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Women and Union Leadership in the UK and USA: First Findings From a Cross-National Research Project

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Women and Union Leadership in the UK and USA: First Findings From a Cross-National Research Project

Abstract

This is a report prepared for Cornell Conference on Women and Union Leadership held at Cornell University, New York City on May 8th 2010 and for Queen Mary/SERTUC Workshop on Women and Union Leadership held at Congress House, London on 11th September 2010. The project was funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

[Excerpt] This report offers the first findings of a unique comparative research project on women in union leadership in the UK and the USA. It is the first study that seeks to systematically investigate the experiences of women in union leadership in two countries using the same research methodologies and carried out by an American/British research team.

Keywords

unions, union leadership, gender, women, United States, Great Britain, labor movement, labor rights

Comments

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The Leverhulme Trust

Women and Union Leadership in the UK and USA

First findings from a cross-national research project

May 2010

Gill Kirton and Geraldine Healy, Queen Mary, University of London
Sally Alvarez and Risa Lieberwitz, Cornell University
Mary Gatta, Rutgers University





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report offers the first findings of a unique comparative research project on women in union leadership in the UK and the USA. It is the first study that seeks to systematically investigate the experiences of women in union leadership in two countries using the same research methodologies and carried out by an American/British research team.

The research objectives were to:

- Stimulate a cross-national exchange of ideas and experiences on women's union leadership development
- Run a cross-national exchange programme for women union leaders
- Contribute to global research on women and unions by providing a cross-national UK/US comparison carried out and analyzed by a cross-national research team
- Establish an international e-network of women union activists and leaders
- Disseminate findings to the UK and US union movements and scholarly community via a project report and academic workshops and publications.

The report employed multiple research methods including

- An innovative exchange programme involving American and British women union leaders
- One-to-one interviews with American and British women union leaders at all levels
- Focus groups or roundtable discussions with American and British women union leaders
- Case studies of a selection of the most senior union women in the UK and USA – these women are not named in this report for confidentiality reasons
- A survey of the 2008 New Jersey WILD Conference

20 women were involved in the exchange programme, 119 women were interviewed (58 in the UK and 61 in the US). The women held various unions roles at all levels (both paid and unpaid) and we also included women who were prominent union leaders in both countries.

We report on the similarities and differences in which unions operate in both countries including economic restructuring and decline in union density. Moreover, we report on the different approaches to equality strategies and note the lack of enabling federal legislation in the USA with respect to, for example, paid family leave.

Our first findings are set out in Section 4 and demonstrate the similarities and differences between American and British women's experiences but also the complexity and differences within countries.

The similarity in gender union politics and relationships was striking. In both countries, in white collar and blue collar unions, women reported the perpetual struggle of making their way in a male dominated union context. They reported the different strategies they adopted to cope with a hostile environment. Such strategies may reflect a more participative (often characterised as 'feminine') approach to leadership, but also they demonstrated an authoritarian approach (often characterised as 'masculine') when deemed necessary. Key influences were attributed to mentors and those who encouraged them to step forward and take a role in the unions. In some cases, such encouragement may be underpinned by a concern about the lack of representativeness of the union so their sex or their race/ethnicity was relevant to this support. Nevertheless, it was noteworthy that in the exchange black British women were more likely to publicly raise 'race' as a union issue, whereas American black women were reluctant to do so, perhaps fearing it would threaten a discourse of solidarity in the New Jersey group.

The exchange visit was beneficial to both American and British women, but in different ways. The realisation that the legislative and healthcare context was more favourable in the European context was surprising to many American women who had been brought up to believe that Americans had the best conditions. It gave them the incentive to plan negotiating strategies on a wider range of issues. American women also learnt of the prevalence of women's committees and groups in the UK, and a number returned with the intention of setting up such committees/groups. This is not to say that such women only committees were not unquestioned; both American and British women demonstrated some scepticism fearing that they may be divisive. British women gained from the positive 'can do' outlook of the American women as opposed to their British diffidence. The British women felt that if some of the positive and affirming union culture (through for example, awards, ceremonies, public votes of thanks) could be engendered in the UK, the British union movement could be strengthened.

The political contexts demonstrated interesting differences. Although the majority of unions support the Labour Party in the UK, union structures demonstrate a more complex pluralist system with delegates and officers standing for election on a political slate. Thus women would find that to get elected in some unions they had to be part of a political grouping, whereas, this did not seem to be the case in the US. The broader political context translated to the interviewees' perspectives, which were more politically and internationally informed in the UK than the US. This reflects the 'business unionism' associated with American unions.

In both countries, unions were 'greedy organizations' demanding huge time and commitment. There was little difference between the time and commitment that women gave to the unions in the US and UK. Despite this, women from the exchange programme reported that the international exchange had encouraged them to put themselves forward for more union positions. This suggests that there is a clear case for further such exchanges supported by the unions.

Women and union leadership in the UK and USA

We argue that by focusing on women in union leadership we are also focusing on the survival of the movement. Our argument is that the two goals – (i) increasing women's representation in union leadership and increasing the visibility of their contribution to unions *and* (ii) working towards the survival of the unions – are not mutually exclusive. For unions in most industrialized countries to thrive and more importantly to survive, they must recruit and retain women members and this means having an agenda that is fit for purpose – one that serves the needs of a diversity of workers – and this in turn means ensuring that unions are inclusive of diversity at all levels. This need not be a zero-sum game with existing, long-established leaders losing out to newcomers, but it does mean that the established hierarchy – women as well as men – might need to be prepared to concede power bases and positions for what we might call the greater good. Our cross-national research project has shown that many of the challenges of union leadership, especially for women, transcend national boundaries and their specific contexts and are actually at a fairly abstract, conceptual level that union leaders need to get to grips with in order to accomplish the kinds of change that might yield a stronger guarantee of a future.

1. THE STUDY: INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, much has been written about the barriers in the way of women gaining leadership positions in unions globally, but research tends to be nationally focused. Whilst very useful, country specific research clearly cannot learn from similarities and differences between countries. In 2008 we secured a two year grant from the prestigious UK foundation, the Leverhulme Trust, to run an *International Network* between 1st October 2008 and 30th September 2010, which involved a pioneering comparative research study of women's leadership in UK and US unions. Many women union leaders in the South East region of the UK (encompassing London and neighboring counties) and in New Jersey and New York City in the USA took part in interviews and focus groups and 20 women took part in a cross-national exchange programme. In addition we interviewed ten of the most senior union women in the North East region of the USA and in the UK. This report discusses preliminary findings from this study.

Before outlining our aims and objectives, we begin with a little background in order to contextualize this comparative study. What do we think a union leader is? Who do we usually think about when we are asked this question? Many people instinctively point to people at the very highest levels of leadership such as general secretaries in the UK and national presidents in the USA. When we look at these levels, we see very few women. We believe that defining leaders simply as those at the very top levels amounts to an undervaluation of women's contribution to organizing and running the global union movement. Our understanding of union leadership is a much broader one – union leaders can be found at workplace level, in locals (US) and branches (UK), in organizing campaigns, and more. Once we include these levels of leadership, women become visible in both the UK and USA. This study explores the lived experiences and practices of women union leaders at all levels.

Why compare the UK and USA? Clearly the UK and USA are two major industrialized countries whose social and economic profiles bear many similarities (as well as significant differences). Focusing on the union movement, economic restructuring combined with women's increased employment participation have meant that women now make up a highly significant proportion of union membership in both countries – 40 per cent in the USA and over 50 per cent in the UK. This compares with a figure of around 30 per cent in the early 1980s in both countries. More women than men are now joining unions in both countries so the female share of membership looks set to increase. The unions have recognized the importance of women to their survival and revival and there are various gender equality strategies and practices in place. It is also true to say that women have made gains in both countries within union leadership and decision-making structures. However, women remain underrepresented in union leadership. Why? In the past it was often argued that women were naturally more passive than men, that they were happy to leave men to represent their interests, that adding union activism to work and motherhood was one job too many. All of these 'essentialist' explanations that basically put the blame on women have far less currency now. Even though women have made huge advances in the workplace and unions, research shows that climbing the ladder to leadership positions remains far from a smooth process and women face multiple gendered

barriers that we comment on later in the report. We also need to note that black and minority ethnic women or women of color are also a significant constituency for American and British unions, but these women are even less well represented in leadership and decision-making positions and research shows that the barriers for them are multiplied (Bradley and Healy 2008; Healy and Bradley 2004). It is against the above context that our study took place.

Aims and objectives of the study

Our aim was to provide a comparative in-depth study of women's union activism and leadership in the UK and USA. We wanted to provide insights into the barriers standing in the way of women's progression into union leadership, but we also wanted to identify strategies and practices that women had found enabling. Ultimately, we wanted to stimulate a debate both among American and British women union activists, leaders and scholars that could generate creative and innovative collective and individual ideas and practices that might over time enable more women to access leadership. Important to note is the fact that we do not see increasing women's union leadership as an end in itself, but as a vehicle for increasing unions' capacity to improve women's working lives globally.

We are a cross-national team of scholars and labour educators. As such we are building on previous research and teaching experience in the union movement. We would describe ourselves as 'critical friends' of the union movement. This means that while we are pro-union, we also believe that the unions need to do more to include women as activists, leaders and on union agendas.

Our objectives were to:

- Stimulate a cross-national exchange of ideas and experiences on women's union leadership development
- Run a cross-national exchange programme for women union leaders
- Contribute to global research on women and unions by providing a cross-national UK/US comparison carried out and analyzed by a cross-national research team
- Establish an international e-network of women union activists and leaders
- Disseminate findings to the UK and US union movements and scholarly community via a project report and academic workshops and publications.

2. METHODS

This report is based on a cross-national study of women's union leadership in the UK and USA. Why do cross-national research? We believe that cross-national research is extremely worthwhile – it is interesting and exciting for us as scholars. But more than that, we believe it can shed light on both our own national context and that of the other country involved. We also believe that cross-national research is very useful for the global union movement. In comparing two countries we come to question things that we often take for granted and we can discover new and different ways of doing things. However, to make sense of what we see and what we find in a cross-national study, it is also clearly important to have a solid understanding of the context in which data are gathered. Our research was conducted by a team of seven academics from one UK (Queen Mary University of London) and two US universities (Cornell and Rutgers). We spent time in each other's country carrying out fieldwork, participating in the exchange programme and meeting to discuss the research design and findings. Through these activities we were able to explore in depth the implications of our different national research traditions, different conceptual lenses, different socio-cultural contexts, etc, prior to, during and after the fieldwork. This enables us to firmly locate the study in local knowledge and in the context of each country.

However, cross-national research is not without its difficulties even with two English speaking countries where language is ostensibly no barrier. We say 'ostensibly' no language barrier because although all researchers and participants were fluent English speakers, we soon discovered that we do not always speak the same language in terms of the meaning imputed to and contained in things such as job/union titles, modes of expression, etc. Titles may embrace multiple levels of experience. One example is the grander titles that are more typically attached to American union positions. For instance, being a union president in the US can mean different things, but often equal what in the UK is called a branch secretary, which like the US president may be a lay or a full-time role, and which translates as president of a smallish local, possibly someone without a great deal of leadership experience or without a great deal of power. In the UK the title 'president' usually implies a highly experienced person in a very senior position. This type of language difference can easily create misunderstandings – for example, a leader might be seen to be more senior (and therefore more powerful, influential and experienced) or more junior (therefore less powerful, etc) than they actually are. This is just one example of the problems faced when interpreting comparative research and makes the bringing of local knowledge to the research (in the way that we did with our cross-national research team) all the more important.

The study consisted of:

- An exchange programme involving American and British women union leaders
- One-to-one interviews with American and British women union leaders at all levels
- Focus groups or roundtable discussions with American and British women union leaders

- Case studies of a selection of the most senior union women in the UK and USA – these women are not named in this report for confidentiality reasons
- A survey of the 2008 New Jersey WILD Conference

The exchange programme

Firstly, a few words about the thinking behind the exchange programme for women leaders. Union/labour education is clearly critical to the development of female *and* male union leaders, but we decided to make the exchange programme women only in order to reflect the aims of the project, but also because women's groups and other women's forums and events have played a significant role in advancing gender equality in unions in many countries. Women's union schools are available in many countries (including the UK and USA) and are argued to have a particularly strong impact on women in terms of sustaining and developing union activism. Women's schools provide a safe space where both newer and experienced women can build or renew their confidence and also collectively explore and define their needs and interests. In the union context women's schools offer a rare opportunity for union leaders to spend time talking specifically about 'women's issues', rather than focusing on majority or 'bread and butter' issues that often end up neglecting some of the most pressing concerns of women. The experiences that women share at women's schools usually extend beyond the boundaries of particular workplaces, occupations, industries and sometimes unions, enabling women to understand a broader range of women's lives and to bring what they learn to bear on union activism and leadership in their own workplaces and unions. Our goal was to extend the dialogue beyond the national boundary too in order to enhance cross-national solidarity the seeds of which would be sewn by participants sharing their stories and comparing their situations across countries (as well as across unions and occupations). We hoped that the exchange programme would contribute to the development of women's leadership by providing a setting where women leaders could learn how to increase their own efficacy as leaders, but also how to help develop other women as leaders and how to establish an agenda for women in their unions and workplaces.

With this thinking and these goals in mind, we designed, with input from the AFL-CIO and the UK Trades Union Congress (TUC), two week-long cross-national residential exchanges involving 10 British women from the south east region of England and 10 American women union leaders from New Jersey. The exchange programme took place in March 2009 (New Jersey) and June 2009 (London). The participants were recruited via union channels after completing an application form and attending a short interview with a senior TUC/AFL-CIO officer and a member of the research team. The women who participated were union leaders at a variety of different levels, including workplace, branch (UK), local (US), and regional and they represented a range of unions, occupations, sectors and industries (including male and female dominated). The mix of unions and occupations was a deliberate strategy that we believed would expand thinking and learning beyond the confines of specific contexts and encourage a more questioning approach to different unions' strategies and practices. We also proactively recruited BME/women of colour and across the age spectrum.

Women and union leadership in the UK and USA

In New Jersey the 20 American and British women took part in a range of activities including:

- Facilitated discussions on: supporting women's union involvement and leadership, barriers for women, discrimination at the workplace and in the unions
- Visits to: a unionized factory, the New Jersey Department of Labor, the New Jersey State House and the Governor's Mansion
- A one-and-half-day union women's conference (WILD – Women in Leadership Development).

In London activities included:

- Facilitated discussions and presentations on: union structures for women activists, planning and developing a speech, union organising, employment and equality law, international union issues/campaigning, cross-national networking
- Visits to: the Trades Union Congress (including a talk by the first ever female Deputy General Secretary), No. 10 Downing St, a union (RMT rail union) summer BBQ
- A union women's networking event.

Interviews and focus groups

To simplify the cross-national comparison, we used standard, semi-structured interview and focus group schedules (for both American and British respondents) that allowed for some flexibility according to individual respondents' and groups' narratives situated within their national contexts. The interviews covered a wide range of themes: (i) what the respondent's union work involved; (ii) the respondent's attitudes towards unions and their policies and practices; (iii) how the respondent felt about their union work; (iv) how union involvement influences life outside the union; (v) what it is like being a woman activist/leader; (vi) views on unions' gender equality strategies; (vii) the respondent's views on union leadership. The focus groups concentrated on two main themes: (i) what it is like being a woman union activist/leader; (ii) views on unions' gender equality strategies.

The interviewees' age and ethnicity characteristics are shown in Table 1. The interviewees held a range of union leadership positions including:

UK

- workplace representative/shop steward
- assistant branch secretary
- branch secretary/convenor/president
- branch organizer
- regional officer
- national officer

Women and union leadership in the UK and USA

The roles and functions covered in these positions included equality, women, education and learning, health and safety, industrial relations, negotiating and bargaining, representing individual members, political activities. The unions that interviewees came from organize and represent workers in a range of industries and white collar and manual occupations in the private and public sectors including: healthcare and other public services, education, communications, government, transport.

USA

- workplace representative/shop steward
- local vice president/president
- business rep/agent
- secretary treasurer
- organizer/organizing director
- principal officer/programme director
- international rep

The roles and functions covered in these positions included: negotiating and bargaining, representing individual members, political activities. Unions that interviewees came from organize and represent workers in a range of industries and white collar and manual occupations in the private and public sectors including: communications, construction, education, government, healthcare, hotels and catering, transport, light manufacturing, retail, entertainment.

Table 1: Interviewee characteristics

	UK N = 58	USA New Jersey N = 31	USA New York N = 30	Totals N = 119
Ethnicity				
BME/of color	17	7	16	40
Hispanic	0	0	5	5
White	41	21	10	72
Unknown	0	2	0	2
Age				
18-25	0	1	0	1
26-35	6	4	4	14
36-45	15	5	6	26
46-55	21	13	12	46
56-65	13	3	9	25
65+	2	3	0	5
Unknown	1	1	0	2

Survey of 2008 New Jersey WILD conference

We surveyed all the women who attended the New Jersey WILD conference in 2008. The goal of the WILD Conference is to address the broad question of how unions help women and how women help unions.

The WILD Conference is also designed to ensure that union women have every opportunity to be educated, develop leadership skills, and build diversity within the

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labour movement. Attendees at the Annual WILD Conferences meet and talk with union leaders, organizers, educators, and authors, who share the challenges they face and their strategies for advocating for and organizing workers.

The survey results provide some interesting information about who attended, from which unions and the nature of the union positions held by delegates – a separate report is available on our project website (<http://hosted.busman.qmul.ac.uk/wtul/>). The survey provides important insights into the benefits that women felt they got from attending the conference, how useful it was and their views on US unions and women's equality, as well their participation in union activities. The survey questionnaire was distributed during the conference and time was allowed for the women to complete it. It was short and contained mainly closed questions; therefore it could be completed very quickly. 145 women completed the questionnaire – the overwhelming majority of delegates. In this report (section 4) we present findings on (i) respondents' views on the value of women's conferences, and (ii) views on male unionists' understanding of women's equality issues.

3. WOMEN'S UNION LEADERSHIP IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

This section of the report provides a context for our study by briefly describing the UK and US union contexts.

The UK union context

During the 1980s and 1990s the UK union movement faced many inter-related challenges including high levels of unemployment, the contraction and near extinction of the manufacturing industry, privatization of public services and nationalized industries, a hostile Conservative government (1979-1997). The consequence is a depleted and changed union movement (at its peak in 1979 membership reached over 12 million and density 55% compared to approximately 6.5 million members today and an employee density of around 28%. Private sector density averages 16.1% and public sector 59%. Unions are present in 46.6% of UK workplaces and 34.6% of UK employees' pay is affected by a collective agreement (Mercer and Notley 2008).

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) is the peak union body and it represents the vast majority of unionists in the UK. Intensive merger activity during and since the period of steep membership decline means that the total number of unions has shrunk – in 1980 the number of unions affiliated to the TUC stood at 109; now that the larger unions have absorbed many of the smaller the TUC has 58 affiliates. The largest 10 unions account for about 80% of total membership – these are shown in Table 2.

The changes briefly described make it extremely difficult to classify UK unionism (if ever it was easy to do so). What we now see can only really be understood as a complex hybrid model. There are some small unions that only organize within one company that could be classified as examples of company unionism (relatively unusual in the UK). Craft unionism, once strong if not the backbone of UK unionism, has all but disappeared with mergers and more open recruitment and organizing strategies in response to dwindling membership. Occupational unionism still exists, particularly in teaching and some other areas of health and public services (e.g. Fire Brigade), but also in niche areas in the private sector (e.g. airline pilots – BALPA; performance workers – Equity). Industrial unionism also still exists, although its share of total membership has declined – e.g. RMT and ASLEF for rail workers. General unionism organizing all grades and types of worker across industrial divides is also now important in the UK context in terms of share of total membership – Unite, now the UK's largest union is essentially a general union, as is GMB the third largest union (together these two unions account for approximately one third of the total UK membership). This complex structure means that individual workers are often in multi-union workplaces with a choice of unions to join (that are recognized by their employer for the purposes of collective bargaining and representation).

The average union density rate of 28% conceals differences across a range of dimensions. For our discussion it is significant that in 2007 for the sixth consecutive

year, a higher proportion of women than men were union members. Union density among women remained unchanged at 29.6%, whilst for men it fell by 0.6% to 26.4% (Mercer and Notley 2008). Given the extent of gender segregation in the labour market, it will come as no surprise that women members are unevenly distributed across the unions. The three industries where female union density is highest are: (i) public administration and defence (53.5%); (ii) education (53.9%); (iii) health and social work (43.5%). Over half of all union members (56.5%) work in these three industries. Women members dominate six of the 10 largest unions and have a 45% share of the third largest union, GMB. The unions where women members outnumber men are, with the exception of USDAW (retail), public sector unions, reflecting the large numbers of women employed in the public sector. Reversing the historic trend of male domination, overall women now account for 52% of union members. The gendered change in membership composition has occurred largely as a result of economic restructuring bringing about the collapse of the male dominated, highly unionized industries, rather than any deep or sustained efforts on the part of the unions to recruit women workers.

Other personal characteristics both intersecting with and independent of gender that matter for union density are age, ethnicity and level of highest qualification. Union density is highest among people aged 50 plus for both males and females, with 35.2% density for all employees in this category, 34.7% male and 35.8% female. More than 77% of union members are aged 35 or over. Overall, density is highest for Black or Black British people (29.4% compared with 28.3% for White people). For men, density is highest among White males (27%); for women it is highest among Black/Black British females (34.5%); for both women and men it is lowest among the category 'Chinese and other ethnic groups'¹ (Mercer and Notley 2008). In terms of what this means for the ethnic composition of union membership, it is important to note that 93.4% of union members are white, reflecting the ethnic composition of the UK workforce. Nevertheless, it is clear that Black women have a greater propensity to join unions than any other group. Union density is now highest for highly qualified people with degrees or other higher education qualifications, particularly in the case of women. The three occupation groups most likely to contain union members are 'professional' (47.1% density), 'associate professional and technical occupations' (41.5%) and 'personal service' (30.4%). In the professional group women are far more likely than men to be union members (58.9% density compared to 37.2% for men). The same trend holds true for 'associate professional and technical' women (46.7% density compared with 35.5% for men). This is a function of the fact that women in these occupation groups are concentrated in the highly unionized public sector. In contrast, in manual occupation groups – 'skilled trades', 'process, plant and machine operatives', 'elementary occupations' – women are less likely than men to be union members (Mercer and Notley 2008).

A question relevant to our study is of course the gender composition of union leadership. Table 2 provides details of women's representation in different levels of union leadership in the largest 10 UK unions in comparison with their share of total membership. Every two years the Labour Research Department² (LRD) carries out a survey of the UK's 10 largest unions to monitor the extent to which women are fairly

¹ The ethnic categories are those used by the Office for National Statistics in the Labour Force Survey.

² A non-governmental organisation that carries out independent research on labour issues as well as research for and on behalf of trade unions see: www.lrd.org.uk.

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represented in various leadership roles and bodies. The 2008 survey reveals that there are now two women general secretaries³ in the top 10 unions; union delegations to TUC annual congress are becoming less male-dominated and women are now better represented among paid regional and national union officials (LRD 2008).

Table 2: Women's representation in the UK's 10 largest unions

Union	Share of membership % 2008	Representation on national executive % 2008	Share of paid national officers % 2008	Share of paid regional officers % 2008
Unite				
Unite(Amicus)	27	20	21	23
Unite(T&G)	22	32.5	26	17
UNISON	77	65	43	43
GMB	45	41	30	n/a
USDAW	58	41	71	27
PCS	60	34	30	27
NUT	76	41	29	50
CWU	20	19	22	8
NASUWT	68	23	63	42
UCATT	2	0	0	0
ATL	73	42	50	51

Source: LRD (2008)

Gender equality strategies and action in UK unions

Since the 1970s the UK union movement has developed gender equality strategies. For example, the TUC has a women's committee and annual women's conference, as well as an annual women officers' summer school. A regular survey carried out by the Southern and Eastern Region TUC (SERTUC) provides valuable, up-to-date information on individual unions' strategies. The 2008 survey – *Treading Water* – includes 31 of the 58 TUC unions representing 94% of TUC members. The survey reveals that ten unions have regional paid officers who cover women's equality as part of their responsibilities; 21 unions have a paid equalities officer (who usually covers women's equality as well as other equality strands). Only one union – public services super union UNISON – has a dedicated national women's officer. Seven unions have elected regional women's committees and 14 nationally elected committees. 12 unions hold an annual women's event and another three hold biennial events. Nine unions have women-only training courses and ten unions publish journals for women. SERTUC itself has a women's rights committee that meets five to six times per year – committee members are delegates from their unions. So while there seems to be a lot of activity to ensure that women have some dedicated space within unions, the title of the latest edition of the SERTUC survey – *Treading Water* – alludes to the fact that whilst over time women's representation in union leadership has improved alongside greater effort to tackle gender inequalities, few gains have been made recently. The danger, of course, is that gender equality strategies could easily slip away in the current resource-constrained context in which unions now function. Clearly, organizing and recruiting members is currently a high priority for unions.

³ Both are teaching unions – ATL and NASUWT.

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In terms of what the unions are actually doing for working women, the TUC publishes a biennial equality audit of union policies and activities. The 2009 audit (TUC 2009) found that the single top equality bargaining priority was *equal pay for women*. Other top priorities were:

- parental rights
- race equality
- fighting the far right
- disability equality
- work-life balance
- flexible work arrangements

Table 3 shows the proportion of unions with up-to-date policies or guidelines on equality issues.

Table 3: Proportion of unions with up-to-date equality policies or guidelines

	2005 (%)	2009 (%)
General equalities bargaining	N/A	65
Women's pay and employment	75	63
Equal pay for work of equal value	56	40
Flexible working/work-life balance	88	65
Parental rights	83	58
Race equality	81	58
Dealing with racism and the far right	56	33
Disability	73	54
Migrant workers	N/A	35
Lesbian, gay and bisexual workers	N/A	56
Religion and belief	56	42
Age equality	69	49
Harassment and bullying	77	61

The audit also identifies the issues that have been the most fruitful in terms of successful union negotiations over the past four years. The 5 areas out of the 13 in the table above where unions reported the greatest success were:

- parental rights (51% of unions reported success)
- flexible working/work-life balance (44%)
- age (37%)
- disability (35%)
- race equality (35%)

The TUC equality audits (in place since 2005) have been an important vehicle for holding individual unions accountable for their gender equality strategies and action. The pressures for specific policies have resulted from the introduction of statutory rights with respect to for example, parental leave and flexibility and to societal and contextual pressures (for example migration, the growth of the far right). It is noteworthy that Table 3 indicates that attention to equality policies and guidelines declined between 2005 and 2009.

The US union context

Over the past few decades there has been growing economic inequality in the US labour market. Currently, 31% of Americans earn less than two-thirds of the national male median wage and the richest one percent of households own 42% of net financial assets. Scholars have identified two main explanations for these trends. First, computers and information technologies have automated routine and rule-based tasks in many occupations, delegating tasks that were once performed by individuals to equipment and technology. Second, the global outsourcing of jobs that can be performed more cheaply outside the US has accelerated the decline in manufacturing employment and the movement offshore of a range of service jobs. Partly as a result of computerization and globalization many scholars have suggested that the labour market is “hollowing out”: high-wage, high-skill occupations and low-wage, low-skill occupations are growing, while the middle-range occupations (those that pay self-sufficiency wages and require moderate skills) are shrinking as a share of total employment (Autor et al, 2006). This creates significant challenges for the fabric of American democracy as workers with high levels of formal education are rewarded in the labour market, while workers with a high school education are stuck in jobs that pay low wages. The resulting income disparity, based on formal education attainment, appears poised to continue to widen. These changes in the US economy have led to challenges for the US labour movement.

In addition, the American political climate has been amongst the most anti-union in recent history, and there has been internal strife within the labour movement, with major unions breaking away from the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Unions (AFL-CIO) to form the “Change to Win” federation. So, when one examines union density in the US, (computed from by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, based on the percentage of wage and salary workers who belong to unions), there is a clear drop in union membership from a peak of one-third of the workforce in the late 1940s to less than 13% of the workforce by 2007 (Panagopoulos and Francia 2008).

Unpacking the characteristics of US union workers illustrates important trends. In 2007 13% of male wage and salary workers and 11% of female wage and salary workers were union members. 13% of full-time workers were members of unions, compared to 6.5% of part-time workers. Across categories of race, 11.8% of white wage and salary workers, 14.3% of black wage and salary workers, 10.9% of Asian wage and salary workers, and 9.8% of Hispanic wage and salary workers were union members. Not surprisingly when we look at race/sex combinations men represented a higher percentage of union members, except among Asians. Among Asian women, 11.6% were union members, compared to 10.2% of Asian men. Moreover, according the AFL-CIO, women comprise 43% of union members and 55% of newly organized members. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of union women grew by half a million, with the largest growth amongst African American women. Moreover, AFL-CIO projections have noted that soon women will comprise the majority of US labour union members, but presently comprise about 40% (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Across industry categories, while only 7.5% of private sector employees were union members, a much larger percentage (35.9) of public sector employees were union members in 2007. Union members had the highest representation in professional and related occupations (18.2% of that workforce).

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While women make up a large and growing proportion of union members, they are not equally represented in union leadership. Women are only about 21% of lead union organizers (Bronfrenner 2005). Moreover even in unions with strong female membership, women are also poorly represented in top leadership positions. For example, women are 39% of top leaders in the AFT and 30% in UNITE. They are 38% of top leaders in AFSCME, 32% in the SEIU, and just 12% in the CWA. Based on these numbers, AFSCME has the highest ratio of women's leadership to membership, but in no case does women's leadership match their level of involvement (Milkman 2007). Data on women of color and union leadership is virtually non-existent, but it does appear that although these women are severely under-represented (especially at senior levels) the gap for African-American women may actually be less than for white or Latina women (Cobble and Bielski Michal 2002). Table 4 shows women's share of leadership positions in selected unions compared with their share of membership.

Table 4: Women's representation in selected US unions

Union	Share of membership %		Share of officer and executive board positions %	
	1978	2000	1978	2000
AFSCME	40	52	3	38
AFT	60	60	25	39
SEIU	50	50	15	32
NEA	75	61	55	33
UNITE	72	66	11	30
HERE	42	48	4	18
CWA	51	51	0	12
UFCW	39	50	3	11
IBT	25	30	0	4

Source: Cobble and Bielski Michal (2002)

Gender equality strategies and action in US unions

Like the UK, the US unions have a history that dates back to the 1970s of developing gender equality strategies. But, when it comes to examining the gender equality strategies and action in US unions, what is striking is that less data is collected and made publicly available when compared with the UK. Nevertheless, we can say that the AFL-CIO has an Executive Council Committee on Working Women that regularly produces reports, surveys and reviews on women in unions and the workplace. AFL-CIO constitutional amendments passed in 2005 require: convention delegations to reflect the racial and gender diversity of membership; at least 15 positions on the Executive Council to be used to ensure diversity; a minimum mandatory standard for representation of women and people of color at all levels of the AFL-CIO within four years; and affiliated unions are urged to adopt a set of diversity principles and to report on diversity within their organizations (Nussbaum 2007). There is a lack of publicly available information on how these constitutional amendments have actually impacted and whether or not they have achieved their aims. Also, less positive is the fact that the AFL-CIO's Working Women's Department was abolished in 2002 as a

cost-cutting measure, the national Working Women's Conferences were ended and national campaigns on equal pay and work-family issues were phased out.

There are a number of leadership schools and conferences for union women, sponsored by university labour education centers, state labour federations (e.g. New Jersey WILD), women's committees of national unions (e.g. CWA), and self-supporting nonprofit organizations (e.g. Mass. WILD). The leadership schools date back to 1975, and though they have gone through periods of low enrollment (at one point it looked like they were down to two or three regional schools) are currently thriving. Many local and state women labour leaders are graduates of these programmes.

Many unions have policy statements about sex discrimination and other gender issues, but again the evidence as to how far these have impacted on the grassroots level is lacking. In addition, AFL-CIO endorses the non-partisan Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW, formed in 1974), which has around 40 chapters (including one in New Jersey and one in New York City) and members from 54 national and international unions across Canada and the USA. CLUW has an education and research center and runs various campaigns. In addition, there has been a resurgence of grassroots networking amongst women in the trades. An example is the UBC's Sisters in the Brotherhood group, which will hold a national conference in 2010 (<http://www.sistersinthebrotherhood.info/>).

With regard to union action on women's equality, raising wages is a central demand of the US union movement and in the 1990s the AFL-CIO supported legislation to amend and improve the 1963 Equal Pay Act. There is also evidence that union women are endeavouring to ensure that strategies focusing specifically on the gap between women's and men's earnings (the gender pay gap) are incorporated into union agendas. The union movement has lobbied for improved family leave at the state and federal levels and many organizing campaigns are now aimed at women and people of color (Cobble and Bielski Michal 2002).

The fact that because the percentage of unionized workers in the US is so low means that a lot of focus has been on how to *organize* women and minorities (e.g. the projects and publications of the Berger-Marks Foundation). The underlying premise is that you need women *in* the unions before you can work on making them presidents of the unions.

Summary

In recent decades, the union movements of both the UK and the USA have faced at different moments and at different levels of intensity hostile economic and political climates. They have also had to adapt to changing demographics in the labour market, particularly the significance of women and black and minority ethnic (BME) people/people of color. The unions in both the UK and USA are no longer mainly representing male workers in heavy industry and manufacturing. It is clear that the unions in both countries can no longer afford to ignore working women and indeed there is evidence that women and their specific workplace issues are at least to some extent part of the union organizing, campaigning and bargaining agenda. However,

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despite women gaining an increasing share of union leadership when comparing today with the 1970s, they remain underrepresented in leadership in both the UK and USA. The higher up the leadership ladder you look, the fewer women you will find. The reason that this matters so much is that previous research in the UK and North America has made a link between women's presence in union leadership and the increased visibility of women's issues (e.g Cobble 2007; Briskin 2008; Kirton 2006; Bradley and Healy 2008); therefore it is vital that the momentum to improve women's representation in leadership is maintained.

While there are similarities in context with respect to the decline of union heartlands, there are important differences. A key difference is the statutory support given to issues that disproportionately affect women. In the UK, the law provides support, for example, for paid maternity leave, parental leave, rights to request flexible working. Kirton and Greene (2005) have pointed to the salience of European policy on unions. In contrast in the US, such rights are won (rarely with only California and New Jersey offering paid family leave) at the state rather than the federal level. Moreover, in the UK, there is universal healthcare free at the point of demand. In the US at the time of our study some 40 million were without health insurance and gaining such insurance was a key reason for some in maintaining union membership.

The next section presents and discusses findings from our study on women and union leadership in the UK and USA.

4. THE FINDINGS

In this section we report some of the main findings from the key components of our study – the interviews with women leaders, the survey of the 2008 WILD conference, the case studies of top women leaders and the cross-national exchange programme. As far as possible, we want to allow the respondents to speak for themselves; therefore we quote fairly extensively from the interviews as well as summarizing respondents' accounts. Respondents have been allocated a code number indicating whether they are from New Jersey (NJ), New York (NYC) or the UK (UK); we also show their main union position and sector/industry. In the case of top level leaders, again we do not identify them by name or union nor do we use any material that might reveal their identities – they are also assigned a code number (e.g. USCS1/UKCS1, etc). Because fewer women were involved in the exchange programme and we want to ensure we protect their identity, we simply indicate whether the quote is from a UK or a US participant. We focus on the study's central themes: women's positions/roles in unions; the challenges women union leaders face; how women get to leadership positions; women's leadership practices and women's views on gender equality strategies. We also consider the value of the leadership development programme (the cross-national exchange) that formed part of our study.

Findings from the interviews

What do women leaders do in unions?

As stated earlier, we interviewed American and British women organizing and representing workers in a range of industries, white collar and manual occupations in the private and public sectors including: healthcare and other public services, education, communications, government, transport, retail, hotels and catering, performance and entertainment. The workplace and union contexts these women operate within obviously vary enormously. Added to this there are also many differences between the structure of unions in the UK and USA, yet what we found striking was the depth of women's commitment and contribution to the labour movement. It is often said that women excel at multi-tasking and we were certainly impressed by the number and range of roles that women leaders take on. Most of our respondents had one main union position or role, but at the same time took on a variety of subsidiary ones, often because no one else seemed to be stepping up, rather than because they wanted to do everything themselves. For example, more than one American elected local officer was simultaneously president or vice president, political director, local fundraiser, and lead grievance handler. More than one British elected branch officer was simultaneously branch secretary, women's officer and branch organizer. Even within a single position, union work whether paid or voluntary, is multi-faceted, typically involving (in both countries) negotiating with management/employers (policies, contracts, agreements), representing members (in grievances and disciplinaries), co-ordinating/managing/supporting staff and shop stewards/workplace reps, chairing and participating in union and/or employer

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committees, organizing and/or delivering union training. Many respondents talked about needing to ‘wear many different hats’. A small number of women in heavily male dominated unions and industries where there were few women in leadership positions felt that their presence was valued as providing a more feminine touch:

I think it’s because of the fact I am a woman and they feel more comfortable discussing some issues with me because they feel as if they would be intimidated by it if they would address a man, it’s almost a motherly role, but everyone needs a mother. (NJ1, Shop Steward, construction industry)

If the individual woman who is being harassed is understandably quite upset, you have to handle that in a very specific way, and you have to have those skills and with all due respect to the lads, they don’t have them and they will never have them. To say they are not interested would be grossly unfair and unjust; I have been doing this for 30 years and they are never going to get it, so that is one of the parts of being a regional officer. (UK20, Regional Officer, public sector manual occupations)

In the quotes above we see reference to ‘feminine skills’, the idea of which is highly contested by scholars and women unionists. So what makes someone, especially a woman, qualified for a union leadership position? Carrying out multiple roles and tasks obviously requires wide-ranging skills, experience and knowledge, so we wanted to know whether respondents felt that they met the requirements when they took on their positions, whether they had had any formal training for their roles and responsibilities or whether they had informal mentoring and support to help them accomplish everything in their union work. Access to training varied, but most respondents at the shop steward/workplace rep level had usually had some union training, but a small number felt that they had been denied training opportunities, feeling that ‘the men’ wanted to keep the training resources for themselves:

It is mostly men going, I think all elected shop stewards should have mandatory training so they know how to better represent the members and your appearance to management; you would be on a higher standard because you would have the knowledge. (NYC27, Shop Steward, communications industry)

Moving up the union ladder was not something all respondents felt equipped for:

I did not feel prepared for the branch secretary role. A crisis situation throws you into something that you are not ready for, it’s the same old story, you feel you have to do something otherwise it will fall apart. So you go out of your way to head on something and all the time you are questioning, how am I going to cope? (UK44, Branch Secretary, Civil Service)

Many of the more senior respondents were also prepared to admit that they had not felt equipped for their present leadership role when they originally entered it. Even though most women had come from union activist backgrounds, sometimes quite lengthy, the feeling of being ‘thrown in at the deep end’ or feeling like ‘a fish out of water’ seemed to be a common experience among both American and British women. Formal union training at early points in activist careers (shop steward training) was more widespread among the British respondents, but the majority agreed that there was little, if any, training for the more senior positions. For most senior level respondents, it was really a case of ‘learning by doing’ as they went along or ‘by the seat of my pants’ as one respondent put it. Some respondents had reflected on their own experience of feeling ill-equipped for the role and had introduced more training

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for stewards and other leaders once in a senior enough position to make these kinds of decisions about priorities and use of resources.

Many respondents also reported being supported by retired presidents or other colleagues in the union who they could talk to for help and support. But, equally a couple of women reported that the retiring or ousted president had deliberately obstructed the handover:

When I walked in, every file in the office in the office was empty and there was nothing about what had happened in the last two years of the president and I knew we should have had at least one file of the current contract that we were in Unfortunately, I am yet to hear of a friendly handover from one president to another, the only time I heard that was when the president was retiring and he or she had already handpicked the successor so they mentored them and brought them along. (NYC7, Local President, public sector)

Although there was a bias towards naming women as their informal mentors and support networks, others also named men who had given significant help and support. On both sides of the Atlantic, interviewees reported examples of nepotism with the handing down of the mantle of leadership to a son or a daughter. Of course many American respondents have also benefited from the labour education programmes at Cornell and Rutgers, which their unions had often supported financially.

Against their willingness to take on multiple roles, many respondents were also actively trying to increase activism at workplaces and in locals/branches so that the total workload could be more evenly spread and the union could become more effective. In the meantime it was clear that many women union leaders are overworked and overstretched. One American respondent said:

I rarely take time off right now; I am so backed up on vacation I don't know when to take it because when you want to take time off, there is another crisis that you have to deal with. So, the labour movement just consumes my life. (NYC25, Local Vice President, healthcare)

Some respondents were paid union employees or on full-time release from their jobs, while others were voluntary (lay) stewards, representatives and officers carrying out union duties in their own time. The first group (whether American or British), typically reported working between 45 and 60 hours per week, including many evening and some weekend commitments. Email and cell phones, while being important tools for union activists and officers, mean that many leaders reported being available 24/7 for their members, so that for some there is really no such thing as sacrosanct personal time or space:

It varies, some weeks are slow, like thirty hours, others are like seventy two hours. I don't *take* work home, work *follows* me home; my phone and blackberry are on all day and night, but now at eleven I shut it down. You get used to it, if you are in a relationship, communication is key; it is very demanding on your relationship and you have to protect your time with family and your relationship. (NYC28, Local Vice President, healthcare)

As for the second group, respondents had between 0 and 30 hours release time for union duties; some had a set number of hours per week, others had flexible, negotiable release time and one or two had experienced the withdrawal of release time. In effect, many were doing their full-time paid job and on top of that up to 20 hours per week union work. However, most respondents described their typical

(extremely busy) week in a matter-of-fact way without complaining, suggesting high levels of commitment, passion and motivation. In the first group (the women doing union work full-time) there were also a small number of American and British women who managed to confine their working day to their contractual hours. In the second group (the women doing union work and another job) there was a small number whose union work either did not take up much time or who had flexible and accommodating managers/employers who took the attitude that as long as their work was done, they could squeeze in union duties without it being a problem.

What are some of the day-to-day challenges that women leaders face?

As suggested earlier, the union movement faces challenging times in a number of different respects, which our respondents confirmed. Practical issues were raised, such as locals and branches being understaffed and under-resourced, meaning that respondents find themselves ‘on the run’ constantly and ‘playing catch-up’ continuously. One point for some of the paid union officers was the ability of locals/branches to work autonomously; this depends on a network of trained and experienced shop stewards. More senior leaders often reported having difficulty recruiting and retaining experienced and committed shop stewards, meaning that they often have to get involved in routine workplace issues such as grievances and disciplinaries. All this takes a lot of time and many talked about needing to build a more self-servicing steward network, but again this requires a time and effort investment that most could not manage. Related to this was the apathy of members that was seen as a big challenge, coupled with members’ high and often unrealistic expectations about what the union could achieve for them both as individuals and as a collective. Some respondents found it hard to get members involved, to get them to attend meetings or even respond to email consultations, etc, but at the same time they found that members were quick to complain if they did not get the results they wanted. This obviously relates to the tendency for passive members to see the union as a ‘third party’ rather than as an organization that they own and in which they ought to participate. These experiences were common in both countries and in the long term there are serious concerns about the ability of the union movement to sustain itself as the current generation of union leaders retires.

Another practical issue was the harsher workplace environment that many respondents are currently experiencing: more layoffs, more bullying and harsher management treatment of workers were again common experiences in both countries. Junior managers in particular (rather than senior) were cited as a problem, taking a tough line with employees and the union in order, it was felt, to prove themselves. When it came to the HR department, some respondents reported good, supportive relationships, while others experienced HR as difficult, hostile and obstructive. Many American and British respondents reported high personal caseloads that take up huge amounts of time. Against this hostile workplace climate, a small number of respondents (mostly British) felt that being a local union leader marked you as someone who would not get promoted or get any training and development opportunities. One British respondent, a teacher, explained:

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I think that I have sacrificed my career at this school to being a union rep. I am very good at what I do; I think I am very competent in my teaching and I think that before I became a union rep at my school, they would come round and ask me to do all sorts of things, but once you are established as a union rep, ... because there have been so many outright clashes between the teachers and management, so in order to do it properly, you have to say that in this school, I don't want a promotion ... I know that other union reps in this school like the one who was health and safety rep before me ... has been victimized for being a union rep. (UK3, Health and Safety Rep, education)

Another young British respondent felt a dilemma between staying involved in the union and developing her paid work career – she also felt that in the long run she would need to sacrifice one or the other and as yet had not decided which it would be. Similarly an American respondent – a public sector worker – said that she had removed her experience as a shop steward from her resume because she believed that she had been denied a more senior level job in another agency because of it. She said that although she was proud to be a shop steward, she would have to do it in secret from now on so as not to destroy her chances of promotion.

The internal union environment is the source of another set of challenges for many women leaders. A common experience of male-dominated union environments was of feeling undervalued, being ignored, undermined or excluded. There were countless everyday examples of this from the interviews with respondents describing themselves as 'an outsider looking in', the union environment as a 'boys' club', etc, etc. Most women with these kinds of experiences seemed to have deliberately decided not to be combative, but wherever possible to ignore or avoid the situation and to work with it as best as possible:

I don't let him create an obstacle for me, it's easier to ignore me, at the same I have gone to him for help even though I don't like him, but I know the other reps won't, they won't even say good morning to him, I have no problem, if I need help, I know that he knows the answer, I go to him when no one else is there, he's not my first choice, he thinks everyone is stupid, women are stupid, the president is stupid and he voices this to the members all the time and that is just his mantra. He is a vice president of the local. (NYC18, Staff Rep, public sector)

Many respondents faced a very male dominated environment, finding themselves to be the only woman or one of two or three women leaders. This required a 'thick skin' according to many respondents. For BME women/women of colour, this experience was typical and often uncomfortable:

I am the first African American for this job, so I look different, I talk different, so until people started to get to know me, I had to muscle my way through a lot of this to get the respect ... if I had a dime for every time you talk to people and then they meet you and the surprise is all over their face, it's like oh she's black! ... the first time I attended the meeting, the only one who knew me was the president and I walked into the hotel and it was me and 42 white males and it's a small local, but I will always remember that number '42'. There was not another African-American or woman ... in that meeting and they had a seat for me in front and I said, okay girl go on. There was no presentation or anything just an introduction and meeting and I was sitting there with all these men on either side of me and in the audience. It was hard at first, but I am a people person, naturally I was shocked because of what the room looked like, once I got past the shock, I wasn't nervous but I was uncomfortable, you know men they gawk and then there is always going to be someone who will say something wrong. (NJ5, International Rep, public sector)

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For some, this kind of experience was less benign. A British BME woman had had a very bitter battle infused with sexism and racism with the male leader of her union branch:

I think the male person that came in just didn't want me there. He wanted to run his own agenda ... he is Turkish, so he would play the sort of ethnic thing and I am Caribbean and the other officers were white ... he just played a lot of games. He was using the women to serve his own ends; he had relationships with them and then put them in direct opposition to my position. (UK18, Branch Equality Officer, public sector)

Generally the feeling was that sexism and discrimination still existed, but they were more subtle now and often not spoken aloud, when compared with former times (some respondents had been union active for more than 30 years and could remember times when male unionists were blatantly sexist and racist with impunity). Still, another British BME respondent described her union executive committee as full of 'reactionary, old, white, middle class men' who do not want change, particularly when it comes to having leaders become more diverse. But in addition, a general reluctance on the part of the 'old guard' (usually meaning white men) to change was raised by several respondents. Here, one American woman explains:

My supposed partner, [the Vice President], he is 24 years my senior and he has been in that unchallenged and I guess the culture that has been set in place for a long time is he doesn't do much and I have been doing most of the work. There are other things I would like to focus on as well, but everything gets put on the back burner because I am constantly reacting to things and don't have time to focus on other projects that I think would benefit the membership. I have tried in some ways to correct that and have been unsuccessful in getting that to happen. (NYC17, Local President, education)

Resistance to change is not solely a 'woman's problem', but where women are under-represented (historically as well as now), it is much harder for women to gain acceptance and respect in their role as leaders. Many American and British women spoke of experiences of this kind:

Our new political director is fantastic, she took over that position at a very difficult time, the other political director was not doing a good job at all and change finally was made. She was not accepted very easily, especially in the more manufacturing locals, but she stuck with it and people are finally seeing that not only is she doing the job but she can do the job and she is gaining a lot of respect. She is a fantastic communicator, even when people are screaming at her; she just has this great ability to get what that issue is and how they are going to solve that problem, she's really good, she's very dedicated too. (NYC17, Local President, education)

In this industry, women who express an opinion or have a sense of independence, women who are no nonsense, if they weren't women, they guys would love them and I find that really ironic that gender discounts those positive attributes in the individual. I would want someone to have those positive attributes in a leader and it wouldn't matter to me if they were male or female. (NYC19, Organizer, construction)

I am not on the executive I don't know how they [women] do it, but it's trying to break down the old culture, it's the boy's club; if you vote me here, then I will give you this later on. I think there is a culture here that women are best put up with or at worst patronized and you have to be really tough to withstand that type of environment. (UK11, Specialist Tutor, general union)

When people say sexism, I didn't understand it, but there is this male thing that they just want the women to be behind, they want to hold them down, there is like a comradeship, a male dynamic and the women are seen as lightweight although to be honest, they are doing most of

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the work because I don't see any male voices anywhere, they are not coming forward and so the women are working away and they don't like the women coming forward. (UK18, Branch Equality Officer, public services)

The word 'window dressing' was used by more than one respondent to describe how they thought men saw women union leaders – meaning that it is now widely accepted that it is necessary to have women around, but not too many and not women who are too outspoken. Many respondents talked about women having to work over time at being accepted within a culture that could be resistant, not just to change, but to women specifically:

I think initially there are difficulties; with some exceptions there are some dinosaurs in the labour movement, which some guys are. That's a terrible generalization, but that's true, but men in a role equal to mine, once they realise you are capable and competent, sexism doesn't really come in to play. (NJ11, Executive Director, healthcare)

They know my name and know that I am a shop steward and all I can keep doing is showing I am there for the union and not just for me ... just let them see that I am there for them and with a smile, that I am not a threat. (US Focus Group participant, Shop Steward in a local with 25,000 members, 500 women.)

Many of the above quotes go to illustrate that unions are very political environments. By this we mean the 'small p' politics of organizational life – e.g. people vying for power, status and influence, often at the expense of others, etc – and the 'bigger' politics of gender, race and political ideas/parties (the latter especially in the UK). All this makes unions places where, in order to survive and thrive, it is necessary to understand the politics and learn how to navigate them. When women do reach senior positions, they often believe that they are under much closer scrutiny than their male counterparts, as if people are waiting for them to fail. The case of one high profile American woman leader was mentioned by more than one of our respondents as an example of how there can be 'carrion crows just waiting [for women to mess up] and when they saw that she made that one fatal move, they were very ready to pounce'. A discussion along these lines arose in one of the US focus groups:

... you're under much greater scrutiny as you are trying to break that barrier, you're held under a higher standard. There's an old boys' network that you clearly are not welcome to join, you're being tolerated and even if you are recognized as being talented and being a good person ... and all those old boy's kind of things and having connections, at best I think you are able to develop a sort of, a sense of participation maybe, but it's very, very difficult to achieve that same kind of camaraderie and even if you establish some trust, it's very tenuous. (US Focus Group participant)

When it comes to party politics, the American unions generally support the Democratic Party. This is in contrast to British unions which are often described as a 'broad church' politically speaking, where support for an array of left leaning political ideas and parties can be found – everything from the centre-left Labour Party to the far left Socialist Workers' Party and Communist Party. What do British women leaders think of this? Some respondents felt that unions should concentrate on 'bread and butter' issues (like bargaining) and not spend time and resources on wider political campaigns. One young British woman we interviewed felt that older union activists were typically too 'left wing' for her liking, but they dominated her branch, so she felt deterred from getting more involved. Meanwhile other British respondents felt that unions nowadays are not political enough and too focused on 'bread and

butter' issues without a 'bigger picture' of what it is they want to achieve, what kind of society they want to see, etc. The practical reality for many British unionists is that to reach senior leadership positions, it is necessary to have the backing of a political grouping, without which winning votes is difficult. One respondent explained that this was how she had recently lost her seat on the union's Executive Council – she was an independent (with no political slate) and the majority of those who vote in union elections do so from particular political standpoints and what is more those running on a political slate have people lobbying and campaigning on their behalf.

How do women get to leadership positions?

Clearly, different unions in both the UK and the USA have different means of appointing or electing their different kinds of officers at different levels of the hierarchy, but we were interested to understand how women took their first step into a leadership role and what had helped them to climb the ladder to their present positions. As briefly explained earlier, in some industries and occupations in both countries there can be benefits attached to union positions and these might act as an incentive for people to stand for leadership positions. But, more typically unions now experience difficulties recruiting activists and potential leaders. Some of the American and British women in our study, especially those who had started on the union ladder more recently, stood for election because no one else wanted to do it:

I suppose it was because no one else wanted to do it. The long standing president resigned after 15 years and no one else would do it, there certainly was no competition and originally I did it because it was a job share, the other woman, we did it together so it did not seem such a big job but when she left, I just took over, there was no one else to share or do it. (UK2, former Branch President, education)

This type of situation – where there was little, if any, competition in union elections – meant that some women had risen very quickly to fairly senior level positions. Other women, especially in the UK group, believed that they had benefited from an agenda to get more women into leadership roles, something that dates back to the 1970s:

When I started to be active in the late 70s, [my union] was beginning to think about the role of women in the union and there was quite a demand for a female voice at the time and there was an encouragement from my male colleagues to provide some of that voice, so I got involved on that basis. (UK19, Regional Officer, general union)

I remember being asked to be a shop steward not only because I asked a lot of questions and I placed myself up there to be a shop steward, but I was the only black woman to be a shop steward and the chief shop steward came to me ... and he asked me if I wanted to be a shop steward and he had to ask other women, this was around 1990. (NYC27, Shop Steward, communications)

Generally though, respondents got started in union activism and into their first leadership position by being identified by an existing office-holder as a potential leader. Often this was attributed to being outspoken (having 'a big mouth'):

It's a common story, I was working, we had a strike, I ended up leading the strike and my union said, you have a big mouth, we'll hire you and I thought I can't do that, I'm a waitress, so I asked my chief steward and he said if my English was better I would do it in a minute and at the

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time, I didn't have a high school degree and I really just didn't think I was qualified. (NYC3, Organizing Co-ordinator, education)

I was a twelve and a half hour [working hours per week] dinner lady so I was low paid, part time and we were treated like underdogs and I refused to be spoken to or treated disrespectfully by management, although I was doing a manual job, I was important, I was important if I was felt sick and I spoke up and someone said you would make a good steward and that was it, that was 27 years ago. (UK15, Specialist Tutor, general union)

Many women had been encouraged and mentored by union leaders (often women) into their first leadership position and subsequently to climb the ladder, often moving from position to position with the backing of key senior people:

I was a shop steward after like two meetings. It was an appointed position, but that same year when [the female president] was planning to leave, she ... spent that whole year, she took me under her wing ... and all of a sudden I was going to this meeting and that meeting and school and training for a whole year because she was leaving and I didn't know that. In February I was a steward and in April we had elected positions, I become treasurer and I kept doing things, she kept me under her wing, school, training, anything she could find, I was doing it. (NJ5, International Rep, technical work)

I had a really good union rep, I joined the union from day one as well and he managed to sort out my issues and I just thought, I have to take a more active role and he was the one that asked me to get involved, we need women in the union, active and he asked me and I joined and he asked me if I wanted to go to union conference and I went and then I got on the branch committee. The branch chair wanted to stand down, asked me if I wanted to do it, I said yes, after a year I moved to another part of the country and became the branch organizer. (UK51, Learning Rep, general union)

Opposite to this positive experience of the union and of getting into leadership, were cases where women had poor experiences of shop stewards and so took things into their own hands and were pushed or nominated from there to become a shop steward. One American woman explained how she was having difficulty getting the help she needed from her shop steward:

I realized I wasn't going to get help from him, I would have to do it myself and that's what I did, I fought for my seniority ... and once I got that it just seemed like it drew a lot of attention from other people at the plant and they kind of pushed me into becoming a shop steward and once I got into it, I liked it, I liked being in a position that helped. (NJ9, Local President, manufacturing)

Sometimes women and BME people/people of color come to activism and leadership from outside of the traditional union networks, but being unknown to the existing senior level leadership can be an obstacle to getting elected or appointed to leadership positions. One American woman told us how her International had attempted to block her election as President of her Local because they did not know her and therefore saw her as a threat. Other American and British women spoke of the difficulties of being an outsider and not having the support of key leaders. As indicated earlier, most of the more senior level leaders moved on by gaining respect, trust and support from other key leaders in their unions. But, moving on in the union can often be a case of waiting for 'dead *man's* shoes' – often literally – even in elected positions there are ways and means of holding onto power once you have it (i.e. access to resources for campaigning and lobbying, playing on people's fear of change, etc):

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Most of our full time officers are men and I have been here for so long, I don't expect any better, I have resigned myself to the fact that if I want to go further, I have to leave here. It might be harder for some women but if I want to go further, I would have to leave and that is the way it is, it would be another union or another political organization and I would find the same thing there so it would have to be a promotion or sideways transfer, I wouldn't do it for the money, there would have to be something else there. (UK10, National Equality Officer, public services union)

In one particular case an American leader in the hotel industry told us how union stewards get protected from layoffs, which for some people acted as an incentive to get involved in the first place and then to attempt to hold on to positions. In other cases, in the UK and US, it was clear that release time could also act as an incentive, i.e. personal gain, rather than commitment to union goals. Some respondents felt this sometimes explained the reluctance of some leaders to share power and roles or to involve the membership – keeping the members ignorant of the doings of the union served their purposes. As well as blocking upward movement for women, such leaders came in for heavy criticism as standing in the way of the union being able to function effectively (discussed below).

Women's leadership practices

There is a lot written about approaches to leadership and whether women and men prefer different approaches. We wanted to explore the kinds of leadership practices that women unionists use. Obviously these accounts are self-reports of leadership practices and we have to accept that self-reports might not match with the perceptions of others. Many women leaders in our study expressed the belief that the union should be run as a democracy; as leaders this is what many sought to achieve in their own leadership practices. As one American respondent put it:

I see my job as what they call in my previous workplace, environmental standing, which is beyond what we are fighting about today. Look at it both in terms of the wider picture and look to the future to see what is going to happen next and that is the kind of concept of leadership important to me, it's standing on the shoulders of others not to keep them down but to see a little further. So I try to make that my personal mission in leadership, like let us not be caught blindsided by the next big thing. (NJ6, Local President, education)

Similarly, the following quote from a British respondent reveals a commitment to practicing leadership underpinned by democratic values:

I remember when I was on the committee, the president at that time said we have these union management meetings, do you want to come along, I said yes, no one else would go and I was writing notes and things and at the end I said shall we write this up and send it out to members so they know what went on and he said, no, we never do that. That was an entirely different approach to what being union president was; I saw myself as being accountable, I wanted to communicate to people what I was doing, what they wished, not just in my own little place. (UK2, former Branch President, now Executive Council member, education)

Many respondents contrasted their approach to the more authoritarian, dictatorial one they had observed in men, for example, the British respondent above later became president of her branch and then resigned when she went on maternity leave. She explained how her attempts to involve members had been entirely reversed by the new male President:

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I have been checking my email while on leave and I have had five emails the whole year from the union and I was sending emails out all the time and I was having questionnaires, doing surveys, organizing AGMs and we had newsletters every term. Now the same bloke who did it for 15 years before is doing it. I just went back to work and there was some really horrible issue going on, you know how unions get obsessed with orders and regulations and there was a motion put it and he said let's vote on that, but there was an amendment and I said you have to vote on the amendment first and he said, no I am a dictator. OK, so he's not a dictator but he doesn't care very much about participative democracy. (UK2, former Branch President, now Executive Council member, education)

As discussed earlier, an issue raised in previous research in both the UK and US was reaffirmed in this study that in male dominated unions there are generally few women activists and even fewer women leaders (see Healy and Kirton 2000). In response to women's under-representation, there were plenty of examples of women leaders actively trying to get more women involved in the union. As one American respondent put it:

There is a saying in feminism that it's not enough for a woman to be president or CEO or whatever, she has to do things different and pull other women up. So as we said before we who are in leadership positions need to pull women up and give them opportunities. (US Focus Group participant)

Equally there were some experiences of different degrees of male resistance to encouraging more women. One American woman talked positively about how welcoming her male union colleagues had been when she was elected to the Executive Board, but as to whether there was an intention to encourage more female representation, she was quite hesitant as to whether the culture really was inclusive:

Interviewer: So they see a space for at least one woman, but would they try to encourage other women to get involved?

Respondent: To a degree, like we have conventions, mostly male again and very, very few women, I know there was about five and I am talking maybe four hundred people ... and it's like being treated like a child and I honestly don't think anyone meant it in a harmful way. I think they put on their kid gloves because they don't know how to handle me, it's not the norm for them and so in that respect, so if I come out with an idea, sometimes it's like they never even heard it and the same thing a man will say it and they will say oh brother that's wonderful and I just think, okay as long as it's in there and it's working, we'll try it again. (NJ1, Shop Steward, construction industry)

Another American respondent mentioned whose election to office had been effectively blocked by the leadership, was eventually elected and over time managed to build her reputation as an effective leader. It seemed that the experience of being an outsider for a number of years had influenced her own more inclusive, capacity building leadership style. Other women also talked about practicing the type of leadership that would bring on others:

I would say my predecessor was more queen bee than I am, I suppose because of the way things would happen, the office conference would be the whole group around her and I don't mean this in a derogatory sense, it's just she worked in a different way than I work, I work with a large group of people and I encourage those who need it but I don't think I am a queen bee, I want to develop others rather than focus on me. I am coming to the end of my career, I want obviously a younger person to take this job and take it forward, it is very important to

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me who ever gets this job has the right attitude and sees it as developing others and seeing the way forward. (UK13, Regional Equalities Officer, general union)

Many examples were given of top level union women actively promoting diversity by identifying potential talent and commitment among women and people of color active in the union. Some respondents felt that they had personally benefited from being identified as someone with potential and then being mentored or ‘groomed’ as one UK respondent put it, for higher level positions. Many of the more senior leaders we interviewed also expressed a commitment to mentoring others. However, many women had also been mentored and ‘groomed’ by male leaders and some had poor experiences of female leaders:

At the time I was hired, the secretary treasurer was a woman ... and she was the worst and it's bad because when we as women forget that we have to stick together, someone does well that's good, you bring someone else along, you don't forget because someone is going to remind you that you can't sustain without us and we can't sustain without one another, we go through a lot of things in our life, women, we need one another. She is one that forgot that ... and she was far worse than any male boss that I had. (NJ5, International Rep, public sector)

When women were seen to practice the kind of leadership that does not respect or value the contribution of others, they came in for harsh criticism:

One thing I would say about the general secretary in the last union I was working in, when I first started that job, I met the general secretary and we shook hands and he took me to his office, told me a bit of background about the union. Our first female [general secretary], not once has that person made any engagement with the staff to say this is who I am. That should have happened ... you should make an effort to know the staff, that didn't happen and even now, you go into the office ... I don't even bother [anymore], I am not saying hello to anyone who is not saying hello to me, I don't care who are you are, general secretary or cleaner. (UK51, Learning Rep, general union)

It seems that women typically *expect* other women to be supportive and encouraging of women, particularly in male dominated unions, even though the same women might be more philosophical if men are not like this. Some respondents were open in expressing the view that women *should* be more altruistic, more inclusive, etc, in their approach to leadership in order that unions might change as women become more numerous. Many of the more senior respondents stated that one of the most satisfying aspects of their role was mentoring others, especially women, and seeing them move forward into leadership positions. This suggests that women leaders do not simply want to preserve their own power, but want to share it with other women.

Another theme coming out of the interviews was how to be a woman in the union environment. Does it mean adopting stereotypical masculine forms of behaviour (e.g. loud, aggressive, etc) or is it possible to present what might be seen as a more feminine approach to leadership? The following illustrative quotes speak to this issue:

... our president is a woman and half the flak she is getting is because she is a woman and she is not the Hillary Clinton type of woman, she is an introspective, she thinks, she's soft-spoken, she wears comfortable shoes, not high heels. What she says when she says it is on point, her policies are on point; she listens to her members. (US Focus Group participant)

Yes, but I supervised a woman and her problem was not that she wasn't sensitive to the members, she was very confrontational and when she took the members in a direction, she could not bring them. (NYC25, Vice President, healthcare)

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Although there are a lot of women, the union I work for is very macho and can be very aggressive in all aspects of it and sometimes the women can get sucked into that, I found that unless you as a woman go and shout with the rest of them, you can be pushed aside a bit so yes, there are difficulties. (UK12, Senior Regional Organizer, transport)

I think most men don't try to put themselves in other people's shoes and when you are in a meeting I would express myself in a certain way and they would start to cut me off and it does have to do with verbal communication styles and so I think again you have to be willing to adopt some of that behavior and also be able to challenge it. (UK1, National Officer, public services)

In female dominated unions the experiences and observations of women leaders' practices were generally quite different from those in male dominated unions. Some American interviewees reported that their local was basically run by women, which was a reversal of the past trend for even female dominated unions to be run by men. Also in the UK, there were examples of branches more or less run by women. Many of these female dominated environments were seen as supportive for women – having a critical mass of women did seem to make a difference to the culture of the union, with women typically seen to be practicing a more inclusive approach to leadership. But, this was not a universal experience; there were reports of women leaders deliberately keeping other women down (the 'queen bee' syndrome was mentioned by some) and some experience of sexual harassment from the minority of men that were present; so the fact of a female majority did not always act to insulate women leaders from the masculine culture and masculine leadership approaches of the wider union movement. However, from the interviews we conclude that most women union leaders do not actually *seek* to imitate stereotypical masculine approaches to leadership, but some may end up doing so because that is the approach that is often learnt for success.

Visions of leadership

Given that many women union leaders criticize the current, dominant masculine approaches to leadership, we wanted to explore the *visions* of leadership that American and British women have. Visions are different to *practices* because it is possible to desire something without actually being able to achieve it in the prevailing circumstances. Nevertheless, visions are important because they could spell change for the future. In terms of the types of qualities needed for leadership, respondents cited some that might be expected, including: charisma, strength of character, risk-taker, foresight and vision. These are all qualities widely seen as necessary for leaders in all types of contexts and are often associated with males. But, respondents also cited qualities that they associated more with women, including: selflessness, empathy, patience, valuing and respecting others. So when women activists look up, what kind of leadership do they want to see? The American and British respondents held a shared vision of what leadership should be, emphasizing altruism, commitment and dedication, a fundamental belief in fairness and equity:

I think a true leader is someone who believes in it and they are not trying to further their own political career and I think that people that are good stewards are the same people who believe in fairness and equity and do it for the right reasons and not just to propel themselves in the workplace as someone running their area, that it's all about personal payoff instead of really being committed. (NJ3, Political Director, public sector)

This ideal leader should also encourage and mentor her potential successors:

Somebody who is looking out for the best interests of everybody that they are leading or directing, but also bringing somebody along because we are not always going to be here and grooming or teaching or encouraging people to do the best they can for the people they are representing. (NJ4, Business Rep, manufacturing)

You have to be willing to nurture people, step aside and let people fill your shoes. If you think you are that important, you can't do everything by yourself, you have to build some kind of internal coalition with your staff, other people in the building or even people outside and I think a leader recognizes that. (NYC2, Safety and Health Director, public sector)

The ideal leader should also not lose touch with her members' needs and concerns in the way that can happen once someone achieves success, reaches a powerful, elite position and surrounds herself with only like-minded people:

I think they need to be in touch with the members and sometimes I get the impression they are not, they are in touch with the activists but not their grassroots. There can be a disconnect between what the leadership thinks and what ordinary members think, because when you are balloting for strike action and you get a poor turnout, you could be thinking what happened there and lots of times the unions focus on the activists, which is right but they need to be more focused on the grassroots so you get a general idea of what everybody is thinking and not just the activists, so someone that is able to engage at all levels of the union. (UK10, National Equality Officer, public services)

Views on strategies for building women's leadership

In terms of strategies for building women's leadership, scholars have focused on the potential value of various women-only settings, including women's conferences, committees, schools, groups at local/branch level, formal and informal networks, etc (e.g. Briskin 2008; Kirton and Healy 1999;2004). The idea is that women-only spaces are not only *about* women, but also solely *for* women and being women-only they create the opportunities for women to gain support from one another, share ideas, tactics and strategies and for senior women to mentor the less experienced without the opportunity for men to take centre-stage as is so frequently the case in the union environment. Research shows that many union women in different countries feel they have benefited from women-only settings; however, not everyone is supportive. We wanted to gather views from our respondents and compare American and British experiences and perceptions. We present findings from the survey of one women-only setting – the New Jersey WILD conference – in the next section of the report – here we focus on interview findings.

We found mixed views among American and British respondents on women-only settings, ranging from unequivocal support for all kinds of women-only forums, to qualified support for certain types of women's events, through to a belief that women-only settings are ineffective and divisive. On both sides there was considerable support for women's *schools and conferences*, but less for women's *committees*. This is in all likelihood explained by the fact that women's schools are purely

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developmental and even women's conferences often have little or no influence on union policy or decision-making (this is more the case in the US than in the UK). In contrast, women's committees often have influence on both policy and decision-making giving them a different and potentially more powerful status within the structure of unions. As we shall discuss below, some union women are uncomfortable with the idea of women separating themselves from the mainstream.

Many respondents had personal experiences of women's schools and conferences and generally, even if sceptical at first, they had found them valuable. This was especially the case for women in male dominated unions, who were accustomed to being around men and did not always see the point of women's events. Even women in gender balanced or female dominated unions believed that women's schools and conferences were important for networking with other women, but also for presenting an opportunity to focus on issues of specific concern to women. However, it seems that at local/workplace level women's groups/committees are less commonplace in the US compared with the UK and American respondents in our study generally had less direct experience of them than the British respondents. Some women leaders had chosen not to participate in women's committees even where they were available, some believing them to be ineffective or divisive, while others said that they simply did not have the time to participate.

The following quotes illustrate the type of opinions expressed.

On women's conferences/schools:

I am in favour of women only conferences because you get to network with other women, you get to talk to people not necessarily in your local and you get fresh ideas, you get to see other people's perspectives on how you are handling things and what you could do in your own branch and the difficulties others are going through. (US Focus Group participant)

Women-only conferences are an opportunity to get to be exposed to very extraordinary labour leaders, they are not just part of the programme with the men, they are at the forefront for us and it's very inspiring to me to meet these women. (US Focus Group Participant)

I think it's absolutely key, the men have been doing it for years, it seems to have worked for them so why wouldn't we, why wouldn't you utilize the power that we have, it's key absolutely. (NJ1, Shop Steward, construction)

The women's training also builds your confidence, I have experienced that. If I had gone to a male thing, I would have been more withdrawn, I would not have said anything, you automatically think the men know best, but now I know they don't know best and so you start to develop and it helps to bring you up to a level near to the men or even past them sometimes, so it builds you up, in my opinion. (UK18, Branch Equality Officer, public services)

On women's committees:

I personally don't think I think that I would be interested in women-only committees and I think it's important to get the perspective of all parties and hear what everyone has to say about it ... because you have to get the men on board. There's lot of committees in each community for women in specific situations like domestic violence, sexual abuse, women's health, I think as a union we need to be all encompassing. (US Focus Group participant)

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I think they hurt women, I think organizations like CLUW, while they have good intent, they are like the ladies' auxiliary of the union movement and to me it's like I want to be a union leader, I don't want to be a woman leader. (NJ11, Executive Director, healthcare)

We were trying to figure this out, in some ways, I think it would be great if we were not exclusive, I think the male members should hear these issues and maybe understand them, but there are some female members who feel the issues won't be fully discussed if it [the women's committee] is not [women-only], so we are grappling with that. (NYC17, President, professional workers union)

I am a bit ambivalent about that, I do sit on [a] women's committee. I am not sure it does a great deal. I chair the NEC [executive] women's committee, we do a newsletter, we try to raise money; I suppose they have their place. I wish they didn't need to have them, but until women are equally represented on the higher level on the committees, then we probably still need women's committees to push forward women's issues, so it is a big problem. As I said I wish we didn't need them, they are probably serving a role, but I wish we could get rid of them. (UK17, Branch Secretary, education)

I used to think that there are certain issues that are only for women, but in a sense it's discriminating against women to have a women's committee. I think you have to have a good gender balance, I don't think I necessarily agree with them now, probably a few years ago yes, because there was a clear division between men and women but I think it starting to get closer, not as close as it should be, but in the last couple of years, men have probably treated women officials a bit more on a par than they did do. We have females in senior management now, so hopefully they are pushing women's issues forward. (UK23, Regional Learning Organizer, general union)

Prior to the 80's before you started having these committees the union movement was largely a movement for men and mainly dealt with issues that men thought were issues so that the value of them [women's groups], especially women's committees, cannot be overestimated. (UK45, Shop Steward, general union)

Typically, respondents saw various dangers in excluding men from women's committees. As one American woman put it, 'you run the risk of becoming what you have complained about' meaning an exclusionary clique. While many respondents were happy with the idea of excluding certain types of union men, there was also the question of whether women should exclude supportive men? On balance, many respondents regretted that women's committees were necessary to ensure women's voices are heard, believing in the words of one British leader that 'we should have reached a stage where we don't need them.' Despite the ambivalence, some respondents believed that women's committees provided mentoring opportunities for less experienced women and for aspiring leaders, an opportunity to get to understand how the union functions, as well as to bring neglected issues to the table. At the same time, some doubts about what counts as 'women's issues' were raised:

I am happy with the women's committee, but my own experience is that in terms of gender, they are very Eurocentric and when I have gone I have always felt alienated, the issues just didn't pertain to me, some of the arguments that were being put forward, they just didn't fall in with me. (UK10, BME, National Equality Officer, public services)

I am going to speak as someone who is single and doesn't have children. I often go to these women's groups and all that is being discussed is family stuff and it also reinforces this notion that family is only a woman's responsibility and these things should be things that everyone has to be involved in, men included. So it's a good thing when you need that space, when you feel marginalized to build each other up, but then again sometimes it also works in reverse. (US Focus Group participant)

American and British respondents felt that male unionists were either hostile to women-only settings or simply dismissive, seeing them as irrelevant. Some respondents said they had heard men belittling women's conferences as places where women go to talk about decorating the house, baking cookies or to share knitting patterns. Other respondents felt that men got scared and paranoid that women-only settings would be about 'male bashing'. Specifically on the WILD conference, a few respondents had been asked, 'when are we going to have a MILD conference?' – the irony of the acronyms will not be lost on union women!

Comparative summary

When exploring the experiences of women union leaders in the UK and USA, what is striking is that despite significant differences in the structure of the two countries' union movements we found more similarities than differences. It is clear that the union movement is more a way of life than a job or a spare time activity and it is passion and dedication to the cause of unionism that motivates women to stay involved even in a hostile climate. We found American and British women to be involved in every aspect of running unions and this just highlights the difficulties in justifying their under-representation in senior leadership positions. American and British women union leaders face many similar day-to-day challenges, but the experiences in unions and the workplace that had made life difficult for women were the very experiences that made them believe in a more democratic, inclusive and empowering kind of leadership. One difference that does stand out is the greater number of British women leaders in our sample with experience of women's and equality structures – committees, conferences, women's/equality reps/officers – and who talked about actively promoting women's and equality issues within their unions. However, the American and British women shared ambivalent attitudes towards women-only settings – a strategy widely used in unions since the 1970s to build women's leadership.

Findings from the 2008 survey of New Jersey WILD conference

As part of the study, we attended the New Jersey WILD conference in 2008 and 2009 and in 2008 we carried out a survey of delegates. Delegates are diverse in the sense of sectors, industries, occupations, unions, union positions, race/ethnicity and age. It is worth noting that around a quarter of delegates in 2008 were from male dominated manual trades; for these women WILD is an unusual opportunity to discuss union issues with other women. Other delegates worked in more traditionally female areas, but clearly from just being there they still felt they had something to gain from a women's conference. We wanted to get behind the delegates' motivation to attend WILD and their experiences of doing so.

What were delegates' experiences of the WILD conference?

Of interest to unions sponsoring delegates will of course be the perceived benefits of the conference. We also wanted to know in what ways the conference might help build women's leadership. We asked delegates what they got from the conference,

focusing on the kinds of skills, knowledge and contacts that research has shown to be essential to building a union career. We gave survey respondents the following options:

1. It built my confidence
2. It gave me a chance to network
3. It deepened my understanding of women's equality
4. It inspired me to participate more in my union
5. It developed my understanding of unionism

Delegates were able to pick more than one option. The results are presented in Table 5. Interestingly, 17% reported that all the above benefits were gained from conference attendance. This is a major endorsement for this kind of conference. Networking was the most important single reason given. Where dual or multiple reasons were given, networking was identified as a benefit for two thirds of delegates. Networking among union representatives allows them to learn from each other and to build contacts with other women to discuss union issues and problems. Confidence building was identified by half of the delegates. This is an important category as being a union representative in all its forms is a difficult and challenging role that requires personal confidence. Such conferences clearly enable confidence building among women. 32% reported both that the conference deepened their understanding of women's equality and inspired them to participate more in their union. Over a quarter reported that the conference had deepened their understanding of unionism.

Table 5: What did you get from the conference?

Benefits	N = 145	Percentage %
It gave me a chance to network	96	66
It built my confidence	72	50
It deepened my understanding of women's equality	47	32
It inspired me to participate more in my union	46	32
It developed my understanding of unionism	38	26
No response	5	3

What were delegates' views about

- **Women's union conferences**

There was a virtually unanimous view that women's union conferences are essential (an extraordinary 79%) or very useful (18%) (see Table 6). Therefore some 97% found the conference essential/very useful. It is most unusual in survey responses that no respondent chooses average or mean categories, in this case 'quite useful'. This is a clear testament to the considerable success of the WILD conference in contributing to building women's leadership.

Table 6: How essential are women’s union conferences?

	N	percentage
Essential	114	79
Very useful	26	18
Quite useful	0	0
Not useful	0	0
Divisive	0	0
No response	5	3
Total	145	

- **Male unionists’ understanding of women’s equality issues**

In most studies on women-only union events, questions are asked about men’s response to and understanding of equality issues. This survey was no exception. Women were divided in their experience about men. Whilst few thought men had very good understanding of women’s equality issues, 42% of women believed that men did have some understanding. However, many women (50%) believed that male unionists did not understand women’s equality issues very well, or not at all. This highlights the need for women’s involvement and leadership, but also reveals that there are issues here for unions to address in raising the importance of equality issues for all union members and officers and developing skills of recognizing them and acting upon them.

Table 7: Do you think male unionists understand women’s equality issues?

	N	Percentage
Yes, very well	4	3
Yes, to some extent	61	42
No, not very well	65	45
No, not at all	10	7
No response	5	3
Total	145	

Findings from the case studies of top women leaders

Arguably against the odds, some women do make it to top leadership positions in both the UK and US. We wanted to know how they had managed to do this, but also what kind of leadership they sought to practice. As we noted with all the respondents, what we heard from these senior women were clearly self-reported approaches to leadership that may or may not be recognized or corroborated by those they lead. We acknowledge that union leadership takes place in a complex political environment and that individuals might sometimes fail ‘to practice what they preach’. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate how top leaders understand the leadership project. Some of these women’s union histories dated back to the 1960s, others were more recent (1980s/90s) – as might be expected all had union histories of a significant length.

Most of the case study leaders were the first woman to occupy their current union position and they had generally got there via a series of prior union positions and roles. Along the path to top level leadership, sponsors and mentors, some female, some male, had been significant for these women. All the women at this level that we

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interviewed had faced many barriers, obstacles and personal dilemmas as they made their way to top leadership. These included being at the centre of political in-fighting and significant opposition, blatant and more subtle instances of sexism and racism, encountering stereotypes, the breakdown of personal relationships, difficulties balancing family life with union. One British respondent reported ‘huge and swirling resistance’ to her appointment, so that she felt like she needed a suit of armour just to enter the building. She put this down partly to being a woman and partly to being an ‘outsider’, meaning outside of the networks where people (usually men) are groomed or lying in wait for the top positions. As stated earlier, unions are highly political organizations and therefore gender was not the only issue when it came to the opposition some women had faced. However, it was clear that gender was often used in the criticism of women leaders to undermine their credibility in specific ways. One American respondent’s experience is illustrative:

When I was running one of the lines was, she’ll cry, she won’t be able to stand up to [managers], she will just cry and quit. We were challenged to a debate with the former president and I heard from some quarters after that they [her opponents] said oh she’s better than I thought. (USCS2)

Respondents argued that union leaders, especially women, need a ‘thick skin’, but also ‘you need to know yourself, know who you are’, so that you have the resilience to withstand the often intense criticism and opposition:

You have males who feel that because you are a woman, you should not be in the position that you are and they don’t respect you and when you are aware of those things, you just put them at the back of your mind and try to address them in a way that you can and the next thing you know you have a coalition of people, so you have another dimension as a woman trying to survive in this world. (USCS3)

Moving on to approaches to leadership, these women generally felt a strong affinity with other women and favored inclusive, transparent, democratic approaches to leadership:

I have many [aims], but one of them is having democracy and transparency within the union and I think we have succeeded in that, really bringing that back to our members. But now that people have the transparency, they don’t know what to do with it, they have been stagnated for so long that some can process the information and some don’t know what to do with it, but anyway I am proud of that fact. I am also proud of the fact that we have grown our union and we continue to fight for the low paid workers and my ultimate goal is to educate our members. (USCS5)

A more democratic approach to leadership was also felt to encourage other women to seek leadership positions. At the same time a reality experienced by many women on their way to top leadership is that there is often male opposition to having ‘too many’ women and therefore women often find themselves competing with other women for a space. One woman’s rise can mean that another is kept down. More than one example of men trying to keep women out of leadership positions was given by the senior leaders we interviewed. As one British respondent said:

I just carry on and completely ignore the hateful way in which they [men] try to marginalize powerful women. If you try to engage with it, it’s very disempowering, you become powerless and if you become hopeless it engages powerlessness and for other women you have to be strong. (UKCS1)

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This woman also explained how she had been punished (blocked from an even more senior position) by senior men in her union for supporting another woman's appointment to a senior position. This just goes to highlight that alliances between women can be dangerous.

One of the stereotypes of women is that they are more caring and nurturing (basically nicer) than men. As stated earlier, these women have beaten a path to top level leadership against the odds, so what qualities do they believe are needed for leadership? Among the ones commonly cited were: good people skills; being collaborative and willing to listen to others; recognizing your own weaknesses; being prepared to be wrong and open to changing your mind. These are arguably qualities that are more often associated with women than with men and some of our respondents did believe that women typically lead in a feminine way:

I think they [women] are a bit more caring than men; you know they are mothers and they are nurturing so part of that comes right into the job. I'm concerned about the workers out there, if something happens to them out there, I am sure that means more to me than the average man, I think we are a lot more nurturing. (USCS3)

Women's power typically has come from a group, women tend not to have that kind of immediate power put on them ... if you want to get stuff done, stick to your sisters and have a plan and men don't get it done that way, they tend to have singular power and that makes for difficult politics because if there are six guys in the room and they are all trying to figure out who's the tough guy and I don't think women do that instinctively. (USCS1)

Also, we found that there was a strong sense of accountability, not just to members generally, but specifically to other union women – these women are regarded by many as trail blazers, role models, etc, and they are aware of the responsibility that this carries. All the women talked about wanting to develop other women leaders, through personally mentoring or allocating resources to women's training, etc. They also were conscious of a union culture, heavily based on hierarchy, which could deter women from speaking up or simply mean that women (often lower down than male colleagues) do not get the chance to have their say, so they claimed that they tried to make sure, using their own seniority status, that women get the chance to speak and are listened to in meetings.

Respondents also talked about wanting to bring a new culture to the union – 'changing the rules of the game' as one British respondent put it. One aspect of this was creating an environment where women could do high level jobs, but also balance family and home life. Some saw themselves as modeling this more flexible, family-friendly kind of approach to union leadership roles:

I spent the first two years trying to do it as I thought it ought to be done, which was following a very male way of doing things, which meant my family suffered, working long hours and thinking, it's going to sound ridiculous, but thinking you had to turn up at events to be seen and that only works if you have strong backup at home and support that is very gender based and that didn't work for me and I didn't like that I was turning into something I didn't respect very much because I didn't see the point of being in a role like this if I just carried on doing it the same way, so I shifted really after that first two years to a different way of working and it's been much more comfortable for me and what I hope in terms of the people we employ is that they have a clear understanding that flexibility is something they build into their working lives and I want them to have that and to have high standards and I don't see them as diametrically opposed. (UKCS3)

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Some say women's supposed kind and caring nature makes them ill-equipped for leadership, which usually means not being able to please everyone all the time. We had plenty of examples from our case studies that revealed top women leaders quite ready to take harsh and unpopular decisions if they believed it was the right thing to do for the union, particularly in a crisis situation; for example, cutting staff jobs, changing internal management structures, getting rid of people who stood in the way of change, etc. One British respondent expressed it as being prepared to say 'just f**** do it' or 'I've heard you, but I don't agree with you', when she wants something done quickly without too much discussion. This obviously throws wide open the question of whether women practice a feminine leadership style. The following quotes illustrate the complexity of the women's approaches to leadership:

I believe leadership means that you are clear about where the organization needs to go, that you are confident in your articulation of that clarity, that you listen to a variety of opinions, but you are not blown in the wind by different voices, that you have fixity of purpose so when things get tough, you stand there ... against the storm. (UKCS2)

But, the same woman said:

Leadership is about making change happen. When you are a leader you have to make the big strategic and operation decisions which will allow your managers to effect that. Having said that ... if you are a good organization, you will allow your colleagues to exercise the leadership they are capable of in the role that they are doing and I am very aware of that. So, one of my characteristics is I am not a control freak, I do not micromanage my colleagues' work. (UKCS2)

I don't want people to be scared and I think that can happen. But, it's not about being nice, it's about being accessible and not being a bully and that is quite important because I have seen that quite a lot in the union. I don't think people expect me to act like I am a dictator, but they might think me a *Prima Donna* sometimes. (UKCS3)

I tended to be seen as funny and cute till I made them see that I only looked nice. I had a guy who loves to tell the story. He said if I am going to have an argument I would rather have it with John, he will shout and get red in the face but [the respondent] will sit there and talk to you and slit your stomach open and I said yes I will if you deserve it. (USCS1)

However, respondents did believe that being a woman made a difference to their approach to leadership, but not necessarily because of any *natural* characteristics women have, rather because of different life experiences.

With regard to how these top level women felt that women's leadership could be built, the importance of informal networking with other union women was mentioned and women's schools, conferences and committees were also seen as important vehicles for bringing women on. Equally though there was a sense that women need to demand and challenge more, individually as well as collectively, in order to assert their right to a place at the top. One British woman said:

It's very easy to do all the negatives, but equally it's positive that someone like me can end up in a position like this, which tells me it's more possible than we expect or believe, because the very fact that I managed it tells me that those doors are open. (UKCS3)

Findings from the cross-national exchange programme

This section presents findings from the exchange programme in 2009. What did women gain from the cross-national exchange? How did they see it helping them to develop women's union leadership? What kinds of leadership practices did we observe during the programme? How has the group developed since the end of the programme?

Firstly, it is important to say that previous research on women's schools in both the UK and USA, (e.g. Catlett 1986; Kirton and Healy 2004) has found that getting women together in a space where they can share stories and experiences and learn from one another can be an important moment in the development of women unionists. We wanted to offer this kind of positive experience for women, but with the added dimension of the programme being cross-national. We are pleased to report that after the exchange programme all the participants emphasized its motivational value and empowering nature. Mobilizing women's leadership has to involve individual women developing the skills and confidence to step up to and hold on to leadership positions that are potentially challenging and often situated in a hostile environment. Many of the participants commented how simply being chosen to participate in the programme had boosted their confidence and made them feel more worthy of leadership positions. Most of the UK participants were workplace and branch leaders who had not previously had an opportunity to take part in an international union delegation (or even a national one). Some of the US participants were more senior and were accustomed to participating in national union delegations that took them outside of the state of New Jersey, but most had not previously had the opportunity to take part in an international delegation. We could offer quotes from all 20 participants to illustrate how they felt, regardless of leadership level, that the programme instilled new or renewed confidence, vigour and commitment to their union work, all of which are essential to developing and sustaining women's leadership. Examples include:

I have received a level of encouragement and support I have not experienced in my professional working life in the last 10 years. This project has been my salvation. (UK participant)

My renewed vigour I put down to taking part in the project and meeting the most inspirational women and gaining confidence through dialogue and understanding. (UK participant)

This programme has been an inspirational and learning tool that I will share and carry with me forever. This should continue and lay the foundation for other programmes of this kind. (US participant)

My participation in the exchange stands as one of the most valuable experiences of my professional life. (US participant)

As encouraging as these comments are, we are not so naïve as to believe that feelings of greater confidence and inspiration will necessarily translate into objectively observable or immediate changes in women's leadership. However, what such feelings can do is to encourage women to step up to new roles and positions and engender stronger union commitment and a stronger awareness of women's issues

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both within the national and international contexts. In turn, this at the very least creates the conditions for developing women's leadership so that it is possible to imagine that over time unions might change to become more inclusive of women. The participants identified several different aspects of union activism that individually they felt most committed to, where they felt they now wanted to play a stronger role. The following quotes illustrate:

I still find myself feeling inspired and grateful for the support I got from the women. I have just been elected to be a sector representative There is also a chance I will be elected onto my sector's regional BME committee This does mean that I can play some part in the running of my union. BME women have got to make their voices heard and put themselves forward. If we don't then the labour movement will not be properly equipped to face the challenges ahead. (UK participant)

For me several things have happened: I will be running for the position of Executive Vice President this fall. I really believe that this is due in a very real sense to my feeling the need to more fully empower women in leadership roles in our union movement. I decided it wasn't enough just to talk about it ... I'd better step up! Next, I was so impressed by the global view of women in union leadership roles in the UK that I have committed myself to developing a women's committee with a global perspective in our Local. (US participant)

The above quotes are simply illustrative – other participants have also gone on to stand for new positions and roles at workplace, local/branch and regional levels; some have taken steps to raise the profile of women's issues in their unions; some have reported speaking out more at union meetings rather than being the passive committee member; one UK participant has established an e-network of women in her union. Some of the women, American participants in particular, reported being more aware and less naïve about gender issues and had become interested in establishing women's groups (that some of the British participants had experience of) in their branches/locals. Many of the women (both UK and US) talked about subsequently having taken up women's issues, something they would not have 'bothered to do' or would not have made time to do, if it were not for the exchange programme. All of these actions on the part of women individually and collectively must go some way towards mobilizing women's leadership to challenge the male dominated union structures and masculine cultures that are said to stand in the way of women's leadership.

In terms of the kinds of women's issues the participants thought should be taken forward by women leaders, issues including domestic violence, workplace sexual harassment, paid family leave, flexible working arrangements, etc, were all raised during the programme. Since we had an ethnically and racially diverse group, it is also worth noting that we observed that the British BME women were extremely vocal on race issues and very keen to inject a race perspective into the discussions about women workers and unionists. The American women (of colour and white) on the other hand, were less willing to lay race issues on the table, but this is perhaps an example of how people's differing perspectives on equalities and identity issues are filtered through the different socio-political contexts that their lived experiences take place within. Despite the US being the location of the election of the first black leader of any Western industrialized country, race remains a very difficult conversation in the US context. Nevertheless, once put on the table, fruitful and insightful discussions about the invisibility of BME women/women of color in senior union positions in both the UK and US were held both by the whole group and among the

American/British BME women as a sub-group. Class differences were also talked about, particularly in relation to the barriers facing women in male dominated blue-collar work. We observed the formation of cross-class as well as intra-class connections among the women. This all suggests that in the right setting at least women can work together across racial and class divisions and benefit from doing so.

With regard to the international value of the exchange programme, many women were surprised to discover the common ground of women unionists that seemed to transcend national boundaries. Because it was cross-national, most participants entered the programme with excitement, but some trepidation – what would ‘*they*’ be like? What would ‘*they*’ be interested in? Would ‘*they*’ have anything in common with ‘*us*’? On the very first morning the facilitated discussion identified common issues as women unionists both within and external to the unions, for example, specific career, workplace and union barriers for BME women; masculine power structures in the workplace and unions; blatant and subtle sexism and racism in the workplace and unions; problems around juggling home, family, work and union responsibilities. The identification of common ground was important for the subsequent programme activities and was also the foundation of participants’ belief that an international network would add value to the development of women’s leadership in both countries and globally. After the programme, many participants reported ‘feeling part of something bigger’ and the feeling that ‘there are women out there who support me’. Coming together had helped to break down national stereotypes, to create greater cross-national understanding that allowed participants to see possibilities for international alliances and solidarity as women and as unionists. For example, many of the participants, especially, but not solely American women, welcomed the way that globalization and international union issues were highlighted in the programme, something they found instructive and missing from local union debates in the US (and in some cases in the UK). Some explicitly stated that they felt that exposure to global labour issues would help them to become more effective local union leaders, but they also talked about wanting to take the message of ‘the value of sisterhood’ beyond the national boundary. Some were discussing how they might try to get their unions to take up international issues and to extend solidarity to unionists beyond the industrialized world around issues such as human trafficking, sex workers/tourism in developing countries, child labour etc. Some had taken practical steps to globalize the local agenda for the first time:

I am especially keen on starting a women’s committee in my Local with an emphasis on global women’s issues, such as economic exploitation and violence against women. I think we need to urge our sisters to embrace the bigger issues than only those we see in our own workplaces.’ (US participant)

But, would the participants have gained just as much from a *national* women’s school? As we have illustrated in the above discussion, there was a strong belief that the *cross-national* exchange had encouraged and facilitated thinking ‘outside of the box’, leading to a more questioning approach to their union work. For example, participants reported asking themselves such questions as: are there alternative ways of doing things? Are our strategies always the best available? What would the American/British women do in this situation?

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I find myself frequently considering my actions in campaigns and development work and pondering if the US women had that situation how exactly would they be tackling the issue? (UK participant)

Taking part in this exchange has enabled me to build on my knowledge and gain a wider understanding and appreciation of the role of women in trade unions in an international context. This has helped me to formulate strategies that I can apply to my own roles. (UK participant)

I am now thinking beyond the local context in a way that I haven't done before. I have an idea to plan a campaign on human trafficking and will look to the UK for examples as the UK is so much more progressive on equality issues. (US participant)

What were the key 'lessons' drawn from the exchange programme that the American and British women reported wanting to take forward? For the American women, two 'lessons' stand out:

- (i) the benefits of 'new' gendered approaches to unionism (e.g. women's groups and other self-organized groups) for mobilizing women's (and that of other marginalized groups') activism and leadership; and
- (ii) the idea of thinking beyond the workplace to broaden the union agenda, including building coalitions with NGOs and other social movement organizations. These were the areas where the British women contributed experiences and shared ideas that the American women typically found novel, interesting and exciting.

For the British women, the key 'lessons' to take forward from the American women's stories and experiences were:

- (i) the motivation and inspiration that can be gained from the 'recognising' of women's value and contributions (via ceremonies, awards, public votes of thanks, etc, etc); and
- (ii) the passion and loyalty the American women felt for their unions where the family metaphor was often invoked to describe their Locals. The British women felt that if only some of this positive and affirming union culture could be engendered in the UK, the British union movement would be strengthened.

As well as offering 20 women a leadership development opportunity, we also hoped that the programme would result in the beginnings of a lasting cross-national e-network that American and British women union leaders (beyond the 20) could draw information and support from. At the end of the second leg of the exchange, the participants certainly had strong desire and intention to sustain contact within the group and they wanted to extend the network to include other American and British women union leaders and women from other countries. The American women in particular wanted to use an e-network to spread the message to more women that the labour movement is not an American labour movement, but an international one. The e-network was established within days of the end of the London exchange event, but at the time of writing (around 10 months after the end of the programme), the visible activities of the e-network are limited mainly to 10 blog posts between August and December 2009 and 11 discussion forum posts between June and September; the

posts were generated by a small group of about four UK and US women. The blogs gave details of forthcoming events of interest to union women in both countries and information on union-related news items. The forum posts attempted to generate discussion on a number of issues including: the impact of the UK-US exchange (4 replies); a major strike in New Jersey (3 replies); trafficking and prostitution (2 replies). Despite this being an e-network, potentially capable of overcoming the problem of lack of time that so many women leaders complain of, time was still mentioned in the post-exchange focus groups as the main reason for such little e-network activity. All participants re-emphasized international solidarity as a powerful union tool, but they also re-emphasized lack of time as a barrier to developing the e-network as fully as intended. Some of the immediate post-exchange time demands on the women included: involvement in the AFL-CIO supported political campaign for the governorship in New Jersey in July 2009; the economic downturn in both countries pushing union reps and officers to prioritize firefighting activities (i.e. defending members' jobs and representing those who have lost their jobs); involvement in strike activity in some industries/firms; involvement in union conferences/conventions; the familiar and ongoing work-life-balance issues many women activists face.

Previous research has shown how e-networks (much like any other network or support group) can founder on things such as lack of clear objectives and vision, lack of role allocation, lack of leadership (Greene and Kirton 2003). Although the last afternoon of the second exchange event was devoted to talking about the e-network, there were many questions that with hindsight were not thoroughly thrashed out. What did participants want and expect from the e-network? How would it develop women's union leadership? What kinds of e-activities did participants want to see? Who would develop it both technically and substantively in the longer term? How would new members be reached and who would be responsible for making links beyond the exchange group? Who would make decisions about the e-network's development? Like any other new network or group, e-networks usually rely on one or two committed individuals to maintain the initial enthusiasm and momentum (Greene and Kirton 2003). This was recognized in post-exchange focus groups when the British women agreed that the e-network needed a couple of participants to volunteer to draw up terms of reference, to make contact with other women's organisations around the world and to take responsibility for putting the e-network on the map. However, to our knowledge this has not been formally proposed to the whole group as a way forward.

Part of the problem is that participants felt that the e-network, like the exchange programme, should be 'owned' by all participants and that any hierarchical differences between the women would not count in that space. So one issue seems to be how the group takes decisions and yet maintains its democratic, non-hierarchical ethos that the participants had wanted to establish. Consensus decision-making is of course an obvious solution, but this still requires one or two individuals to put suggestions forward. Plus, the ways in which the exchange group had evolved – development of sub-groups, individual alliances, discord between some individuals – combined with pre-existing allegiances, loyalties or discord, meant that some participants seemed to be subtly excluded from decision-making processes, even though on the surface everyone was included. From the discussion in the last session of the programme, it was clear that a small group of more senior individuals (UK and

US) were steering the direction of the e-network. It was unclear how dissent and disagreement would be accommodated, i.e. how much room for debate there was on the aims and objectives of the e-network, its activities, etc. For example, one participant asked, 'what happens if opinion is split?' (on the e-network's aims or activities). The reply from one of those who had taken control of the discussion was, 'we *are* going to agree; we are all here to work together'. It appeared that some of the women were effectively silenced by pre-existing, unequal power relationships (i.e. women in the same union/region/local) or by those that had developed during the programme.

The overall assessment is that the programme was a success from the point of view of it being an attempt to develop women's leadership and to establish a fruitful cross-national dialogue that the participants could all learn from. In terms of the programme leading to the development of a sustainable cross-national e-network, this has been more difficult. Without doubt, lack of time for 'luxuries' or what might be seen as peripheral activities is a major problem – as we saw earlier women union leaders are already overworked and overstretched. However, despite a fairly weak cross-national network having so far developed, the American women reported that they had since formed a strong network among themselves and that this was proving to be a highly useful tool for gaining mutual support and exchanging tactics. But, it is also relevant for our discussion of women's leadership to say that lack of time is not the only factor standing in the way of the e-network's development; some of the other barriers run deeper than time and are perhaps harder to confront and resolve. Essentially, we are talking about power, politics and interests within groups of women leaders and about how women practice leadership. This begs the question of what kind of leadership women want to see? Do they want to replicate the masculine models that so many women union leaders criticize? Or, do they have a different vision for union leadership that is perhaps more participative, democratic, inclusive and empowering?

Nevertheless, the interpersonal relationships that have developed between British and American women led to five of the 10 British exchange group returning to New Jersey in March 2010. They were hosted by their American exchange partners and again attended the WILD conference. In the middle of the debate on Obama's health reforms, two women were invited to run a workshop about their experience of the British National Health Service and others contributed to workshops on women's union education. This unique exchange therefore now takes on a life of its own managed by the women themselves.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This report has presented first findings from a multi-method cross-national research project of women's union leadership in the UK and USA. We know from existing research that women are under-represented in union leadership, particularly at the higher levels, but we wanted to find out more about the current state of play regarding women's contribution to and experiences of running the labour movements of both countries. What do women union leaders do? How do women get to leadership positions? What are the challenges they face? We also hoped that we would succeed in stimulating debate in the union and scholarly communities about how women's leadership might contribute to the future of the union movement. What kinds of leadership do women practice? What are their visions for union leadership? What are women's views on strategies for building women's leadership?

Our study has shown that American and British women carry out multiple leadership roles at a variety of hierarchical levels and that they are overworked and overstretched. One of the ironies is that unions have become more inclusive of women during the period of understaffing and under-resourcing that has meant that union leadership is probably more of a challenge now than ever before. Despite the fact that women have arrived in union leadership in significant numbers, many continue to have experiences of being excluded, undervalued, undermined, marginalized and so on. Nevertheless, we hardly met any women leaders either in the UK or the USA who were contemplating giving up. Moreover, many women in our study were attempting to change union culture – to change the 'rules of the game' – by practicing (or at least trying to practice) a more democratic, participatory, inclusive approach to leadership, one less based on the preservation of hierarchy than is traditionally the case in unions. However, there are of course limitations to this in the sense that women learn how to be union leaders – how to be taken seriously, how to survive, how to win support, etc – within the prevailing political and hierarchical regime usually established by men who got there before them. Many women talked about needing a 'thick skin', needing to be immune to criticism, all meaning that it can be difficult to stick to an alternative value system and actually enact alternative visions for leadership.

Role models and mentors, often other more senior women, were regarded as important for building women's leadership. There was also considerable support for women's events such as education and training courses, conferences, etc. But, many respondents highlighted the fact that women too are a diverse group, meaning that working women do not all share the same concerns and interests. The cross-national exchange programme that was part of our project was an example of union women working together across various social divides, including country of residence, nationality, race/ethnicity, class, occupation. Following the programme, participants talked about feeling part of something bigger – a global union movement that is not purely about parochial local issues. Forging global links is clearly another dimension and level of women's activism and leadership that union women can find productive. The exchange programme also revealed some of the more pernicious effects of the traditional hierarchical approach to leadership where there is a clear boundary between 'leaders' and 'followers' and where all parties are expected to observe the behavioural norms of their position. This kind of approach to leadership is unlikely to

lead to the kinds of transformational change that women in our study either claimed or implied they wanted to see for the future.

In the course of our research some people have commented to us something along the lines of: ‘what’s the point of focusing on women’s leadership when the union movement is in crisis? What we should focus on is the survival of the movement.’ Our argument is that the two goals – (i) increasing women’s representation in union leadership and increasing the visibility of their contribution to unions *and* (ii) working towards the survival of the unions – are not mutually exclusive. For unions in most industrialized countries to thrive and more importantly to survive, they must recruit and retain women members. Along with other scholars and many activists, we argue that to recruit and retain women means having an agenda that is fit for purpose – one that serves the needs of a diversity of workers – and this in turn means ensuring that unions are inclusive of diversity at all levels. This need not be a zero-sum game with existing, long-established leaders losing out to newcomers, but it does mean that the established hierarchy – women as well as men – might need to be prepared to concede power bases and positions for what we might call the greater good. Our cross-national research project has shown that many of the challenges of union leadership, especially for women, transcend national boundaries and their specific contexts and are actually at a fairly abstract, conceptual level that union leaders need to get to grips with in order to accomplish the kinds of change that might yield a stronger guarantee of a future.

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