

Watchdog, Collaborator, Change Agent? The Role of Women's Structures in Advancing Equity within UK and Canadian Trade Unions

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INTRODUCTION

The UK and Canada share an adversarial tradition of employment relations; an attendant political and economic weakness in the labour movement, and collective bargaining agenda preoccupied with workplace/economic interests. Union density has been in long-term decline and concentrated in the public sector (in the UK, 58.8% and 16.6% in the private sector; the Canadian figures are 72% and 18%). TUC affiliate membership has been hovering around 6.5 million, three times that of the CLC and one and a half times that for total Canadian membership. Female union membership also now slightly exceeds that for males at 51% in both countries. In the UK, shop stewards have historically been pivotal in making their union's presence felt in the workplace. More widely, a non-comprehensive welfare state and absence of wage solidarity has been reinforced by both governments' support for neo-liberal market economics; a non-domination of political life by social democracy; and the relative absence of consensus-seeking and collectivist ideology¹. Social discourse on gender equality in both countries has also shifted its emphasis from liberal ideals to those embodying diversity principles, rather than to the common interest/gender neutral policies traditionally favoured by the Nordic countries.

Such contextual features have helped to generate an organised movement of union women in both countries who seek workplace and wider change (e.g. via campaigns on legislation for pay and employment equity). A growing body of scholarship also recognises that individual women and women's collectives have pursued gender equality within the union realm (e.g. Foley 2000, Parker 2006, Briskin 1993, Forrest 2001) although wider academic concern with gender equality has been slow to secure a central position in the mainstream industrial relations literature. Union women's structures (WS) or collectives are spaces that help women to develop their strengths and better engage with their union, and include women's conferences, committees, courses, working groups, caucuses and (virtual) networks (Parker 2003)². Women's level of engagement with unions has conventionally been gauged by their absolute number and proportion as union members or in union positions and structures, emphasising their integration into the *status quo* rather than changes in men's attitudes or union structures to increase women's union participation (e.g. Ledwith and Colgan 1996, Roby and Uttal 1993).

While factors including recent UK union mergers and partial data on women in Canadian unions complicate cross-national comparisons, improvements in women's formal progress in unions in both countries have been slow and uneven (e.g. LRD 2008), and unions have articulated the need for more to be done to ensure women's 'full' representation. This paper thus explores the nature of recent gender equity achievements within UK and Canadian unions, and more particularly, their relationship to union WS activity. Findings are discussed in terms of the nature of WS' perceived 'contribution' to internal equity, and the relevancy of prevailing measures of such for labour movement influence in the UK and Canada.

BACKGROUND

Slow progress on women's formal union participation encouraged WS development in many UK and Canadian unions, as well as their pursuit of liberal goals around equal participation via

¹ Although some contend that Canada's union density is double that for the US because Canadians are more collectivist and pro-union than US workers, Hurd (2004:5) suggests that it is not socialist values that sustain Canadian unions and the legal framework, but a strong sense of fair play that assures 'even handed' labour codes which in turn secure for unions a meaningful right to strike.

² The term WS often refers to the sum of women's collectives *and* individual posts within a union. This paper focuses on the former.

'deficit', integrationist, and increasingly, positive action and positive discrimination approaches (Briskin 1993). Growing support for positive measures in certain union quarters also derived from women's activists' increasing and varied organisation, unions' need to actively respond to women members to survive, growing rejection of the assumption that women and men start from a 'level playing field' in their quest to enter and progress in the union setting, and the perceived inadequacy of charters, declared policies and statements and arguments supporting more obligatory measures and equity programmes. For instance, in the UK, limited positive provisions in the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) 1975 also provided a legitimate base from which union measures could be inspired. In Canada, the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women helped to establish an agenda of reform for women's rights groups in the 1970s and one of its four guiding principles recognised that 'in certain areas women will, for an interim period, require special treatment to overcome the adverse effects of discriminatory practices'.

While Canadian union membership in the 1970s and 1980s escaped 'almost unscathed', despite facing many of the problems that have been largely responsible for creating the harsh conditions in which unions had to operate in other countries (Jackson 1992:51), being sensitive to what women and potential members want and attempting to deliver it became part of many UK and Canadian unions' strategy to counter male membership decline in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, the 1991 TUC conference showcased positive action and the adoption of charters for women within unions and at work. However, the growth of positive action/discrimination initiatives in both countries' unions slowed from the 1980s in a context of persistent unemployment which helped to prioritise (men's) 'mainstream' concerns; the likelihood of advancing beyond formal equality in these circumstances was small. Evidence is mixed on more recent trends around presence of union WS. Increases in women's organisations in the UK, including those within unions, have been recorded (e.g. Kelly and Breinlinger 1996, Parker 2006). However, TUC (2007) research shows that certain WS forms (e.g. national women's committees (NWCs) in large unions) have been in decline. A smaller decline in the percentage of unions with national committees for disabled, black and LGBT members indicates that they are now more widespread than those for women. In both countries, this underscores a trend towards greater activity on the part of the former, and coincides with anti-discrimination legislation on these issues.

Nonetheless, reflecting frustration with the slow pace of equity developments within and beyond unions, the array of equality approaches pursued by WS in many unions has continued to widen. This development recognises that while integrationist and positive strategies assist women into union membership and posts, they do not necessarily confer them with equal power with men in that setting or beyond. Recent UK and Canadian studies identify that a sub-set of WS now emphasise and address the significance of women and men's diverse characteristics and circumstances in relation to the imbalance in their union presence and power relations. A small minority have also sought to overhaul of features of their union's structures, culture, strategies and practices that impact differentially on women and men (e.g. Kirton and Healy 2004, Parker 2006, Briskin 1993, Colgan and Ledwith 2002).

METHODS

The UK and Canadian labour movements were analysed because WS have a long history in many of their unions; both house a similar array of WS types; and the countries share certain industrial relations and union features. Factual material about WS in unions and progress on internal (gender) equity, and perceptions of relations between the two, were derived from two representative UK and two Canadian surveys of senior union, equality officials, paid and lay representatives and activists in 2005-06. In the UK, 56 TUC affiliates or 79%, covering 98.7% of affiliate members, responded to the first 'fact-finding' survey. Of these, 27 housed a total of 'at least' 142 WS ('at least' because some sub-national WS numbers were not available). Forty-six respondents from eight affiliates responded to the second, 'perception-seeking' survey. In Canada, 13 unions, accounting for 50% of the country's 4.4 million union members, responded to similar surveys. Nine of these unions comprised at least 96 WS, including several women's caucus 'internationals' (see Appendix tables). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted

with WS members and senior union personnel in both countries. Systematic analysis of the links between gender equity progress and WS activity was structured by a typology of union areas where equity progress is emphasised in the extant literature: membership and participation/activism, education/training, local union position holding, convention attendance and union leadership roles. Simple statistical analysis and thematic aggregation of survey and interview material to assess progress on equity and its relationship to WS both synthesised data from multiple sources and emphasised informants' 'multiple realities'.

FINDINGS

The Grassroots

The first UK survey revealed that most of at least 62 (mainly) national-level WS in 24 affiliates were conceived as much as part of union recruitment and internal organising strategy as a response to grass-roots consciousness of the need to better serve (women) members' interests (cf. Heery 1997, Flynn *et al.* 2004). The corresponding Canadian survey revealed similar results for the majority of at least 52 WS in nine unions but at least 17 of these WS were also seen as a response to external influences (e.g. political and legislative developments).

UK and Canadian interviewees also generally perceived that activity by WS had positively contributed to union membership and participation, particularly by women, though the scale of these impacts was indeterminate due to intervening factors (e.g. activity by other union equality groups and individuals). However, respondents to the second surveys singled out intermediate- and local-level mechanisms for attracting and involving female members, and for encouraging a greater sense of union 'ownership' among women. Further, a number of recently-established WS were seen as facets of a wider shift in the union towards more decentralised democratic arrangements and some level of 'organising approach'. For instance, in the UK Transport and Salaried Staffs' Association, the biggest challenge seen to face its national Women in Focus (WiF) support groups 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' (TSSA communications officer).

While Canadian survey respondents did not explicitly link the presence of sub-national WS with the devolution of union decision-making and organising, 52 of the recorded total of at least 96 WGs (i.e. 55%) were sub-national bodies, and a significant proportion of these were established relatively recently. For instance, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers' NWC and National Human Rights Committee had been 'putting a big push on development and the support of local [women's] committees' while the heavily male-dominated United Steelworkers of America is seeking the expansion of more women's committees at local and regional levels. On the other hand, the development of WS 'internationals' in several Canadian unions was said to reflect the need for cross-national organisation to the intensification of globalisation pressures and raise 'global awareness of solidarity' (IAMAW respondent).

Education and training

In both countries, various WS types were considered by informants to be an important - if not *the* most important - source of mentorship and knowledge transfer within unions for new and existing (female) unionists. Indeed, female unionists' education and training often formed the central function of women's courses. The first survey revealed the existence of at least 10 sub-national and at least 17 national women's courses in UK unions, and of at least eight sub-national and six national women's courses in Canadian unions. This makes them UK unions' second most common WS behind women's committees, and Canadian unions' third most familiar WS after women's committees and working groups/caucuses.

Women's courses were found to embrace a wide array of procedural and substantive concerns, particularly around fostering female (and male) unionists' understanding of their union, its representation of female members and related external developments (e.g. legislation). Further, women's courses were widely seen as a separate space in which women unionists

could 'feel safe to develop their confidence and union skills' (UK MSF Regional Women's Committee (RWC) member) while learning how their union functions over an extended timeframe (e.g. UK and Canadian respondents indicated that women's training activities can last between half a day and a week). Significantly, their focus was often reported to encourage more women to engage with the mainstream union, and to increase women's capacity to seek to advance gender equity in that setting. For instance, several MSF RWC members commented that their own women's course and wider involvement in WS had helped them to redress a personal sense of impotence in geographically-isolated or male-dominated branches (locals), and as ordinary members and local and senior union postholders.

Many British and Canadian interviewees also suggested that women's training courses had moved beyond an 'integrating' to raising awareness among, politicising and mobilising women to challenge gender- and diversity-based inequities in their union. For example, some felt that women's courses had empowered them to try to break the domination of certain union activities, posts and structures by the 'same old male faces'. However, female union membership share was seen to mediate this pursuit (e.g. shop steward training in the Canadian SEIU has been taught by three NWC women but, given the union's 90% female membership, this is less a proactive device to influence union courses than female 'domination' by numerical default).

It also emerged that such educative, politicising and support roles were not solely the preserve of women's courses. Many other WS forms in UK and Canadian unions were said to have helped pave the way for women and sometimes men to (more easily) attend union courses and other events (e.g. by encouraging the union to provide childcare allowance, and in the case of the CUPW, special funding under the union constitution to enable women to attend union and other WS events). Moreover, WS in the 30% female CAW 'push for change at all levels of the union, building on previous equality work' and plans were afoot in IMAW to integrate 'women's issues' into all training modules for union representatives. Further, the union's international women's committee was considered the most influential of its WS because it 'can reach out to the majority of sisters who in turn can reach into the majority of locals [branches]'. Divisional Women's Committee members in the UK's female-dominated USDAW follow their bi-monthly meetings with a worksite 'walkabout' so as to help educate and impart knowledge to and recruit employees. And women's conferences and support groups were generally perceived to be an excellent, on-going environment for networking, sharing gendered and other experiences, and mentoring via workshops and speakers – for new and experienced female unionists (e.g. in the UK, PCS' Head of Equalities indicated that a former women's network for senior female officials might be revived to provide them with more support in their roles; TSSA's national and regional WiF support groups 'have given members more confidence in their *own* ideas' (WiF member)).

Convention Attendance and Local Position Holding

According to the TUC (2007) Equality Audit, 38% of responding affiliates target women for recruitment as shop stewards or branch officers (compared with 4% in 2003). While there are no equivalent Canadian databases, UK and Canadian informants concurred that women's involvement as local union postholders has slowly been growing. Further, figures from the LRD and the Southern and Eastern Region TUC Women's Rights Committee show that, across most major TUC affiliates (cf. the male-dominated CWU), women's share of union conference and TUC delegations has seldom grown to reflect their union membership share. Anecdotal evidence from the Canadian informants suggested similar trends.

Significantly, however, informants to the second UK and Canadian surveys in this project indicated that women's involvement in union conferences and peak body (TUC/CLC) delegations has often been sparked or supported by WS and their current or former engagement in WS. This supports Braithwaite and Byrne's (1995) ETUC study of union confederations which found that women's or equality committees are a necessary part of achieving better female representation. For example:

The [regional] Women's Advisory Committee's meeting at [PCS's] Inland Revenue [IR] Conference helps networking, and supports new women delegates, particularly from smaller branches which are only due one delegate to conference. (PCS IR Group Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) member)

Further, the TGWU's Annual Women's National Members' School includes sessions on each of four women's courses to encourage and support greater female union involvement (a Candidate Development Programme also targets women and other under-represented groups to develop their involvement as senior representatives, delegates and officers). Another way in which a small proportion of NWCs and caucuses have encouraged women's involvement as union representatives, delegates and convention attendees is via their own 'institutionalisation' (e.g. via their own formal slots or fringe events at union conferences). While several UK and Canadian interviewees felt that these fixtures were seen by critics to entrench the idea that women's interests are separate to 'core' union business, most saw them as an important precursor to the discussion of women's issues in the mainstream, and as a reflection of union recognition of the relevance of their interests. Indeed, responses received from a subset of unions indicated some agreement that WS have been important for: developing an expanding agenda concerning women member-union relations (women's committees, conferences and courses in particular were singled out for addressing women's proportional representation, union organising and participation by women, changes to union structures and procedures to help women access union posts, and dealing with sexism and harassment in this and other contexts); raising women's interests including internal equity at union platforms such as conferences; seeing women's interests become part of the union agenda and sometimes priorities; and influencing union and external groups to actively respond to their concerns.

WS' concern with 'externally-oriented' interests (e.g. work-life balance, childcare issues) was also reported to have directly affected women's capacity to access and participate in their union, a finding supported by the TUC (2007) equality audit (though there is no monitoring of the results of equalities bargaining at local level in most unions). Although Canadian respondents were somewhat less likely to agree that issues raised by WGs had become increasingly common in union-employer negotiations although this finding is somewhat tempered by the small union sample size (cf. Nicholls-Heppner's (1984) statistical findings on women's committees in Canadian unions). Moreover, it emerged that in a minority of cases in both countries, WS have helped to 'revision' their union's approach to treating particular issues as diversity matters or 'issues for all' rather than 'women's issues'. For instance, the Teamsters respondent to the second Canadian survey commented that its WS have encouraged this shift in approach in respect of bullying and sexual harassment. Similarly, PCS' National Women's Forum (NWF) and Group WACs support major campaigns by the union on pay, pensions, job losses and relocation whilst asking 'What's our perspective?' (NWF member).

Union Leadership

LRD and SERTUC WRC data also show that over the past decade, women have maintained or increased their share of their union's national executive in most large UK unions. As a proportion of national FTOs, women's share has also tended to grow (particularly in Unison, the GMB, USDAW and NASUWT) though it should be recalled that FTO figures can be small. Considerable improvement has also been recorded regionally. As with local position holding and convention attendance, however, this growth seldom reaches a level that is commensurate with female membership share. Most of these trends were borne out by the first UK and Canadian surveys and interviews though a decline in female leadership shares was reported for several Canadian unions (CUPE, UFCW and PSAC).

However, across unions in both countries, WS – notably women's committees, conferences and courses - were credited by informants with contributing to a stable or increased female presence in leadership roles by encouraging female unionists to, and providing a springboard for their own members from which can, progress in the union. Indeed, a significant minority of the UK interviewees, strongly represented by experienced female national FTOs, felt that their

involvement in WS had provided vital support for their early union careers, particularly in terms of accessing and operating effectively within local union posts and at union conventions.

A significant proportion of WS in both countries' unions were also reported to have sought or encouraged alterations to elements of their union setting, often on the premise that the women's proportional representation on existing union posts and structures does not automatically lead to power equality with male unionists. The first UK survey showed that at least 13 WS in eight unions focused on getting women into existing, or on *developing*, union posts and structures for women, themselves situated within and alongside existing union organisational arrangements. And at least 18 WS across 11 UK unions had sought greater representation of female 'sub-groups' (e.g. ethnic minorities, youth) via special posts on existing and proposed union structures (e.g. PCS' NWF and women's section LGBT body were said to have persuaded the EC and other union decision-making bodies to take account of membership diversity in policy development and execution). Several unions also pointed to WS' growing special representation on and coalitions with external bodies (e.g. IAWAW's NWC intends to pursue seats on 'like-minded' external boards, and a number of Canadian respondents mentioned the significance of the CLC for links for WS beyond their union and even the labour movement).

Barriers to change

According to most informants, a small minority of WS have successfully encouraged their union to underpin some of its organisational features with 'longer' equality notions (Cockburn 1989), with attendant meaning for gender (power) relations within and beyond the union setting. However, many had encountered the following sorts of impediments to the introduction of change-seeking and power-shifting internal equity goals, encouraging their evolutionary and piece-meal approach to change. In a number of unions:

Structural deficiencies such as a low absolute number of women unionists and/or their low concentration in the union; the absence of 'a solid plan to move groups forward' (IAAWAW respondent); mainstream bureaucracy and 'abstruse procedures'; limited membership control over leaders' actions; non-enforcement of constitutional arrangements; a predominance of WS with advisory (cf. policy-making) status; women's representation in leadership posts (e.g. COPE's executive committee female majority has led some to believe that WS are 'not required' and that 'too many of the women on the local women's committee are also on the executive – there's a need for new women to be involved to make challenges' (COPE respondent);

Resourcing issues including funding shortfalls (e.g. CUPE's Equality Director wrote that WS issues were constrained by limited time, money and opportunities to meet). Further, resource shortages can vary among different WS within a union (e.g. the Teamsters' international women's committee is strongly supported and funded by the International Executive Board while the recently established OTWC 'doesn't have adequate funding – for now'. However, several UK and Canadian informants felt that although adequate union resourcing of WS might assist them to achieve more, this depended on how far the union sought to control their ambitions.

Union culture, customs and communications Traditionalists and critics, including those who regard women's committees as divisive or perceive that women have 'achieved' equality, were cited for limiting WS' ability to act (e.g. a Teamsters respondent felt that its executive board 'likes to promote women's groups during an organizing campaign, [but] they are afraid that strong women would take their places in the structure'. In the UK TSSA, a lack of branch support for WS means that 'it's hard to get women involved because we have a lot of opposition [and] negative connotations' (WiF member). Several informants noted that WS expend considerable energy guarding against the active reversal or withering of their achievements.

WS-centred factors Despite adequate union resourcing and leadership and officials' support for WS in COPE, the attitudes/behaviours of union members, politicking within WS, and the external time commitments of one local women's committee's members, were seen to have constrained WS progress. WS age also played a part (e.g. a senior FTO from the UK Community union commented that a year-old NWC in its ISTC section was pursuing 'fledgling' institutional strategies and impacts while the activities of longer-running WS in Unison and PCS embodied various internal equality ideals and often a critical perspective of mainstream pursuits.

Absence of/partial monitoring Several UK and Canadian second survey respondents recognised that while some WS had influenced local union procedures, it was difficult to isolate their wider union equity effects, particularly in respect of qualitative change (e.g. to union culture) given complex influences on them.

Significantly, several informants observed that certain obstacles to WS' internal equity pursuits have sometimes stimulated them to work harder for change. For instance, a TSSA WiF respondent commented that the factors assisting the introduction of national and regional WS in her union not only included a supportive General Secretary and certain National Executive Committee (NEC) members, growth in female membership and a rise in the number of 'aware' women, but also a return to 'feminist bashing' in certain union quarters. And while several informants contested that WS function differently to the union mainstream, most reported that WS had contributed to internal union equity by circumventing, supplementing or working more flexibly and informally than 'less progressive' mainstream operations. For instance:

NWF has organised informally, drafted model motions to go to conference, produced briefings and worked outside the formal structures to progress issues. (PCS IR Group WAC member)

[In the WiF], hierarchy/power struggles do not exist. It's equal ... If you vote against something, we always take it into account – we aim for total democracy. No strict roles – everyone does what they can/feel comfortable with. (TSSA WiF member)

Echoing comments from other respondents, a local level women's committee in COPE was cited for apparently making more effort than mixed-sex union bodies when it came to seeking to encourage people to its activities and women to become active, focusing on developing members' skills and confidence, keeping (women) members informed of union policy and raising consciousness about the implications of union concerns for different constituencies. Some survey and interview evidence also pointed to efforts by WS members to transfer their ways of working to the mainstream where possible (see earlier) though such change efforts by individual women could be hard-going in the context of more traditional union fora - even when wider benefits could be demonstrated. And several senior UK and Canadian FTOs asserted that some WS strategies which stressed constituent diversity (e.g. via tailored organising drives) had enhanced the efficacy of union information gathering and interest representation processes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: WS – WHAT ROLE(S)?

Recent decades were perceived by the informants to have witnessed some notable improvements to women's participation in conventional UK and Canadian union roles. However, the findings also underscore that women still often trail men in this respect, and that the achievement of gender parity on traditional measures of union involvement does not automatically confer equal decision-making powers on or interest representation for women and men within the union context or beyond.

Notwithstanding this, the study recorded the existence of a significant number of WS across UK and Canadian unions. 'Insiders' perceive that they have played a significant part in improving women's involvement in conventional union structures, as well as in effecting uneven progress on other equity indices. The latter were reported to range from more inclusive language in union constitutions through improved equity structures to greater profiling of and sometimes union action on interests that reflect gendered structural inequities. Significantly, WS were also said to have worked towards internal equity goals of varying 'ambition' – and thus appear to have adopted watchdog, collaborative *and* internal change agent roles - via an evolutionary approach to change which highlights the varying obduracy of perceived impediments to these goals. One possible dilemma of this combinatory 'approach' is the potential for incompatible effects from different equality strategies, itself a potential obstacle to further change. On the other hand, a 'cherry-picking' application of different equity ideas underscores the dynamism of equity goals themselves; indeed, most informants assessed that WS' projects of work are on-going.

Although a significant minority of Canadian and UK union respondents pointed to plans to develop their existing network of WS (e.g. in CUPE, the NWC 'wants to establish more local

women's committees to mobilize more women and build leadership and knowledge' (Equality Director) and resolutions have been put forward to constitute the NWC to be able to send resolutions directly to national union convention to enhance opportunities for developing union WS), the extension of WS might be augmented further by efforts to persuade cynics of their potentially positive (cf. divisive) influence for different constituent groups. For instance, regular monitoring of WS impacts on internal equity and their meaning for progress on key institutional goals such as membership growth and union cohesion could engender wider support. Further, greater promotion of WS achievements, particularly by high profile cross-border and national-level WS might be valuable in the context of union decline, and more particularly for Canadian unions where female union leader numbers have been falling.

The findings also point to areas to which unions and WS could extend their cache of internal equity gauges (e.g. to include changes to union structures, democratic practices, processes, culture, attitudes, formal and informal ways of working) so as to better explain women's collective agency. There will likely remain issues around how best to measure WS' more qualitative and interactive effects; difficulties in procuring information in certain union environments; the capacity of different WS to gather information; the level of mainstream responsiveness to such information; and so on. However, an approximation of WS contributions to internal gender equity needs to be clarified, not least to secure their presence as important internal union critics, collaborators and protectors of existing areas of equity progress.

Efforts to concretise an expanded repertoire of internal equity measures may also encourage unions themselves to evaluate the fullness of conventional measures of their influence (e.g. TUC 2007, SERTUC WRC 2008). This is imperative for the UK and Canadian labour movements whose renewal strategies respond to the curtailment of their institutional, procedural and substantive powers in a context of tough economic conditions and individualist politics, and concomitantly, who seek to balance the representation of a diverse constituency with the need for strong union identity and membership cohesion.

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