of local WGs are not supplied, however.

⁸ Although ‘other’ factors were cited only by the Graphical, Paper and Media Union (GPMU), with respondents suggesting that the Union’s WGs were carried over from previous constituent unions, this reason can perhaps reasonably be inferred in other union cases such as UNISON and Amicus.

⁹ Only in the CWU was a WG (Regional Women’s Committees) viewed as a ‘medium-term’ measure.

at national level and devolved them to regional level - 'the focus was on the bargaining and organising agenda for women and developing reps' skills' (SERTUC WRC 2004:39). Similarly, the biggest challenge seen to face the TSSA's national Women in Focus support group is the need to communicate and organise on a more local/regional basis, moving from more general debates at national level to local workplace campaigns where the agenda is set by the members based on their own experiences.

A regional support group was thus set up to cover the London Divisional Councils and 'allowed to flourish' before regional WGs were rolled out in other regions (see also Parker (2003) on local lay structures in USDAW and the former MSF). A respondent for the FBU commented that a union context of 'a totally open structure and democratic process, (with) officials at all levels' had facilitated the establishment of its many WGs (see Table 2).

Others attributed the establishment of WGs largely to the presence of a 'critical mass' of women, particularly active women. For example, high female membership was cited as a positive influence in the case of PCS; relatedly, the absence of WGs in several other unions was linked by respondents to perceived barriers to women's mobilisation and activism, as well as small female membership numbers. In other unions with WGs, the 'agency' of other equality initiatives and post-holders were seen as key to WG development. For example, the setting up of UNISON's WGs was largely tied to the enthusiasm of Regional Women's Officers and the 'active' nature of Regional Women's Committees. In the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) which organises teachers and lecturers, the significance of the election of a woman to the NEC for the establishment of WGs was observed. A respondent from Equity, the British actors' union, noted that union politics and varying views on how best to pursue equality for women – factors that one might anticipate would be cited by more respondents – had been important influences on the decision to merge its women's committee with the 'general' equality committee for a time.

As is the case with many factors listed as 'pre-conditions' to WG formation, merger activity was conceived both positively and negatively. For instance, in the Community union, the respondent felt that the 'present merger with a union [the National Union of Knitted, Footwear and Apparel Trades (KFAT)] that is 90% women [members]' supported the arrival of WGs. By contrast, several respondents from the former GPMU were apprehensive about the recent merger with Amicus, the largest private sector union, in case WGs were not transferred to it in their current forms while union policy and structural arrangements were hammered out.

Various other union features were cited in relation to the (non-)development of additional WGs. Union leaders and others' attitudes were often viewed as significant in this respect. For instance, respondents from several medium-sized unions (that shall remain unidentified) perceived that leadership disinterest, the view that 'WGs are no longer necessary', 'men's attitudes', an absence of union backing because WGs 'do not meet union objectives and priorities', institutional sexism, and 'lack of enthusiasm on the part of divisional/regional officers' had been key constraints on further WG development. One respondent wrote:

the biggest constraint continues to be male attitudes and a reluctance by many to accept that they need to make their own sacrifices if they are to integrate women fully into the structures and activities of the union, i.e. we now have more women secretaries [in a particular sector] than ever but no/little change in the balance of branch secretary's and chairs which continue to be male dominated.

Table 3: Reasons for the establishment of Women’s Groups

Union	Reasons for establishing Women’s Group(s)			
	... as part of union’s internal organizing strategy	... growing rank-and-file consciousness of the need to better serve (women’s) interests	... response to outside influences	... other factors
Unison	Com, Course, Conf	Com, Course, Conf	Course, Conf	
Amicus	Course	Com, Course		
TGWU	Com	Com, 2 Courses		
GMB	Course	Course		
USDAW	Com, LSupport group	Com, Conf, LSupport group		
PCS	Com, SCom, BCom, RCourse	Com, SCom, RCourse, Seminar	Com, Seminar	
CWU	RCom, Course, Conf	Com, Conf, RCom	Conf	
NUT	Com	Com, Course, Task group	Com, Task group	
NASUWT	Course, RCourse, Conf	Conf	Conf	
GPMU	Email network	Course, Conf		Com, Conf
Unifi		Com		
Prospect	2 Networks			
NATFHE	Com, Course, Conf, Email network	Com, Course, Conf	Com, Conf, Email network	
RMT	Course, Special conference	Conf		
EIS	Working group/caucus	Working group/caucus	Working group/caucus	
FBU	Com, Conf	Conf	Conf	
Community	Com, RCom, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf	Conf	
AUT	Com, Annual meeting, Support group, LSupport Group	Com, Annual meeting, LSupport Group		
Equity	Course, Open meeting	Com, Course, Open meeting	Com	
TSSA	Course, Support group	Course, Support group, RSupport group		
NUJ		Com	Com	
Connect	Virtual network			
ASLEF	Course	Com, Course		
NAPO	Conf	Conf		
WG total for each reason	45	48	16	2

Where S=Sectoral, R=regional, D=Divisional, L=Local, Com=committee, Conf=conference.

Union n=24, WG n≥62 (national-level WGs unless specified: committee n=16; other level committee n≥4; conference n=11; course n=14; other level course n≥2; working/task/support group/caucus n=4; other level working/task/support group/caucus n≥3; (open) meeting/seminar n=3; (virtual/email) network n=5).

Dependence on union decision-making, restructuring and resources was also associated the *subsequent* development and maintenance of existing WGs in several unions. The former Unifi, the finance sector union, typified the situation in many unions whereby the women's committee 'is unlikely to be able to make changes unless the annual Conference agrees such a resolution'. With regard to resources, in the FBU, 'due to the recent dispute, most of their activities were given over to that. [The Union is] now kick-starting their equality work again' (SERTUC WRC 2004:18). The budget allocated to WGs in three unions, the Communication Workers' Union (CWU), Equity and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), was adjudged by respondents to constitute a constraint on their development. Re-emphasising the significance of merger activity for WG arrangements, the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) informant felt that '(a) proposed merger with the AUT [Association of University Teachers] would necessity looking at all our structures anew'.

On the other hand, barriers to WG development cited by PCS and Community respondents included women's caring responsibilities and lack of time, women's lack of confidence, and the absence of female activists. Perhaps of greatest concern are the views of respondents from three of the largest TUC affiliates that a sizeable number of their female members lack enthusiasm or are apathetic about becoming politicised or mobilised. For instance, one observed a:

(l)ack of motivation from women members – they don't like to acknowledge discrimination in the workplace until they become victims of it, i.e. they press the union towards a servicing model rather than an organising model on equality matters.

For unions *without* WGs, one might suspect that this could reflect factors such as restructuring, a small membership, internal politics, and the inability of the union to help resource such initiatives. Unprompted reasons given by respondents included:

- a (large) female membership majority that makes special structures for women 'unnecessary' for addressing problems related to gender issues (nine unions);
- a perception that women's interests and participation are adequately pursued via existing union arrangements, including lay reps and 'general' equality mechanisms (eight unions);
- a small union membership size with inadequate resources with which to establish WGs and/or a belief that union size makes it 'small enough for all to play a part' (four unions);
- a view that equality for all already exists (two unions);
- a (large) male majority membership which makes WGs 'unnecessary' (two unions - cf. RMT, ASLEF or FBU);
- a view that there will be barriers to women's access to WGs even if they exist (two unions);
- a perception that an existing female majority on the union council precludes the need for WGs (one union);
- supposed lack of interest or apathy on the part of women in WGs (one union);
- the union's organisation along industrial or sectional lines (one union);
- suspicion of WGs for dividing the membership and 'hiving off' women's issues from loci of power in the union (one union);
- a perception that the creation of such bodies adds to union bureaucracy (one union);

- and in the case of the Association for College Management (ACM), existing access for women members to an external WG in the form of a women manager's network.

While there were few accounts of WG 'demise', some examples were cited. Prior to its transfer of engagements to the TGWU in 2004, for example, women's meetings in the National Union of Lock and Metal Workers (NULMW¹⁰) were stopped following a fall in attendance. This was seen as due to the timing of meetings, women's child and domestic responsibilities and difficulties associated with travelling in winter months. In CATU, the 'potters' union', the women's section disbanded (again) in 1996 due to apparent 'lack of interest' (SERTUC WRC 1997). The small Writers' Guild of Great Britain's (WGGB) women's committee (established in 1983) dispersed after 10 years when it was

no longer deemed necessary as, thanks to [it], women were strongly represented on the union council and all the craft committees, and they were therefore able to take up any matters relating to women in particular.

And when the Executive Council of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU) indicated that it would take a Rule change to its 1986 Conference to set up a women's section with its own committees, conference and seat on the Executive, most women and men in the union were reported to have felt that this would 'lead to 'women's issues' being sidelined into what one branch described as a cul-de-sac'.

However, several respondents in unions that currently do not house WGs indicated that WGs might be set up in future or at least that the union would not be averse to the idea. For example, although the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT) does not currently house any WGs, the informant noted that 'if any interest is shown – a group would be set up'. WGs 'may be something for the [Derbyshire Building Society Association (DBSSA)] to look at'. The FDA, the senior civil servants' union, is currently looking into creating a women's network, particularly given their apparent absence in most government departments, and the Nationwide Group Staff Union (NGSU) is considering the establishment of a women's advisory committee.

In sum, WG presence is linked to union size and membership gender-make-up. In affiliates where they exist, there is often more than one WG. Their overall number looks likely to continue to slowly increase. Despite the aggregate range of WG forms, their structural types are common to a number of affiliates. Most WGs operate nationally, though more sub-national and less formal WG types are developing. Their structural make-up rarely reflects an obvious pre-occupation with gender and other identity-based constituent groups. However, WGs operate alongside other union equality mechanisms, some of which are described as diversity bodies. WGs are generally regarded as both part of union organising strategy and a response to grass-roots consciousness of the need to better serve (women's) interests via special representation. 'Push' factors for the establishment and progress of WGs include increasingly decentralised democratic union arrangements and the adoption of a union 'organising' approach. Organisational restructuring linked to merger activity was regarded by some respondents as both an opportunity for and constraint on WG development.

¹⁰ For an examination of equality mechanisms in this union before the transfer of engagements, see Sayce *et al.* (2001).

Women's groups: aims and agenda - gender *and* diversity foci?

The titles and organising bases of most WGs, as group mechanisms, provide few clues of a preoccupation with *both* gender and 'other' identities (i.e. intra- and trans-gender diversities) though some have organised around gender and work-centred differences (e.g. Prospect's Women in Science and Engineering (Wisenet) network, the TGWU's sector-based women's courses). Further, evidence of structural modification to individual posts *within* WGs to reflect diversity was fairly scarce¹¹. We thus now move on to explore other key facets of WG organisation for any evidence of such. The first feature assessed in terms of approaches to equality and democracy were their aims¹². We also examined the issues that WGs address in these terms.

Table 4 shows the 'top' aims of at least 70 WGs from 25 unions. Table 4 shows WG objectives by WG type. Unions with multiple WGs (most of those reported in the table) often witness their wide range of objectives that relate to the union, workplace and other contexts. The aims reflect both instrumental ambitions (e.g. to help recruit) and more ideologically-driven roles (e.g. to pursue consensus-seeking amongst diverse constituencies). Focusing on the table column totals (i.e. the approximate number of WGs that pursue each broad aim), three key objectives become apparent for many WGs: i) to increase women's union representation and presence, ii) to raise women's general profile in their union, and iii) to develop women's union-related skills (e.g. knowledge of their union, experience in handling union-related situations). This emphasis of union-centred aims is interesting given the accent of previous work on externally-orientated WG goals (e.g. Cockburn (1989) on women's organising in the workplace).

With regard to WG types, more purpose-specific WGs (such as (virtual/email) networks and task groups) generally pursue a narrower array of aims than other WG forms. And although different WG types overlap to some extent, particular WG forms can be broadly associated with certain aims. For instance, women's committees, conferences, annual meetings/seminars and courses often aim to improve women's representation in the union, which, in the case of committees and conferences, links to the objective of raising women's profile generally. These WGs also frequently provide a forum for discussing substantive and procedural aims and issues concerning women within and beyond the union. Committees are most likely to encourage the union to include issues of concern to women in negotiations and to monitor union progress on such (though only six WGs were recorded as undertaking the latter). This points up their role as co-

¹¹ Among the few examples is the Black and Ethnic Minority Women's Network (BWN) in the former MSF, which is organised on the basis of gender and ethnicity (Parker 2000). The CWU survey respondent indicated that there is a proposal to make its national women's committee 'more reflective of membership, e.g. (with) black and lesbian seats'.

¹² Earlier research has shown that as well as explicit aims, WGs often pursue implicit or unarticulated aims (Parker 2003). In relation to the former MSF and to USDAW, reasons for this include some groups' apparently unconscious pursuit of particular aims, and concern that their articulation will meet with considerable opposition, particularly when they involve 'longer' equality ambitions. Explicit or articulated aims were focused on here as it was thought unlikely that respondents, as official union representatives, would or could provide data on 'implicit' WG aims.

Table 4: Aims of different WG types in TUC affiliates

Union	Women's Group Aims											
	Increase women's union representation/ presence	Raise women's union profile	Develop women's union-related skills	Develop women's interpersonal /confidence skills	Help women network in/outside the union	Raise issues to union platforms	Influence union to include issues in negotiations	Monitor union progress on 'women's issues'	Encourage change in union structures/ operation	Provide a social forum for women	Pursue political aims for women	Other
Unison	Com, RCom, Conf	RCom, Conf	Com		Com (outside), RCom	RCom, Conf	Com, Conf			RCom	Com	Conf (women's organising, pensions)
Amicus	Com, Course, Conf	Com, Conf	Course	Course	Conf, Course	Com	Com, Conf		Com		Conf	
TGWU	Com, 2 Courses, Conf	2 Courses	2 Courses	2 Courses	2 Courses	Com	Com				Com	
GMB	Course	Course	Course	Course								
USDAW	Com, DCom, Conf, LSupport group	Com, Conf LSupport group	LSupport group	LSupport group	LSupport group	Com, DCom, Conf			Com, DCom, Conf	DCom	Com	Com, DCom, Conf, LSupport group (recruitment)
PCS	Com, SCom, BCom, RCourse	RCourse, Seminar	SCom, BCom, RCourse	SCom, BCom	Com, BCom	Com, Seminar	SCom, BCom	Com, SCom				Com, RCourse (advise NEC on women's bargaining/campaign issues), Seminar
CWU	Com, RCom, Course	RCom, Course, Conf	Course, RCourse	Course, RCourse	Conf	Com, RCom, Conf	Com		Com, RCom, Conf		Com, RCom, Conf	
NUT	Com	Com, Course	Course	Task group, Course	Task group (outside)	Com	Com, Task group	Com				Task group (women's external profile, monitor ext. bodies progress for women)
NASUWT	Course, RCourse, Conf	Course, RCourse, Conf	Course, RCourse			Conf	Conf					Conf (external change campaign)
GPMU	Com, Course, Conf	Conf	Course, Conf	Course	Course, Conf, Email network	Com	Com	Com	Com			
Unifi	Com	Com					Com	Com				Com (Action Plan – WLB, pensions)
Prospect					2 networks	2 networks	2 networks					
NATFHE	Course (women, black, lesbian, disabled)	Com, Conf, Course	Conf, Email network, Course	Course	Conf, Email network	Com	Com	Email network		Conf	Com, Conf, Email network	
RMT	Course, Special Conf	Course, Conf	Course, Special Conf	Course	Course	Conf	Conf			Conf		
EIS	Working group/caucus	Working group/caucus	Working group/caucus		Working group/caucus	Com	Working group/caucus					Com (equality for teachers & lecturers, edn policy & practice)
FBU	Com	Com, Conf	Com, Course	Course	Com	Conf	Conf		Conf		Com	Conf (international affairs)
Community	Com, DCom, Conf	Com, DCom	Com, DCom	Com, DCom					Com, DCom, Conf			
AUT	Annual meeting, LSupport group	LSupport group	Com, Annual meeting, LSupport group	Com	LSupport group	Com	Com, Annual meeting		Com, Annual meeting (union policy & structure)			Support group, LSupport group (women on union Council & locally)
Equity	Course, Open meeting	Com, Course	Course	Course	Course, Open meeting	Com			Com			Com (external change)
TSSA	Course, Support group, RSupport group	Course, RSupport group	Course, Support group, RSupport group	Course, Support group	Support group	Course			Support group			Support Group, RSupport Group (link to other union WGs)
NUJ	Com		Course	Course	Com	Com			Com			Com (gain more resources for women)
Connect	Virtual network	Virtual network	Virtual network		Virtual network	Virtual network						
ASLEF	Com, Course, Annual meeting	Com, Annual meeting	Course	Course	Course, Annual meeting	Com, Annual meeting					Annual meeting	
CATU	Seminar	Seminar				Seminar	Seminar					Seminar (run campaigns)
NAPO	Conf, Annual meeting	Conf	Annual meeting			Conf	Conf					
Total WGs	53	42	37	23	29	30	23	6	17	4	12	20

Where S=Sectoral, R=regional, D=Divisional, B=Branch, L=Local, Com=committee, Conf=conference.

Union n=25, WG n≥70 (national-level WGs unless specified: committee n=16, other level committee n≥6, conference n=13, course n=15, other level course n≥2, working/task/support group/caucus=4, other level working/task/support group/caucus≥3, (open) meetings/seminars n=6, email network n=3, network n=2).

ordinators. As one might anticipate, women's courses are commonly concerned with the pursuit of developmental goals for women.

Many WGs, particularly women's networks, also help women to connect with and support each other. For example, the branch-level women's self-organising groups in UNISON provide a forum where women meet, discuss issues of concern and provide advice to branches on promoting women's equality at work and in the union. As part of its campaigning strategy, the AUT women's committee networks with and supports women activists and the establishment of WGs in local associations. There is also an informal structure to support women members of the Union's Council. As the largest WG forums, women's conferences are most likely to outline political objectives for women. A range of WG types help with recruiting, both via 'sameness' (e.g. recruiting men and women) and 'difference' (e.g. targeting women and/or sub-groups of women) approaches.

The vast majority of WGs have their aims regularly set or authorised by the union, and they pursue aims that align with those of their union. However, a number of respondents who commented that unions authorise WG aims also indicated that WGs have considerable autonomy when deciding which goals they want to pursue in the first place. Further, while WGs are mindful of 'informal' union influences on their operations (e.g. political slates, loci of power in the union), women's committees in particular were generally seen to self-determine *how* they try to achieve their aims. These aspects of WG agency may help to account for the pursuit of WG aims via a range of equality and democratic approaches. For example, a 'sameness' equality goal is emphasised by the widespread WG objective to increase representation of women in existing (i.e. liberal democratic) union structures, while 'difference-based' equality is emphasised by WGs that focus on *women's* recruitment, special representation and/or so-called 'women's issues'. Though there was less evidence of such, transformational equality notions are reflected by the aim of some WGs to encourage general change in their union's culture and representative structures (in particular, see the ninth column, 'Encourage change in union structures/operation', in Table 4).

As with WG structures, most WGs' aims do not show an explicit pursuit of diversity interests though those shown in Table 4 may encompass strategies that emphasise intra- and trans-gender diversity in practice. Thus, we turn now to another dimension of WG organisation – agenda issues – to assess any evidence of such. Tables 5a and 5b show the main issues covered by at least 74 different types of WGs respectively located in 25 unions¹³. Some cells in the tables display specific issue examples (in brackets). As the tables reveal, aggregately, WGs cover a broad range of procedural and substantive matters that relate to their union and beyond. As with WG aims, some WGs focus on a narrower range of matters than others, according to their chosen or prescribed remit. For example, the Task Group in NUT focuses on domestic violence, while women's committees and conferences in many unions have a virtually 'open' agenda. Indeed, data from respondents across 14 unions indicated a fairly even split in terms of their WGs' pursuit of union/internal issues and external matters, though one informant added that:

¹³ In view of the large number of concerns addressed by WGs, union- and externally-centred issues are displayed in these separate tables though their connections in many instances is acknowledged. This list of issues derives from selected and open responses.

women need their own house [the union] in order – before or at least at the same time as looking at external matters for women.

The data reveal that different unions' WGs vary in their overall emphasis of spheres of interest (though most address issues pertaining to the union and environment), reflecting factors such as the characteristics and circumstances of members, the union and WGs themselves.

However, for a number of affiliates, there is a considerable range of common issues. The most common *union*-centred issues pursued by WG are: women's union representation and presence, union organising and participation by women, changes to union structures and procedures to help women access their union, and dealing with sexism and harassment in that context. Women's committees, courses and conferences tend to deal with the widest range of union-related matters. They are also most likely to examine change in the union setting, while a number of women's courses focus on skills building. In terms of externally-centred matters, the most common matters relate often relate to the workplace but increasingly beyond: sexual harassment and bullying; pay (including equal pay, low pay and equal value); working time (including flexible working, casualisation, work-life balance and family-friendly working); maternity, paternity and childcare issues; domestic violence; and women's health and safety. All of these issues have been increasingly addressed in mainstream union forums and negotiations, moreover, due in part to WGs' role in progressing them to various union platforms (see Table 6).

In terms of the three diversity dimensions defined earlier, the tables show that intra-gender diversity issues are not addressed by most unions' WGs. Notwithstanding this, at least 18 WGs in nearly a half (11) of the participating unions deal with female sub-group diversity in the union setting, both in terms of procedural/representation and substantive matters (see shaded columns in Table 5a). At least 28 WGs from 15 (two-thirds) of the unions were address externally-orientated intra-gender diversity matters (see shaded column in Table 5b). All of the unions with WGs that address union-centred intra-gender diversity – UNISON, Amicus, TGWU, USDAW, NATFHE, EIS, FBU, AUT, NUJ, CWU and ASLEF – also deal with this dimension of diversity in respect of external matters¹⁴. This *bulk* of all affiliate members are located in unions where WGs are concerned with women's diversity to some extent.

¹⁴ According to survey data, Community, ASLEF, Equity, PCS, RMT and TSSA address externally-orientated intra-gender diversity issues only.

Table 5a: Union-centred issues addressed by Women's Groups

Union	Internally-centred issues addressed by Women's Groups											
	Women's (proportional) union representation	Women's representation on external union groups	Special union posts/ structures for women	Change to union structures/ procedures to help women's involvement	Change to union customs/ culture	Representation of women sub-groups (e.g. lesbian)	Women and sexism	Women & race, age(ism), sexuality and/or disability	Women's development/ skills-building related to the union	Organising/ participation by union women	Recruitment	Other women-union relations issues
Unison	Com, RCom, Course, Conf	Com	Com, Course	Com, RCom, Course, Conf	Com	Com	Com	Com	Course	Com, Course, Conf	Com	Com, Course (harassment, women's facility time, time-off)
Amicus	Course					Course	Course	Course	Course		Course	
TGWU	Com, RCom, Course, Conf		Com, RCom	Com, RCom		Com, RCom, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf		Com, RCom, Course, Conf	RCom, Course	Com, RCom (women's time off, paid release), Conf
GMB			Com (reserved seats)						Course (confidence-building, communication)			
USDAW	Com, DCom, Conf		Com, DCom	Com, DCom, Conf	Com, DCom, Conf		Com, DCom, Conf	Com, DCom, Conf (recruit young women)		Com, DCom, Conf (assess/coordinate coms), LSupport group	Com, DCom, Conf, LSupport group	Com, DCom, Conf
PCS	Com			Com	Com		Com		Course	Com, SCom, BCom, Course		Seminar (caring duties)
CWU	Com, RCom, Conf	Com	Com, RCom, Conf	Com (regional structure)	Com, Conf	Com (ethnic, disabled, lesbian)	Com, RCom, Conf	Com, Conf		Com, Course, RCourse	Com, Conf	Conf (harassment)
NUT*	Com			Com	Com				Course			Course (harassment & bullying)
NASUWT	Course, RCourse, Conf								Course, RCourse	Course, RCourse		
GPMU*	Com, Course	Com		Com			Com, Course			Conf, Course		Conf, Course (harassment & bullying)
Unifi*	Com	Com			Com							
Prospect										2 networks		
NATFHE*	Com, Course, Conf	Com	Com	Com, Conf	Com, Conf	Course (black, lesbian, disabled)	Com, Conf	Com, Conf	Course	Network, Course		Course (harassment & bullying)
RMT	Com, Course, Conf				Com	Com			Course	Com, Course, Conf		
EIS*							Working group/ caucus	Working group/ caucus				
FBU	Com, Conf	Com			Com, Course		Com, Conf	Com	Course	Conf	Course	
Community	Com, DCom	Com, DCom	Conf	Com, DCom	Com, DCom		Com, DCom		Course	Course		
AUT	Com, Annual meeting										Com	Support group, LSupport group
Equity	Com	Com		Com	Com					Open meeting		Com
TSSA	Support group, RSupport group, Course		RSupport group	Support group, RSupport Group						Com, RSupport group		
NUJ	Com			Com			Com	Com	Course	Course		
Connect*												
ASLEF	Com				Com	Com			Course (assertiveness)	Com		Com
CATU	Seminar	Seminar										
NAPO	Conf, Annual meeting									Conf, Annual meeting		Conf
Total WGs	44≥	10≥	13≥	21≥	18≥	9	22≥	15≥	13≥	38≥	12≥	19≥

Where S=Sectional, R=Regional, D=Divisional, L=Local, Com=committee, Conf=conference.

Union n=25, WG n≥74 (national WGs unless specified: committee n=19, other level committees n≥7, conference n=11, course n=16, other level course n≥2, working/task/support group/caucus n=5, other level working/task/support group/caucus n≥3, (open) meetings/seminars n=4, (virtual/email) network n=7).

*No union-centred issues recorded for the NUT task group (domestic violence), GPMU email network, the Unifi network, NATFHE email network, EIS Gender Sub-Committee, and Connect virtual network.

Table 5b: Externally-centred issues addressed by Women's Groups

Externally-centred issues addressed by Women's Groups														
Union	Pay (equal, equal value, low, etc.)	Working time (e.g. flexi, part, long, work-life balance)	Women's access to/ promotion at work	Maternity/ Paternity leave, childcare	(Sexual) harassment/ bullying, sexism	Domestic violence	Women's health and safety	Women & race, age(ism), sexuality &/or disability	Represent -ation of women on external bodies	Changes to work customs/ culture for women	Women and UK community issues	Law/ legal changes	Women in developing nations/ international affairs	Other
Unison	Com, RCom, Course, Conf (equal value, pensions & same-sex partners' rights)	Com, RCom, Course, Conf (flexi-, part-time working)	Com, RCom, Conf (women & senior jobs)	Com, RCom, Course, Conf	Com, RCom, Course, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf (endometriosis, breast cancer, child abuse, SIDS)	Com, RCom, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf	Com (refugees, women & poverty, retirement), RCom, Conf	Com, RCom, Course, Conf (EU equality law, equal pay cases)	Com, RCom, Conf (female circumcision, violence & women, Iraq)	Com, RCom, Conf (Agenda for Change, facility time)
Amicus	Com	Com						Com				Com		
TGWU	Com, Course, Conf (equal, low pay, pensions)	Com, Course, Conf (family friendly, part-timers)	Com, Course, Conf	Com, RCom, Course, Conf	Com, RCom, Course, Conf	Com, RCom, Course, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf	Com, RCom, Conf		Com, Course, Conf	Com, RCom, Course, Conf	Com, Course, Conf	Com, RCom, Course, Conf (globalisation, Europe links & women)	Com, Course, Conf (paid release, organising domestic, home & care workers)
GMB*	Com	Com (WLB)			Com	Com					Com (child poverty)		Com	Com (pensions)
USDAW	Com, DCom (equal value, low pay), Conf	Com, DCom, Conf (hours, casualisation, job insecurity - & by sector)	Com, DCom, Conf (time off for family duties)	Com, DCom, Conf	Com, DCom, Conf	Com, DCom, Conf	Com, DCom (sickle cell anaemia, thalassaemia, pregnancy, alcohol, drugs), LSupport group	Com, DCom, Conf (women & youth crime)				Com, DCom, Conf (Working Time Directive)	Com, DCom, Conf	Com, DCom, Conf ('no no go areas')
PCS*	Com, SCom, (women and pensions), RCourse, Seminar	Com (flexitime & 'career suicide', long hours, part-timers, WLB), SCom, RCourse	Com, SCom, RCourse	Com, SCom, RCourse, Seminar (caring duties)	Com, RCourse, Seminar	Com, RCourse, Seminar	Com (reproductive health, breast feeding), RCourse, Seminar	Com, RCourse	Com	Com, RCourse			Com (international solidarity, fair trade), RCourse	Com, SCom, RCourse
CWU		Com, RCom, Conf (flexible)	Com, Conf		Com, RCom, Conf	Com, Conf, Course, RCourse	Com (breast cancer, abortion)	Com	Com (women in parliament)	Com, Conf	Com, Conf (women & poverty)	Com, Conf	Com, Conf (Columbia, Cuba, human trafficking)	Com, Conf (medicals, loss of work, child labour)
NUT		Course (part-timers)	Com, Course (moving into mgt)	Com	Com, Course, Task group	Task group	Course (stress and well-being), Task group			Com	Com, Task group (women and poverty)			Com, Course (planned Single Equality Body, curriculum, supply teachers)
NAS-UWT*	Conf (pensions)	Conf (workload, WLB)	Conf		Conf (gay bullying, mgt bullies)								Conf	Course, RCourse, Conf (curriculum)
GPMU	Course, Conf	Course, Conf, (temp workers), Email network		Com, Conf	Com, Course, Conf	Com, Conf	Com					Com, Conf (recognition rights, legal cases)	Conf (exploited overseas call centre workers, Columbia)	Email network Conf (social network, company sell-offs, TUPE)
Unifi	Com		Com	Com	Com, Network	Com	Com							
Prospect	2 networks	2 networks (flexi, part-time)	2 networks	2 networks	2 networks	2 networks	2 networks			2 networks			2 networks (globalisation, human rights)	2 networks
NATFHE	Com, Course Conf (gender pay gap)	Com, Course Conf	Com, Course Conf	Com, Course Conf	Com, Course Conf	Com, Course, Conf (homophobia)		Com, Course, Conf (black women in further/ higher edn)	Course, Conf (equal representation in parliament)	Com, Course, Conf	Com, Course, Conf (women & poverty)	Course, Conf	Course, Com, Conf (peace, commodification of women, asylum policy)	Email network, Network (teaching, curriculum)
RMT*	Com	Com (flexible working)	Com, Conf	Com, Conf (childcare)	Com, Conf	Conf	Com, Conf (pregnancy)	Com, Conf				Conf		
EIS				Working group/caucus	Com, Working group/caucus			Working group/caucus		Working group/caucus				Com (equality for teachers and lecturers, edn policy & practice)
FBU	Conf	Course, Conf (Fairness at Work)		Com, Conf	Com, Conf	Com, Course, Conf	Com, Course, Conf (female firefighter & radiation)	Com, Conf	Com	Com			Conf	
Community				Com, DCom, Course		Com, DCom, Conf	Com, DCom	Com, DCom	Com, DCom					

Table 5b continued: Externally-centred issues addressed by Women's Groups

Union	Externally-centred issues addressed by Women's Groups													
	Pay (equal, equal value, low, etc.)	Working time (e.g. flexi, part, long, work-life balance)	Women's access to/promotion at work	Maternity/Paternity leave, childcare	(Sexual) harassment/bullying, sexism	Domestic violence	Women's health and safety	Women & race, age(ism), sexuality &/or disability	Represent-ation of women on external bodies	Changes to work customs/culture for women	Women and UK community issues	Law/legal changes	Women in developing nations/international affairs	Other
AUT*	Com, Annual meeting (equal pay, local pay bargaining)	Com, Annual meeting (casualisation)	Com (job grading)		Com					Com, Annual meeting				Com (gender & distribution of goods & benefits in higher edn, structural discrimination)
Equity	Com		Com (casting: access to acting parts)	Com	Com		Com	Com			Com (equal pay test case)		Com, Open meeting (women & politics, women on TV and film)	
TSSA	Support group, RSupport group	Support group (flexi, family friendly, WLB)	Support group (women in mgt)				Course, Support group (handling stress)	Support group, RSupport group		Support group			Support group (Int'l Women's Day)	Course (pensions, women in politics, social)
NUJ	Com			Com	Com	Com		Com					Com (IFJ Gender Council)	Course
Connect	Virtual network	Virtual network (WLB for carers)				Virtual network								
ASLEF		Com, Course		Com	Com, Course	Com	Com, Course (washing facilities, cab & bag design, drink & drugs)	Com (retirement)					Com (Int'l Women's Day)	Com (Single Equality Body), Course (facility breaks)
CATU				Seminar	Seminar		Seminar (toxic shock syndrome, breast care)							
NAPO	Conf	Conf, Annual meeting (WLB)												Conf, Annual meeting (women in probation)
Total WG	35≥	39≥	28≥	36≥	44≥	37≥	32≥	28≥	10≥	21≥	15≥	19≥	26≥	36≥

Where S=Sectional, R=Regional, D=Divisional, L=Local, Com=committee, Conf=conference.

Union n=25, WG n≥74 (national WGs unless specified: committee n=19, other level committees n≥7, conference n=11, course=14, other level course n≥4, working/task/support group/caucus n=4, other level working/task/support group/caucus≥3, (open) meetings/seminars n=5, (virtual/email) network n=7)

*No externally-centred issues recorded for the GMB Confidence Building course for Women, NASUWT course and regional course, PCS local committee, RMT course and AUT national and local support groups.

Table 6: Perceptions of WG agenda

In the last two years in the union ...	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
... the WG(s) have developed an expanding agenda concerning women member-union relations	4	2	4	4	
... the WG(s) have developed an expanding agenda concerning women's lives outside the union	2	6	3	3	
... issues raised by the WG(s) have become increasingly common in the national union agenda	3	9		2	
... issues raised by the WG(s) have become increasingly common in union-employer bargaining	3	6	5		
... more issues raised to the union by WG(s) have become union agenda priorities		8	5	1	
... the union has treated issues raised by the WG(s) separately from other union issues/business		2	5	7	
... the WG(s) have developed a more central role in the union	3	2	4	5	
... the WG(s) have been important players for raising issues of relevance to women to various union platforms	3	9		2	
... external groups/organisations have actively responded to issues raised by the WG(s)*	2	3	7	1	
... the WG(s) should have pursued a wider range of issues	1	4	2	5	2
... the WG(s) mostly pursued union-related /internal issues rather than external issues for women	2	3	3	5	1

Union n=14, covering WG n≥91).

* The respondent for Connect did not perceive the statement to be applicable to its women's networks.

Respondents from: Unifi, FBU, Community, PCS, NATFHE, UNISON, Prospect, NUJ, NUT, EIS, GPMU, Connect, CWU and TSSA.

In terms of inter-gender diversity, the tables show that most WGs address the more ‘traditional’ gender-linked job/pay concerns (e.g. see column 1 of Table 5b). WGs in PCS, TGWU, UNISON, FBU and USDAW were also recorded for addressing issues relating to women’s horizontal and vertical location in their respective workplace sectors. However, some WG issues simultaneously address intra- and inter-gender diversity pertaining to gender, economic status/class and *other* social identities (e.g. race) – Table 5b provides examples of WG coverage of ethnic minority women’s access to better jobs, for instance. Beyond the workplace, some also raise consciousness about women and poverty in Britain, and increasingly abroad (e.g. the international commodification of women).

‘Trans-gender’ diversity was found to be addressed by a small but significant core of WGs, in relation to people in unions and other contexts, both in Britain and abroad. Examples of such issues include harassment and bullying, community concerns (e.g. drugs, youth crime), the legal system, asylum seeking, child labour and international human rights (see Tables 5a and 5b). As with other diversity matters, WG attention to such can be more or less implicit. For example, by addressing the concerns of women in the third world, women of particularly ethnicities and cultures are highlighted. Consciousness-raising of sickle cell anaemia and thassalemia by WGs in USDAW simultaneously promotes awareness of a condition that predominantly affects black people. In UNISON, WGs’ attention to pensions and the rights of surviving same-sex partners addresses gender and sexuality. In addition, certain intra-gender diversity matters have been reconstrued as trans-gender diversity matters by WGs in some cases. For instance, while childcare is seen by some WGs as an issue of direct concern for a sub-group of women, others have recast it as a matter of general concern.

Diversity matters are most commonly addressed by the WGs with the widest remits and experience: women’s committees, conferences and courses. However, as with WG aims, WG interests (including those that concern diversity) are infused with sameness, difference and/or transformational notions of equality and democracy. For instance, ‘sameness’ equality that acknowledges intra-gender difference is emphasised by certain WGs in Amicus, ASLEF, TGWU, UNISON and USDAW that seek better representation of ethnic minority, lesbian/gay, disabled, and age-defined women on existing union structures. Some of these WGs also emphasise ‘difference/transformation’ in equality and democratic arrangements via calls for special representative mechanisms and modification of union organisation that ‘stretches’ its liberal democratic premise (see also Leidner 1991) to better represent particular female sub-groups.

The WG ‘diversity agenda’ shows signs of developing further. It emerged that a number of WGs that address diversities have continued to do so or to have taken on such issues in the last two years. Further, attention to diversity within some unions is reinforced by the pursuit of overlapping concerns by WGs and other union parties, increasingly via joint activities such as campaigns and conferences. For example, annual conferences in the FBU for black and for LGBT members and the National Fairness at Work Committee cover a number of issues that are also raised at the Annual Women’s Conference (e.g. rights, equality issues, international affairs and current issues affecting the union and its members). NATFHE’s Equality Advisory Council has sub-groups for women, black, disabled and LGBT members. According to the Union’s respondent, their shared issues are perceived to be ‘numerous’ and to include ‘trans-gender

issues'. In 2001, a workshop entitled 'Inclusivity: What makes women, and specifically black women, lesbian women and disabled women, feel excluded from unions' was run at the Annual Women's Conference. Attendees agreed, as members of the union, women must take a proactive approach at all union levels. In Community, there is a 'strong link between women and disability networks [widely conceived]', reflecting the key interests of one of its constituent unions, the National League for the Blind and Disabled (NLBD) while in NUJ, WG coverage of women refugees and asylum seekers links to the agenda of the Black Members' and Disabled Members' Councils. In PCS, issues of equality legislation, discrimination in pay and appraisal, access to training and union structures were conjointly considered by WGs, the National Race and Disability Forums, the self-organising LGBT group and national officers covering gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, religion and age. A respondent for UNISON indicated that 'all four self-organised groups regularly liaise with/overlap one another over issues that affect members'. In the CWU, WGs and other equality mechanisms deal with trans-gender and transsexual issues. USDAW's National Conference of Women's Committees co-organises workshops for black and asian women with the union Education Department to attract long-term female members who have not previously attended a Union event. The TGWU plans to tackle the under-representation of black, disabled, young and lesbian women through 'positive encouragement' (SERTUC WRC 2004).

Further, it emerged that diversity-based and other issues are increasingly likely to be pursued by some WGs in alliance with external groups, emphasising a 'partnership' approach. For instance, WGs in PCS operate with outside bodies via the Union's Equality Department. WGs in a number of unions have linked up with outside WGs (a common example is Women's Refuge), other-identity based mechanisms (e.g. the Black TUC Conference), and organisations and movements premised on other identities or goals (e.g. Amnesty International, the International Free Trades Union Congress (ICFTU), TUC, government departments).

Responses to statements about WG agenda were gathered from informants in 14 major unions¹⁵ covering at least 91 WGs. As Table 6 shows, in about half of these unions, WGs were shown to have developed an expanding agenda of union- *and* externally-centred issues. Opting to 'do what they do well' rather than over-extending themselves may also be a factor in the non-expansion of WG agenda where this was not the case. In the former GPMU, for example, this may reflect a recent emphasis, prior to the merger, on 'consolidating and building on previous work, trying to ensure, through the women's conference and branch activities, that new people are involved ... [and] to build and strengthen the equality networks'.

WGs were generally seen – by their officials, active members and staff at least – as having progressed a number of issues through their union. As Table 6 shows, in almost all of the unions (the exceptions being Prospect and NUT), issues raised by WGs were considered by respondents to be increasingly common in the national union agenda though only just over half (from eight unions) felt that more issues raised by WGs have recently become union agenda *priorities* (see row 5). Respondents from nine unions perceived that WG issues have become increasingly common in union-employer bargaining (the remaining five responded neutrally). This supports evidence that suggests WGs have been set up partly to facilitate better interest representation (see

¹⁵ Community, Connect, CWU, EIS, FBU, GPMU, NATFHE, PCS, Prospect, NUJ, NUT, TSSA, Unifi and UNISON.

Table 3). Virtually all of the respondents (12) agreed that WGs have been important players for raising issues of relevance to women to various union platforms (irrespective of outcome), and five respondents indicated that external groups have actively responded to issues raised by the WGs. Correspondingly, half (seven) of the respondents disagreed that their union has treated WG issues separately from other union issues/business (a key concern for WGs according to previous research – see Parker 2003) though they were evenly split as to whether or not WGs have developed a more central role in their union. While half (seven) of the respondents disagreed that their WGs should have pursued a wider range of issues, five agreed with the statement – even though their WGs already embrace a very wide agenda – signalling a perception that much work remains to be done. Further, some respondents indicated elsewhere that the progress of issues to union platforms occurred more slowly and patchily than they would like, sometimes against pressures (e.g. lack of active support from the mainstream, resources) that encourage their displacement from union agenda.

In short, WG aims relate to the union and beyond. However, the three most common are union-centred: women's union representation/power and presence, union profile and union-related skills. Certain WG types pursue a more specific range of aims than others. Despite overlap in the aims of different WG types, particular WG forms can be associated with particular aims. Unions usually set or sanction WG aims though women's committees in particular exhibit notable autonomy and creativity in terms of how their aims are pursued. The aggregate WG agenda is very wide-ranging. Again certain WGs are more targeted in their issue coverage than others. Although WGs in different unions vary in their overall emphasis of interests, there are areas of convergence. The most common union-centred matters addressed by WGs are women's union representation and presence, their organisation and union participation, change to union arrangements to encourage women's involvement, sexism and harassment. The most common externally-centred matters are sexual harassment and bullying, pay, working time, parental leave and childcare, (domestic) violence and women's health and safety. WGs have helped to progress some of these issues to union platforms – albeit more gradually and unevenly than some would like. Although only a significant minority of WGs address 'diversity' matters, most union members belong to affiliates with WGs that address diversity to some extent. WG aims and issues (including those emphasising diversity) reflect various notions of sameness, difference and transformational equality and democracy. In many affiliates, overlap in the issues (including diversity matters) pursued by WGs and other equality mechanisms has encouraged jointly co-ordinated operations.

6. Discussion

Implications for WG and union organising

WGs are both familiar and emerging initiatives in many TUC affiliates, particularly in larger, general unions that are neither heavily female- nor male-dominated in membership terms. Exceptions to this picture are the RMT, ASLEF and FBU, each sector-specific and comprising mostly male members; their well organised, militant traditions and culture may help to nurture proactive organising by women. WG numbers and variety reflect a widening view of their relevance to modern-day union organisation. Their location across public, private and mixed sector unions also implies that the traditional 'public sector duty to promote gender equality' cited by one respondent now resonates more broadly. This development is particularly

significant in unions that have long afforded little political or resource support to such initiatives. As identity-based mechanisms, the existence of WGs alongside other equality initiatives premised on other grounds denotes tacit union acknowledgement of the need for a multi-faceted (but as yet unco-ordinated?) approach to equality, interest representation, democracy and, as Heery (1997) and Flynn *et al.* (2004) emphasise, organising strategy.

Notable influences on WG presence also include the existence of a ‘critical mass’ of (active) women; the ‘agency’ of other equality initiatives and post-holders; merger activity and union restructuring; union leaders and others’ attitudes; and support for such initiatives, particularly when WG aims align with union objectives. These and elements such as the level and modes of union decision-making and ‘women-centred’ factors (e.g. caring responsibilities, apathy, confidence levels, presence of female activists in the union) also link to the sustained character of WGs. The dynamic range of WG types may also reflect growing appreciation by unions and female activists of the character of female member-union relations, growing WG experience of ‘what works’, women’s preferences for particular modes of organising, and environmental influences (see also Parker 2002).

The vast majority of WGs recorded by the research are national initiatives, pointing up one of their key roles of raising women’s profile, interests and involvement in the union and beyond. However, the development of more sub-national and informal WG fits with a (re-)emphasis of the ‘organising approach’ in many unions, whereby members become active in and identify more closely with their union. Located at various union levels with varying degrees of ‘grass root’ member involvement, WGs constitute both representative *and* direct democratic forms. Together with the ‘opening up’ of some unions’ democratic arrangements, this development also reflects union sensitivity to women and others’ interests and more effective ways of involving currently inactive union members.

However, the development of sub-national WGs may be reined in unless union and environmental factors are addressed. For instance, substantial reliance on union resources and political tensions over whether such a development may weaken WG adherence to the direction of national union policy may act as a constraint on WG numbers and scale. Well-known external constraints on the expansion of ‘grass-roots’ WG arrangements include women’s caring and domestic responsibilities - the very concerns that a number of WGs seek to address. Of considerable concern, moreover, is the reported apathy and lack of enthusiasm about organising among some female unionists – until they need the union in some way at least. Further, the effectiveness of decentralised WG arrangements may be affected by the presence and support of mechanisms that can help to co-ordinate their policies, operations and resources – a role traditionally undertaken by central women’s committees and conferences (Parker 2003).

One possible avenue for reinforcing the growth of sub-national WGs might involve their reinterpretation - less as union instruments and more as an integral part of an organisational web of and beyond the union. Within unions, for instance, the overlapping agenda issues of WGs and other equality bodies, together with their strengthening links through which shared interests can be pursued, ties in with Briskin’s (1999) advocacy of a dual to build ‘unity in diversity’ and avoid the marginalization of women’s (and other constituent groups’) concerns. Such internal alliance-building may also provide (female) members with a greater number of structural options

through which to pursue their interest – particularly important for members who find it difficult to access or fully identify with WGs and the union as some currently operate¹⁶. External alliances may help to reduce the dependency of local WG development on union resources and political support.

However, WG strategy, scale and activity are largely eclipsed when unions undergo organisational restructuring. Though some authors have emphasised the opportunities as well as the constraints on WG development during a context of structural ‘fluidity’ (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 1996), several respondents here viewed the restructuring occasioned by recent merger activity with trepidation lest it should dilute or side-line current WG arrangements. This highlights the need for WGs to function proactively to emerge well from such processes, particularly when future merger activity may impact on a large share of British union members. For example, Waddington (2004) contends that, coupled to the remaining general unions (TGWU and GMB), the continued emergence of the large private and public sector unions, Amicus and UNISON, appears to ‘thwart any movement towards industrial unionism’ despite the emphasis of the TUC’s (1998) *Millennial Challenge*. WGs need to keep abreast of the factors on which their particular union bases the selection of a merger partner (e.g. overlapping membership, the extent of post-merger autonomy, job security, post-merger support available to their members) in order to protect their position and support base within constituent unions, and to ensure their central involvement in the development of democratic and equality goals in the new organisation. As Waddington notes, for example, mergers ‘only mitigate the effects of decline’, allowing some unions to suspend more intensive recruitment campaigns and providing a ‘low cost alternative’ to the task of organising the unorganised. While the former has often constituted a key WG activity, the latter provides for more WG attention - particularly given their many, often flexible, forms. Existing joint operations involving WGs may also assist the shift of WG power sources to the new union.

On aggregate, the establishment of WGs was attributed more or less equally to growing rank-and-file consciousness of the need to better serve (women’s) interests *and* to further union organising strategy (cf. Heery 1997, Flynn *et al.* 2004). This duality of WG function stresses the agency of women who have been able to access and operate within them, and could help to sustain WGs within unions (indeed, examples of their demise are relatively few). WG longevity also better positions them as champions for ‘getting their own (union) house in order’ in terms of member representation, while providing their union with a lens through which to register and review shifts in equality goals and approaches. Indeed, examples of unions that continue to house WGs even when women achieve ‘sameness’ equality in terms of numeric representation on mainstream structures (cf. WGGB) suggest that equality and democracy *goals* i) evolve and ii) increasingly concern (gender) power relations.

In respect of equality and democracy, few WGs are structured as *groups* along social identity lines other than gender. As well as the practical complexities associated with WG organising according to multiple or cross-cutting identities (and, although the situation is improving, many unions still do not hold statistics on member characteristics other than gender), earlier research

¹⁶ Some unions have established general mechanisms to the same end. For instance, the AUT’s ‘befriending scheme’ comprises volunteers drawn from the membership of groups less visibly represented in the union. ‘They have been trained to take on the role of providing confidential support and basic advice to members and create a link to the formal structures ... Befrienders are not a replacement for existing structures but are intended to make the AUT more accessible and responsive to members’ (AUT 2004, <http://www.aut.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=189>).

revealed some WG caution against it lest they are seen to encroach on the ‘patch’ of other (identity) groups (Parker 2003). Furthermore, multi-identity based WG organisation and efforts were perceived by some to highlight differences over commonalities, thereby promoting a divided (cf. unified) union image, and ‘diluting’ WG allegiance to ‘generic’ women’s interests. Moreover, shifts in women’s mobilisation of identities in response to economic, social, political and cultural processes at different points in time (e.g. Bavnani 1993, Chhachhi and Pittin 1999, Jones 2004, Plantenga 2004)¹⁷ could necessitate frequent re-evaluation of the multi-identity premises of WG arrangements and the emphasis given to each identity. This may help to account for limited evidence of internal modification of WG structures to reflect intra- and trans-gender diversities.

At the same time, current WG forms (i.e. those formally based on gender only) were not viewed by all women as capable of emphasising their priorities at all times, taking ‘ownership’ of particular issues as fully as other identity groups might, or providing an organising context in which they fully identify with the modes of operation (e.g. Kirton and Greene 2002a, Parker 2000). Balancing ‘pan-gender’ and diversity approaches via WG dimensions such as their structure is thus particularly important for those responsible for demonstrating their benefits to union members generally.

WG pursuits – the growing significance of diversity and consensus?

The relative absence of WG organisation reflecting cross-cutting identities encouraged a closer inspection of their actual approaches to equality and democracy. Intra-organisational analysis enabled a robust assessment of diversity and gender equality ideas that infuse WG aims and agenda. WG-level analysis also highlighted WGs as union-located *agents* that seek both union and wider change. Detecting their internal vigour is significant since union-level analyses tend to portray WGs and other proactive equality measures as largely passive instruments of union organising strategy.

Despite their variety, like WG *structures*, WG aims they make little (overt) reference to intra- or trans-gender group diversity, and generally align with union-sanctioned goals. However, the *agenda* of a significant minority of WGs (particularly committees and conferences) clearly include union and wider matters relating to different conceptions of diversity, and attention to such is magnified via joint WG-other party campaigns. There has also been a re-conceptualisation of certain intra-gender diversity matters as shared, trans-gender matters (e.g. childcare). The location of most union members in affiliates with WGs that show some degree of concern with diversity bodes well for WGs’ relevance to union members generally and their promotion of equality and change to a potentially sizeable cross-section of the labour movement. The need to extend WG organisation and ‘reach’ stresses the case for more inter-union WG assemblies where ideas and resources can be cross-fertilised, and for fostering understanding of how unions’ pursuit of equality premised on group diversities can be linked to greater effect with employers’ ‘management of (individual) diversity’ in the workplace. As a key collaborator in the development of union strategy to more effectively represent and organise diverse groups, WGs

¹⁷ The social identity literature tells us little about how and why one identity might be more important at any time than another though leaders and activists can be influential in this respect (Kelly 1998).

may help to recalibrate the emphasis of union attention to balance economic and social justice interests.

The importance of this role is accentuated by continuing heterogenisation of union membership, increased blurring of union-environment boundaries (as emphasised by the Community Union's connections with its members' locales) and evidence here that more issues raised recently via WGs are becoming national concerns and sometimes bargaining issues. WG concern with diversity can thus contribute to union regeneration efforts. Against on-going debate over whether union responses to diverse interests can both satisfy and unify (cf. divide) constituent groups, WGs provide some encouraging ways forward. For example, by emphasising gender unity via their structure and aims, and diversity via their issue base, WGs may increasingly appeal to women generally *and* a more diverse constituent base.

Other factors encouraging WG to embrace diversity relates to the diffusion of a feminist ethic of 'inclusivity' in unions and more generally. Further, diversity notions are considered in much current debate in industrial relations. Connected to feminist inclusivity, WGs may also view their equality and democracy projects – particularly those undertaken with other union parties - as part of a total union equality effort. This is not to suggest that they merely 'soak up' diversity issues to assist other, over-burdened equality groups. Rather, it relates to an intensifying *raison d'être* for WGs to help both progress union organising strategy and see that various group interests are represented more effectively. Fourth, the unions in which WGs exhibit concern with diversity include affiliates with sizeable and varied constituent groups and/or well-established WGs with the experience to extend their interest base. Further, many of the relevant unions have a strong tradition of organising and militancy (e.g. FBU, ASLEF, TGWU, NUJ), potentially providing a culture that is more conducive to the development of WGs with cross-cutting identity pursuits. While recognising that union statements of equality and democracy often reflect ideals that often are not fully exercised in practice, a number of unions are thus learning the significance of implementing measures designed to address diversity to build union unity.

WG contribution to the development of a consensus-seeking approach to union democracy based on diverse interests may also be assisted by their more autonomous elements of operation such as *how* they pursue interests within and around any limits set by union objectives. Their external alliances, for instance, are unique and thus potentially useful for elevating the utility of WGs in the eyes of their union. Some WGs' *own* pre-occupation with diversity and horizontal networking with other WGs reduces the risk of 'isolation' that individual WGs can face within their union. WGs can thereby seek to develop more interdependent (cf. union-dependent) relations, particularly where women and other traditionally under-represented groups continue to account for a growing membership share. WGs' concern with a wider remit could also bolster mainstream responsiveness to their interests and criticisms, and advertise their relevance to unions that do not currently incorporate equality initiatives.

Subsequent research

The multiple approaches to equality and democracy found in TUC affiliates (e.g. whereby WGs operate alongside other equality mechanisms) provide a useful premise for future research into the relative effectiveness of different equality mechanisms for combating inequalities, recruiting

and representing members. For instance, do race equality bodies and officers privilege gender in respect of particular agenda issues, and if so, why? How and why do they differ in the way they operate to WGs? How does their presence influence WG operations, and *vice-versa*? What does this mean for the extent to which members see their interests represented on key union platforms? The significance of such assessments is stressed by evidence here of developing alliances between WGs and other union mechanisms.

Such an inquiry also links to potential studies of the nature and impacts of equality approaches adopted by other institutions with which unions interact. For example, the proposed replacement of ‘single strand’ equality bodies including the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and Commission for Race Equality (CRE) by a single ‘umbrella’ equality body (see Arrowsmith (2004b) for an overview) may encourage more efficient resource usage and greater cross-over of ideas and issues for various stakeholders. In research terms, it will be interesting to see if unions in turn begin to follow suit, or whether they and/or their constituent groups continue to favour the current ‘dual structure’ of identity-specific and general equality mechanisms.

While WG attention to consensus building amongst diverse constituencies has developed, both internally and in the union mainstream, their aims and agenda are infused with a range of other equality and democracy notions. This *mélange* of WG approaches has implications for future assessments of WG effectiveness. For instance, do unanticipated outcomes derive from the pursuit of issues via a range of uncoordinated equality approaches and with what significance? Will WG efforts in one area cancel out or magnify those elsewhere? Should particular approaches be emphasised at all or some times? Comprehensive responses to such questions need to incorporate the views of those upon whom inequalities impact most. And clearer definitions of diversity in academic and practitioner terms may help to demystify the rhetoric surrounding its meaning in various contexts, facilitate fuller engagement by social partners in discussions over how best to respond to diversity and inequality, and aid the translation of policy aims into practice. Further, experience-based evaluations may help to determine realistic equality and democracy goals for WGs given WG ability, the needs of various constituent groups and environmental factors. Greater monitoring of WG activity is thus needed to benchmark progress for women and others.

7. Conclusion

WGs are widespread and assume many common forms in British unions. Despite their ‘single strand’ (i.e. gender) identity basis for organising and largely union-sanctioned aims, our survey data emphasise that other WG features such as their agenda concerns are more commonly infused with an assortment of equality and democracy notions. For a substantial minority of WGs, these include equality premised on diverse group interests and consensus-building. And nor is this a narrowly-defined pursuit of diversity - it extends beyond differences between women and men at work to stress differences among women and elements of trans-gender differences as they relate to the union setting and beyond. Against those who maintain that WGs’ pursuit of diversity deepens (union) divisions, it can be posited that growing attention to such favours their retention insofar as they provide a central plank of union strategy to more effectively represent and organise increasingly diverse memberships.

As well as helping to catalogue the phenomenon of union WGs, the study demonstrated that a national survey can garner data without necessarily ‘smoothing out’ or neglecting the organisational complexity signalled by the many ‘faces’ that WG features exhibit in terms of equality and democracy ambitions. At the same time, analysis of representative data on WG organisation, gathered here for the first time, points up areas for subsequent research. It also helps to re-cast WGs as initiatives with their own momentum and elements of internal agency, increasingly well-located to give voice to members’ real interests in unions and beyond, and encourage an organising approach to unionism, whilst challenging the union and wider *status quo*. The latter is particularly emphasised by WGs whose efforts have broadened union attention beyond economic concerns to matters of equality, democracy and social justice for all. Located in unions alongside other equality measures, moreover, WGs constitute a *proactive* tranche of union efforts to reinvigorate and strengthen its organisation. Areas of shared interest with these mechanisms also bodes well for increasing debate over and resources devoted to theoretical and practical developments that seek to strengthen union unity by addressing member heterogeneity. Further, the internal agency of many WG forms and their increasing integration with other parties may help to sustain, even enhance, their presence and power in unions, particularly when merger activity and organisational restructuring continue to loom large.

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Acronyms: British Unions

Accord	Union for HBOS (merged Halifax and Bank of Scotland) staff
ACM	Association for College Management
AEP	Association of Educational Psychologists
AFA	Association of Flight Attendants
ALGUS	Alliance and Leicester Group Union of Staff
Amicus	Largest British private sector union
AMO	Magistrates' courts staff union
ANGU	Abbey National Group Union
ASLEF	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
ATL	Association of Teachers and Lecturers
AUT	Association of University Teachers
BACM-TEAM	British Association of Colliery Management
BALPA	British Air Line Pilots Association
BDA	British Dietetic Association
BECTU	Broadcasting and Entertainment Trades Alliance
BFAWU	Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union
BOS	British Orthoptic Society
BSU	Britannia Staff Union
CATU	Ceramic and Allied Trades Union
CDNA	Community and District Nursing Association
Community	Community union (formerly ISTC)
Connect	Communication Professionals' Union
CSMTS	Card Setting Machine Tenters' Society
CSP	Chartered Society of Physiotherapy
CWU	Communication Workers' Union
CYWU	Community and Youth Workers' Union
DBSSA	Derbyshire Building Society Staff Association
DSA	Diageo Staff Association
EFTU	Engineering and Fastener Trade Union
EIS	Educational Institute of Scotland
Equity	British Actors' Equity Association
FBU	Fire Brigades' Union
FDA	Senior civil servants' union
GMB	'Britain's general union'
GPMU	Graphical, Paper and Media Union (merged with Amicus)
GULO	General Union of Loom Overlookers
HCSA	Hospital Consultants and Specialists' Association
ISTC	Iron and Steel Trades' Confederation (merged with KFAT to form Community)
KFAT	National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades (merged with ISTC to form Community)
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union (merged with Amicus)
MU	Musicians' Union
NACO	National Association of Co-operative Officials

NACODS	National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers
NAEIAC	National Association of Educational Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants
NAPO	National Association for Probation Officers
NASUWT	National Association of Schoolmasters, Union of Women Teachers
NATFHE	The National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education
NGSU	Nationwide Group Staff Union
NUDAGO	National Union of Domestic Appliances and General Operatives
NUJ	National Union of Journalists
NULMW	National Union of Lock and Metal Workers (transfer of engagements to TGWU)
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUMAST	National Union of Marine Aviation and Shipping Transport Officers
NUT	National Union of Teachers
PCS	Public and Commercial Services Union
PFA	Professional Footballers' Association
POA	Prison Officers' Association
Prospect	Engineers, scientists, managers and specialists' union
RMT	National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers
SCP	Society of Chiropractors and Podiatrists
SOR	Society of Radiographers
SWSWU	Sheffield Wool Shear Workers' Union
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TSSA	Transport Salaried Staffs' Association
UCAC	Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (The Welsh Teachers' Union)
UCATT	Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians
Unifi	Finance sector union (merged with Amicus)
UNISON	Largest public sector union
URTU	United Road Transport Union
USDAW	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WGGB	Writers' Guild of Great Britain
YISA	Yorkshire Independent Staff Association