

Trade unions and gender equality in the workplace: Case-based evidence from the UK

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Trade unions can play an important role in improving the employment conditions of women and advancing gender equality in employment. While union bargaining agendas have traditionally centred on male-biased priorities, as women increased their share in employment, unions started to recognize the importance of engaging with women's workplace concerns not only in the interests of gender equality but also as an essential element of union revitalisation strategies (Dickens 1999).

This project focuses on the role of UK trade unions in promoting gender equality in the workplace. Previous research indicates that trade unions can play an important role in advancing gender equality but that, in practice, progress so far has been relatively limited. Survey research reveals that the contribution of trade unions to translating equal opportunities into effective workplace practices has so far been modest (Hoque and Noon 2004; Heery 2006; Walsh 2007). The key question addressed by this research is: Why has progress towards the implementation of equality measures been so slow, even in unionised workplaces? In particular, it explores the specific strategies pursued by UK unions to translate equal opportunities policies into practices, examines how gender equality is articulated into the bargaining agenda and explores the difficulties faced by unions in achieving better gender equality outcomes in substantive matters such as pay and career advancement.

Why has progress towards the implementation of equality measures been so slow, even in unionised workplaces?

This paper draws on twenty interviews with union reps, union officials and equality officers from six large UK trade unions to investigate the specific strategies pursued by unions to translate equal opportunities policies into practices, examines how gender equality is articulated into the bargaining agenda and explores the difficulties faced by unions in achieving better gender equality outcomes in substantive matters such as pay and career advancement. The interviews explore the perceptions of union officers and reps of their union's contribution to gender equality; their accounts of the strategies pursued by the union in order to achieve this goal through both initiatives in the workplace and through internal union structures; their views of progress towards equality; and the difficulties that remain in place. The rest of this short article presents some of the findings under three headings: (i) equality bargaining, equality initiatives and workplace strategies; (ii) internal structures and equality; and (iii) tensions and dilemmas. It then discusses key issues.

Findings

i) Equality bargaining, equality initiatives and workplace strategies

The interviews reveal a wide variation between trade unions in their equality approaches and strategies and the extent to which equality matters are included in the bargaining agenda. Some unions (but not others) have been relatively proactive in developing specific actions and taking the initiative of promoting specific equality issues (e.g. the living wage, campaigning for compulsory pay audits to be included in the equality act) or making sure that specific equality issues were included in collective bargaining (e.g. equal pay audits and pressuring employers to correct imbalances). Most unions provide access to training to workplace representatives on equality matters but the length of these courses vary significantly between unions (from one day workshops to two week programmes). Additionally, in one union, equality training is a mandatory part of the workplace activists training programme, whereas in the other unions, equality training is not compulsory.

Interviewees from three trade unions reported particular recruitment strategies targeted at women. In one of the unions this involved ensuring that the membership reflected the workplace distribution of the different social groups, so it was expected that workplace representatives would develop efforts to recruit colleagues from these different groups. In the other two unions the strategy to attract women members was closely linked with promoting equality. So equality was not only an end in itself but also a tool to recruit female members and increase women's access to union representation. This was the case of two unions operating in the public sector and involved 'being seen as promoting women's interests and equality' as a 'marketing' strategy but also being prepared to take on equal-pay claims from 'day one'. The quotes below illustrate these strategies.

"Where we've taken equal pay claims we've recruited women. Anybody who joins with an equal pay claim will tend to have legal representation from the day they join, otherwise we have a four week rule where you can't have a legal representation for four weeks with a pre-existing problem. But if somebody has pre-existing problem which is pay and equality they get representation immediately. Where we've been lodging equal pay claims, where we've been in negotiation with employers we have recruited women on the back of that and it has been a very important recruitment tool."

(Female official, UNISON)

"In terms of the Union, you see it is really important that we are seen to be campaigning and organising on women's issues."

(Female official, UNITE)

Another dimension that emerges from the interview data is that this variation is not only between unions but also within unions. So as reported by the interviewees the presence of equality representatives and women's groups varies from branch to branch in UNISON, UNITE and PCS. Additionally, the interviewees account of the scope and depth of equality matters covered in collective bargaining varies widely across unions but also across branches and workplaces as well as between different levels of bargaining within the same union. The quotes below illustrate how equality is a key concern of PCS union in collective bargaining over pay in one branch but not in bargaining over restructuring and redundancies in another branch.

"We will look at the distribution of women and men across the pay bands [...] The [organisation] will do an equality audit on pay and we will get the information from that also, so we'll incorporate that into our pay claim and we'll look to see if there are specific issues and raise them as a part of our pay claim and negotiations."

(Female union rep, PCS)

Interviewer: "How do you integrate the equality concerns in these negotiations, is that considered?"

"It should be, with any major change, at the moment they are shutting down three offices in the South and if an office is shutting there should be an equality impact assessment that is standard."

Interviewer: "But it does not always happen..."

"No, our colleagues in the South East are very dissatisfied with how equality is treated in these negotiations so when we have our meetings with management they don't feel that equality is given a high enough priority and I think they are probably right. The sort of information we ask for is not as forth coming as it should be."

(Male workplace rep, PCS)

Likewise, the quotes below illustrate the differences between trade union policy and the realities of the workplace and also signals differences between bargaining practices between organisations and workplaces. They also suggest that the extent to which equality is included in the bargaining agenda and leads to specific practices may also be influenced by the level of expertise and the commitment to equality of union negotiators.

"Across all our sectors we aim to try and get companies to do equal pay audits but it's not just about that it's developing action plans, so doing audits but after that making sure that they develop an action plan that the union is involved in developing and monitoring also."

(Female union official, Unite)

Interviewer: And did you say you tried to look at the differences between the pay of men and women ?

"Well we haven't actually asked that question in [this branch] anyway for some time, but when we did ask it, ten years ago, the company said they had looked at the data and there wasn't any evidence of discrimination and we said, can we have the data and they said no, so that wasn't very helpful."

(Male workplace activist, Unite)

ii) Internal structures and equality

The differences between unions were also evident in the internal structures dedicated to equality and the resources allocated to these structures.

The three largest UK trade unions have regional officials dedicated to the promotion of equality, all of which were interviewed. In two of these unions the officers are equality experts and are responsible for developing equality initiatives, organising women's and equality groups and supporting workplace activists on equality matters. In one of these, there has also been a unit dedicated to pay equality – mostly because due to its strong presence in the public sector and particularly in local government, the union has been highly involved in the implementation in the single status agreement. In the third one the equality officer accumulates this role with that of

education officer and as result equality is now an important (mandatory) component of the training programme for workplace activists. In contrast with the other two unions where the equality officers were women, the regional equalities officer was a white British man with a background and career mostly on the field of activism and education but without a background of experience or expertise on equality issues. The fact that the union equality officer is not a member of any of the equality groups, that he does not have a particular expertise on equality matters, and that he accumulates the equality role with the significant and pre-existing role of education officer suggests a lower commitment of this union to the promotion of equality in employment and within the union structure.

The other unions also had equality-specialised union roles but these tended to be workplace-based lay activists.

iii) Tensions and dilemmas

The interviewees were asked about the difficulties they faced in pursuing equality and a recurrent theme that emerged was the political and economic climate. In particular the recession, the cuts and consequent redundancies and the fact that women were being disproportionately affected, could translate into a backlash in the advancements made so far and equality matters had lost priority status even in public sector workplaces.

Another topic of particular interest was that there were numerous accounts of the tensions created by trade union's efforts in pursuing equality in the workplace. Many union officials and workplace activists gave examples of resistance and resentment of white male activists with regard to equality policies. The quotes below are two examples of these attitudes, reported by different interviewees from the six unions:

"You asked earlier if there was any negative side to that and obviously you do get some men say why is all this set up for women, why not me, where is my network? So you get some hostile views about that."

(Male workplace rep, UNITE)

"Sometimes, when you say you have been to a Women's Committee or trans-Gender Committee, it has been said - when's the committee for the white married man then?"

(Female workplace rep, CWU)

This resentment was not confined to union equality structures but it also extended to work-life balance policies and protection of maternity:

"[...] for example we have argued about allowing people to go on flexi-time here, predominantly women with caring responsibilities and we have been told, well that is not fair on colleagues who have to come in at 8.15am to do lectures, do you see? We are still having to fight those fights!"

(Female workplace rep, UCU)

"Well there is this issue of the right to return for pregnant women and those on maternity leave has also created some conflict. Men feel disadvantaged because if you are in a group of five workers and they say there is only going to be three jobs - a job cut, and two have to go but two of the people in that group are women who are pregnant or on maternity leave, then that means those two jobs cuts have to be among the three remaining employees who are more likely to be men, statistically. So there is an inherent unfairness about that."

(Male workplace rep, UNISON)

These quotes illustrate how unions promoting equality face resistance in the workplace from their own members.

One (male) union activist mentioned that equality could be used by employers to undermine trade union power by creating divisions within the workforce and by equating militancy with an exaggerated male culture of aggression towards the employer.

"That was the union question where [the organisation] used equal opportunities to weaken the union [...]. The British trade union movement has made spectacular progress in the equalities agenda. The union movement is now much more equality friendly than it was, but it is pathetically weak and no longer interested in serious strike action against the employer. The aggression against the employer has disappeared."

(Workplace rep, CWU)

In this case, a gender balanced workforce and equality policies appear to be regarded as a threat to union power. This was only mentioned by one (male) union activist in a very male-dominated industry and workplace and although it could be consistent with the views of many male members of this particular union it is by no means representative of the views of most union people in the UK. However, it does provide an insight into what can be the actual attitude to gender equality in the workplace of some union activists and can be interpreted as an indication of the kind of covert resistance towards advancing equality.

However in certain circumstances, advancing equality actually involves a compromise that, in the case of the implementation of the Single Status Agreement (SSA) in local authorities, has led not only to pay increases for many women but also a pay cut for some men. This has created a real problem for public sector trade unions of how to manage conflicting interests of men and women members. After the Allen versus GMB case where the union was found guilty of favouring the interests of men and indirectly discriminating against women members, unions have responded by being more cautious in their negotiations and also by supporting members' equal pay claims. Officials from UNITE, UNISON and GMB referred to the need to ensure that all agreements with employers were 'equality-proof'.

UNISON and UNITE both reported having taken specific measures to ensure they would not be seen as not protecting the interests of their women members and to make sure they were under no risk of litigation coming from their own members.

"[...] the Unions are put in a difficult situation where we will have members that will come out of this disadvantaged but we have to make sure that we make women members aware that they may have the potential to take equal pay cases, and we cannot enter negotiations in respect of the men as well, so it's been a very difficult issue for Trade Unions. In the ideal world the women would have been brought up to the level of the men but that wasn't ever going to happen, so that has been a difficult issue for the trade unions to deal with."

(Female union official, UNITE)

This has constituted a dilemma even for UNISON, that by 2008 had taken 40.000 cases to court (Deakin *et al.* 2011) and that has taken a very proactive and progressive approach in negotiating the SSA with employers – which included specialised equal-pay units at regional level and, while the other unions were still negotiating three year pay protection for the male ‘losers’ of the process, UNISON was negotiating just one year protection because, according to the union official interviewed, longer periods could be interpreted as perpetuating gender inequalities. This strong commitment to equal pay was required by its strong presence in the public sector and by the extremely high female share of its membership. Nevertheless, this has also been a difficult issue for UNISON officials involved in negotiations, as the quote below illustrates.

“Now, if more of the membership are women than men and more women were going to do better out of it then it is more likely to be accepted, yeah? But is that wrong? - And I think that’s a really difficult question...”

Interviewer: “What do you think might be seen as wrong?”

“I suppose from a trade union’s perspective, if it means that some people’s pay comes down, that is wrong. But so many other people’s pay comes up and those people traditionally and for centuries have been underpaid. So...I think that’s a difficult one.”

(Female union officer, UNISON)

Discussion

Preliminary analysis of the interview data reveals a wide variation in the commitment and strategies employed by trade unions to pursue equality, which can partly explain the modest (or contradictory) evidence of union engagement and/or effectiveness in promoting equal pay and equal opportunities in employment provided by previous research. This study also highlights the under-researched issue of the tensions created by the equality agenda because acknowledging the disadvantage of certain groups of workers compared to others and drawing attention to the differences between groups of union members is at odds with the traditional strategy of building union strength upon members’ common collective interests and identity. Moreover, a commitment to correct inequalities in practice involves not only improving the employment conditions of the disadvantaged group but it also may imply the worsening of the conditions of another group of union members. In the context of the implementation of the Single Status Agreement, achieving greater gender pay equality has often required a decrease of men’s pay. This creates internal tensions and dilemmas for trade unions, namely, how to promote gender equality without creating internal divisions or alienating male members.

This research draws attention to the difficulties faced by unions in managing the potentially conflicting interests of an increasingly diverse membership. This requires unions to challenge established interests and power structures but is also a requirement for the survival of trade unions. With women now representing almost half the UK workforce, the success of union revitalisation strategies will depend to a great extent on how trade unions handle these tensions and resolve these dilemmas.

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