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Progress on Women's Equality within UK and Canadian Trade Unions: Do Women's Structures Make a Difference?

Jane Parker and Janice Foley

Women's structures have long featured in many UK and Canadian unions, and their forms and functions continue to widen. Extant literature highlights their concern with improving female union members' conditions in the workplace, but a growing body of scholarly work observes that women's structures may act as change agents within the trade union setting. Drawing on recent survey and interview evidence, this paper examines various equality achievements for women within UK and Canadian unions, before seeking to account for the extent of this progress with regard to women's structures' presence and activity. The empirical findings then inform a discussion which focuses on women's structures' contribution to women's equality within unions, and the implications of prevailing measures of internal equality progress for union influence.

KEYWORDS: women's structures, trade unions, equality, union renewal

Introduction

UK and Canadian industrial relations share certain characteristics, including a broadly adversarial approach to collective bargaining (e.g., Gaymer, 2006, Briskin, 2006), attendant political and economic weakness in the labour movement over recent decades,¹ and a collective bargaining agenda preoccupied with workplace interests. In both countries, union membership has retreated into the public sector, and female union density slightly exceeds that for males at just over half of union membership. Further, UK union density fell from around 35% in 1996 to 27% in 2006 (Grainger and Crowther, 2007). Trades Union Congress (TUC) affiliate membership is hovering around 6.5 million (half its 1980 level) or one and a half times that for total Canadian union membership. In Canada, although union density increased in a number of provinces in the last decade, it too dropped overall from nearly 35% in 1995 to 30% in 2007 (Statistics Canada, 2007). However, the countries differ on other indicators of labour movement activity and vitality (e.g., compared with virtually any other country, UK branch or shop stewards stand out for their historical significance for making their union's presence felt in the workplace).

Jane Parker is Senior Lecturer (Employment Relations, HRM), Secretary, New-Zealand Employment Relations Society (NZERS), Department of Management Faculty of Business, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand (japarker@aut.ac.nz).

Janice Foley is Professor, Faculty of Business Administration, University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada (janice.foley@uregina.ca).

Beyond the industrial relations landscape, a non-comprehensive welfare state and absence of wage solidarity has underscored and been reinforced by the UK and Canadian governments' support for neo-liberal market economics. Recently, there has been a relative non-domination of political life by social democracy, consensus-seeking and collectivist ideology. The emphasis of social discourse on women's equality in both countries has also shifted from liberal ideals to those which embody difference/diversity principles rather than to the common interest/gender neutral policies traditionally favoured by Nordic countries.

Such environmental features have helped to generate an extensive organized movement of union women in both countries. Much of their activity has centered around achieving external change (e.g., via campaigns on legislation for pay and employment equity, for flexibility in gendered domestic arrangements, see Briskin and Eliasson, 2007; Parker, 2009). Several commentators have shifted the analytical lens to examine related conditions *within* the labour movement which in turn have influenced the development of women's union organizing (*ibid.*; Foley, 2003). A growing body of scholarly work also recognizes that individual women and women's collectives within unions have pursued women's and diversity equality aims that seek changes in that realm (e.g., Rayside, 2007; Foley, 2000; Parker, 2006; Briskin, 1993; Forrest, 2001), although wider academic concern with women's equality has been slow to secure a central position within mainstream UK and Canadian industrial relations literature. However, in both literatures, the term "women's structure" (WS) usually refers to the sum of women's collectives and posts within a union, the former including women's conferences, committees, courses, meetings, caucuses and networks.

Further, progress on women's equality within the labour movement has been conventionally measured by the absolute number and proportion of women who are union members or fill mainstream posts and structures. These gauges emphasize women's integration into the union *status quo* rather than changes in men's attitudes or union structures to increase women's union participation (Ledwith and Colgan, 1996; Roby and Uttal, 1993). Although factors such as a recent flurry of UK union mergers and the absence of a central repository for Canadian union data complicate cross-national comparisons, it is generally noted that improvements in women's formal progress in both countries' unions have been slow and uneven, with many union WS articulating the need for more to be done to ensure women's "full" union representation in numerical and power-sharing terms.

Connected historical elements have thus converged in both the UK and Canada to put both countries at the forefront of the development of women's-based collective mechanisms within their labour movements. This article seeks to contribute a unique yet rigorous assessment of how these now-familiar, intra-organizational, identity bodies have played a part, according to union "insiders," in advancing women's equality within unions. It draws on nationally-representative survey and interview evidence to explore the character of recent equality achievements within UK and Canadian unions, and more particularly, their relationship to WS activity. Findings are discussed with regard for the capacity of prevailing measures of internal equality for women to assess labour movement influence.

Women's Structures and Equality within Unions

Sluggish progress on women's formal union participation has helped to encourage the growth of WS in many UK and Canadian unions. WS' traditional pursuit of formal or "sameness" equality in terms of women and men's union participation emphasized integrationist and "deficit" models. In brief, the integrationist perspective assumes that once women gain access to unions, they will naturally progress to attain the same positions as men on the basis of "merit." Despite some continuing support for this position, there has been a shift away from integrationism, given its failure to equalize women's union situation with that of men. The "deficit model" recognizes the significance of gender difference and the need for some separate organizing. However, it focuses on individual women changing (rather than on unions changing) to "overcome" their so-called "inadequacies" to become "like men" to take on union roles and fit into the union system (Briskin, 1993; Gray, 1993; Parker, 2003). This approach, too, has proven inadequate for significantly improving women's engagement with unions.

Further, the "gender neutrality" in these approaches has worked against the specificities of women's concerns and circumstances, and hidden the practices which privilege men (*ibid.*). Reflecting limited improvements in women's union participation and the perceived inadequacy of equality charters, policies and statements, "positive" measures have been increasingly sanctioned by unions and WS. Drawing on Jewson and Mason's (1986) analytical framework, positive action in the UK forms part of a liberal union approach wherein procedural initiatives (e.g., childcare provision) are implemented to help women to access their union and develop the skills and experience to compete equally with men within existing union arrangements. However, most large unions have since shifted to, or supplemented positive action initiatives with, more "radical" positive discrimination measures which assist equal outcomes in women's representation on existing union structures (e.g., via quota setting) and identity-based arrangements (e.g., women's reserved seats) from the standpoint that conventional union mechanisms impede women's (equal) interest representation (Parker, 2006; Kirton and Greene, 2002). In Canadian unions, "affirmative action" initiatives have encompassed a wide array of anti-discrimination, positive action and positive discrimination measures to help women overcome barriers to entering their union and to access special seats, the latter the creation of union good-will or mandatory measures (e.g., Canadian Autoworkers (CAW), undated; United Steel Workers (USW) Canada, 2001).

Growing ostensible support for positive and affirmative measures within both labour movements also derived from unions' need to actively respond to women members to survive. While Canadian union membership in the 1970s and 1980s was "able to escape almost unscathed," despite facing many of the problems that have been largely responsible for creating the harsh conditions in which unions had to operate elsewhere (Jackson, 1992), being sensitive to what women and potential members want and attempting to deliver it became part of the strategy of many UK and Canadian unions to counter male membership decline in the 1980s and 1990s.

For example, the 1991 TUC conference showcased positive action and the adoption of equality charters within unions and workplaces. However, the growth of positive/affirmative initiatives in both UK and Canadian unions appeared to slow from the 1980s in a context of persistent unemployment which helped to prioritize (men's) "mainstream" concerns; the likelihood of advancing beyond formal equality in these circumstances was small.

More widely, the limited positive provisions in the UK Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) 1975 have provided a legitimate base from which union equality measures could be inspired. In Canada, the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women established an agenda of reform for women's rights groups in the 1970s. One of its four guiding principles recognized that "in certain areas women will, for an interim period, require special treatment to overcome the adverse effects of discriminatory practices." Further, the backdrop provided by the Canadian Employment Equity Act (1986, revised in 1995) encouraged unions to hold a mirror up to their operations. The Act, influenced by the conceptual framework of affirmative action as implemented in the US, places an obligation on employers to implement employment equity (affirmative action) by proactive means (cf. quotas), some to be undertaken jointly with unions (Agócs and Burr, 1996).

Other drivers for proactive equality initiatives have included women activists' increasing and varied organization, the related multiplicity of their feminist standpoints, and growing rejection of the assumption that women and men start from a "level playing field" in their quest to enter, remain and progress in unions. However, as a number of commentators from both countries point out, while "affirmative action (has) opened the gates" (Fonow, 2003), like the deficit and positive approaches, it has not decreed the absence of sexist practices, generated structural locations that have been sufficient to generate widespread union participation by women, nor conferred union women with equal forms or sources of power as union men (e.g., *ibid.*; Parker, 2009).

Union WS have promoted various equality approaches to help improve women's engagement with their union. However, recent UK casework identifies that, reflecting women's frustration with the slow pace of progress on women's equality in unions, a significant minority of WS strategies and goals are coming to stress and address the significance of women and men's diverse characteristics and circumstances in relation to the imbalance in their union presence and power relations. Even more ambitious has been a small number of WS which have sought to transform aspects of their union's structures, culture, strategies and practices that impact differentially on women and men (e.g., Kirton and Healy, 2004; Parker, 2006, 2003; Briskin, 1993; Colgan and Ledwith, 2002).

In recent years, there has been mixed evidence on trends around the presence of union WS themselves. Increases in UK women's organizations, including those within unions, have been recorded (e.g., Kelly and Breinlinger, 1996; Parker, 2006). However, the TUC's (2007) union equality audit indicates that particular WS in unions (e.g. national women's committees (NWCs) in large unions) have been in decline. A smaller decline in the percentage of unions with national committees for disabled, ethnic minority and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) members suggests

that they are now more widespread than those for women. In both countries, this reflects growing activity within unions on the part of those identity groups, as well as aboriginal workers in Canada, coinciding with anti-discrimination legislation on these issues. Further, the UK Commission for Equality and Human Rights, which recently replaced separate commissions on gender, race/ethnicity and disability, indicates a reframing of equality issues in UK unions and workplaces to accent intersectional discourse (Parker, 2009).

Methodology

The UK and Canada were primarily selected for analysis because WS have a long and varied history in many of their unions; there is a similar breadth to the array of WS types in both countries' unions; and the UK and Canadian industrial relations and union settings share certain characteristics (see earlier).

Factual material about WS in unions and progress on internal equality for women, and perceptions of relations between the two, were derived from two representative UK surveys of senior union, equality officials, paid and lay reps and activists in 2005-06. The same surveys were administered to equivalent individuals in Canadian unions, emphasizing a rigorous approach to data collection. The fact-finding survey administered in UK and Canadian unions comprised 41 questions designed to elicit both quantifiable and qualitative information to "map" WS presence and character. Information sought by the survey questions included: WS types and union location; WS age; and WS' activities, external links, interests, access to union resources, and formal status. The perception-seeking survey was longer, with 65 questions. The information it sought included respondents' views on: why WS had been established; WS' aims; WS contributions to union recruitment and participation; and opportunities for and constraints on WS' development, goals, issue base, operations and powers. Respondents exhibited considerable diversity in their work-related (e.g., seniority, length of union service, level of direct involvement in WS) and personal characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity, political views) although the majority in both countries were female. However, due to the constraints of length, the following analysis is limited in its delineation of study participants and their unions' heterogeneity, and this may obscure certain organizational and contextual specificities (e.g., union regional or sectoral characteristics) (also Briskin, 1994).

In the UK, 56 TUC affiliates or 79%, covering 98.7% of affiliate members, responded to a "fact-finding" survey. Of these unions, 27 housed a total of "at least"² 142 WS. Forty-six expert respondents from eight affiliates responded to a second "perception-seeking" survey. In Canada, 13 unions, accounting for 50% of the country's 4.4 million union members, responded to the first survey. Nine of these unions comprised at least 95 WS, including WS "internationals" which straddle more than one national context (Canada and the US) in their membership, representation or issue orientation. No international WS were reported for UK unions, reflecting different union organizing histories and perhaps relatively weak links between UK union WS and external parties (see Tables 1 and 2).

TABLE 1
WS Types in Canadian Unions

Union Level	WOMEN'S ...																								
	Committee			Conference			Course			Network			Virtual Network			Seminar / meeting			Section			Working / task / support group / caucus			
	Int'l	Nat	Other	Int'l	Nat	Other	Int'l	Nat	Other	Int'l	Nat	Other	Int'l	Nat	Other	Int'l	Nat	Other	Int'l	Nat	Other	Int'l	Nat	Other	
UNION																									
CUPE		••	••		•	•															•			•	•
CAW		•	•		•	•			•	••											•	•	••	••	••
USWA		•	•••		•	•			•	•											•			•	•
Teamsters (IBT)	•	•	•		•	•				•											•			•	•
SEIU		•	•		•	•				•											•	••	•	•	••
CUPW		•	•		•	•				••											•	••	•	•	••
IAMAW	•	•	••		•	•				•											••			•	•
COPE			•																						
CFNU		•	•																						
Total	2	8	13	1	7	4	0	6	8	0	2	3	3	0	2	1	4	6	4	7	1	1	7	9	

Source: First Canadian survey, Union n = 8, WS n = 95, where Int'l = international, Nat = national, D = divisional.

• Double or triple dots in a cell indicate more than one WS at national or sub-national levels.

TABLE 2
WS Types in TUC Affiliates

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

Source: First UK survey, Union n = 26, WS n = 142, where Nat = national, D = divisional, R = regional.

^a This type of WS constitutes the only 'informal' form in the sense of not being sanctioned by the host union. ^b Double or triple dots in a cell indicate more than one WS at national or sub-national levels. A "hollow" dot indicates a planned WS.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with expert informants in both countries (WS members and senior union personnel). The 15 core UK and Canadian interview questions were the same, re-emphasizing attention to rigour in garnering comparable data. While certain questions echoed, and corroborated responses to, those posed in the second survey, interviewees provided lengthier, context-aware replies. Each interview also included unique questions to clarify an interviewee's earlier responses or to pursue under-researched or new avenues of inquiry. Apart from their union seniority, like the survey respondents, the vast majority of these informants were women and showed considerable diversity in their personal and work-related characteristics. Interview and survey informants' names have not been supplied due to the sensitive nature of certain information they provided.

A thematic analysis of the relationship between progress on women's union equality and WS activity was applied to perception-based survey and interview responses. The analysis was structured by a typology of key union areas where progress on women's equality has been emphasized in the literature: membership and participation/activism, education/training, local union position holding, convention attendance and union leadership roles. Factual survey data were subject to simple quantitative analyses (e.g., cross-tabulations). In the Findings section, the results of both types of analysis have been synthesized. While emphasizing the "insider" informants' varying standpoints, they generally concur on the nature of the links between women's equality progress within unions and WS activity.

Findings

Union Membership and Activism

Data from the first UK survey reveal that the majority of at least 62 (mainly) national-level WS in 24 affiliates were conceived as much as part of union recruitment and internal organizing strategy than as a response to grass-roots consciousness as initially "voiced" to and then pursued by WS of the need to better serve (women) members' interests. While the corresponding Canadian survey revealed similar results for the majority of at least 52 WS in nine unions, at least 17 of these mechanisms were also seen as a response to external influences (e.g., political and legislative developments). One might speculate that the absence of UK references to external features could partly reflect the assumption that nowadays, some union women have the experience and continued need to establish WS without external prompting.

In line with the surveys, UK and Canadian interviewees generally perceived that WS activity has positively contributed to union membership and participation, particularly by women. While the scale of these impacts was obfuscated by intervening factors (e.g., other union equality groups' activities), second survey respondents singled out intermediate- and local-level mechanisms for their part in union strategies to attract and involve female members, and for encouraging a greater sense of union "ownership" among women in both countries. Further, a number of newer

WS emerged as features of a broader shift in unions towards more decentralized democratic arrangements and organizing approaches. For instance, in the relatively small, male-dominated UK Transport Salaried Staff's Association (TSSA), the biggest challenge seen to face its national Women in Focus support groups is

the need to communicate and organize on a more local/regional basis, moving from more general debates at national level to local workplace campaigns where the agenda is set by the members based on their own experiences (senior male TSSA communications officer).

While Canadian survey respondents did not explicitly link the presence of sub-national WS to the devolution of union decision-making and organizing, 52 of the WS total (55%) were sub-national bodies, and a significant proportion of them were recently established. For instance, the large, 40% female Canadian Union of Postal Workers' (CUPW) NWC and National Human Rights Committee have been "putting a big push on development and the support of local [women's] committees" while the male-dominated USW is encouraging more women's committees locally and regionally. On the other hand, the development of WS internationals in the male-dominated Teamsters and the International Association of Machinists (IAMAW) was seen to reflect a need for cross-national organization to respond to the intensification of globalization pressures and, as the IAMAW NWC respondent put it, to the need to raise "global awareness of solidarity."

Education and Training

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

Women's courses were found to embrace an array of procedural and substantive concerns, particularly in respect of fostering female unionists' understanding of union organization, operations, policies, representation of women and related external developments (e.g., legislation). They were also widely seen as a separate space in which women unionists could "feel safe to develop their confidence and union skills, and learn how their union functions" (Regional Women's Committee (RWC) member in the UK, male-dominated Manufacturing, Science and Finance (MSF) union) over an extended timeframe; UK and Canadian respondents indicated that each women's training session ranges from half a day to a week's duration. Significantly, this was felt to have encouraged more women to engage with the mainstream union, and to increase women's capacity to seek to advance women's equality in that setting. For instance, several MSF RWC members commented that their own women's course and wider involvement in WS had helped them to redress a personal sense of impotence

in geographically-isolated and male-dominated branches (locals), as both ordinary members and union postholders.

Many UK and Canadian interviewees also suggested that women's courses had moved beyond an "integrative" function in their training to raising awareness among, politicizing and mobilizing women to challenge identity-based inequalities in their union. For example, some female senior and lay officials felt that women's courses had helped to empower them to seek to break down the domination of certain union activities and structures by the "same old male faces." However, female union membership share appeared to mediate this pursuit. For instance, shop steward training in the Canadian Service Employees' International Union (SEIU) has been taught by three NWC women but, given its 90% female membership, this is less a proactive device to influence union courses than female "domination" by numerical default. Unfortunately, the Canadian union sample size, while representative, is too small to compare statistically with the UK union data (cf. Parker's (2009) statistical analysis of UK unions which demonstrates statistically significant relationships between the likelihood of WS being present and their location in larger, mixed-sex unions; those with a significant female membership share; those with a critical mass of active women; and those with other, non-gender specific equality groups). Moreover, it cannot be assumed that (only) female-dominated unions will undertake progressive organizing around women's issues (*ibid.*).

It also emerged that educative, politicizing and support roles were not the sole preserve of women's courses; other WS forms undertake these functions to some extent by integrating women into the union and/or pursuing more ambitious internal equality aims. For instance, many UK and Canadian WS were said by senior female officials to have helped pave the way for women in particular to more easily attend union education and other events (e.g. by encouraging their union to provide childcare allowances, and in the case of the CUPW, special funding to enable women to attend union and other WS events). Moreover, WS in the 30% female member CAW "push for change at all levels of the union, building on previous equality work" (CAW female national official) and plans were afoot in IAMAW to integrate "women's issues" into all union representative training. Further, the union's international women's committee was considered its most influential WS because it "can reach out to the majority of sisters who in turn can reach into the majority of locals [branches]" (IAMAW NWC respondent). According to Divisional Women's Committee members in the UK's large, female member-dominated shopworkers' union, the Union for Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), their bi-monthly meetings are followed by a worksite "walkabout" to help educate, impart knowledge to and recruit employees. Women's conferences and support groups were generally held to offer an excellent environment for networking, sharing gendered and other experiences, and mentoring (e.g., the UK's large, female-dominated Public and Commercial Union's (PCS) Head of Equalities reported that a former network for senior female officials may be revived to provide them with more support in their roles; TSSA's national and regional Women in Focus (WiF) support groups "have given members more confidence in their *own* ideas" (TSSA regional WiF member)).

Local Position Holding and Convention Attendance

According to the TUC (2007), there has been a major advance in the collection of diversity statistics at local union levels. Fifty-six per cent of responding affiliates collect sex statistics on stewards and representatives (double the 2003 percentage) while 53% gather them on branch officials. Moreover, 38% target women for recruitment as shop stewards or branch officers (compared with 4% in 2003). There is no equivalent Canadian database, but UK and Canadian informants concurred that women's involvement in local union posts has been slowly growing. The TUC audit also recorded smaller improvements in the percentage of unions that keep statistics on women representation in union conference and TUC delegations, although Labour Research Department (LRD) and Southern-Eastern Region TUC Women's Rights Committee (SERTUC WRC) figures show that, across most major TUC affiliates, women's share of such has seldom grown to reflect their membership share (cf. the male-dominated Communication Workers' Union (CWU)). Anecdotal evidence from Canadian informants suggested similar trends.

Both UK and Canadian informants also indicated that women's involvement in union conferences and peak body delegations has often been sparked or supported by WS and individual attendees' engagement in WS. This supports Braithwaite and Byrne's (1995) study of union confederations which found that women's or equality committees are a necessary part of achieving better female representation. For example:

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

Further, the large, private sector and male-dominated Transport and General Workers' Union's (TGWU) annual Women's National Members' School includes sessions in four women's courses which encourage and support greater women's involvement in the union (a Candidate Development Programme also targets women and other under-represented groups to develop their involvement as senior representatives, delegates and officers). Another way in which a small proportion of NWCs and caucuses have encouraged women's involvement in the mainstream as union reps, delegates and convention attendees is via their own institutionalization such that they have formal slots or fringe events at union conferences. While several UK and Canadian interviewees felt that these fixtures were seen by critics to emphasize women's interests as separate to "core" union business, most regarded them as an important precursor to the discussion of women's issues in the union mainstream and as reflecting union recognition of their relevance. Second UK and Canadian survey respondents largely concurred that WS have been important for developing an expanding agenda on women member-union relations (particularly around women's proportional representation, women's union organizing and participation, changes to union structures and procedures to help women access union posts, and dealing with sexism and harassment in various contexts); raising women's interests including internal equality at union platforms; seeing women's interests become part of union agenda and sometimes priorities; and influencing unions to actively respond to their concerns (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Perceptions of WS' Interest Representation in UK and Canadian Unions

	TUC AFFILIATES					CANADIAN UNIONS						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Average score	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Average score
In the last two years ...	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	2.6	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	2.9
... WS have developed an expanding agenda on women member-union relations	4	2	4	4	0	2.6	2	3	2	2	0	2.9
... more issues raised to the union via WS have become union agenda priorities	0	8	5	1	0	2.5	2	1	3	3	0	2.8
... WS have been important players for raising issues of relevance to women at union platforms	3	9	0	2	0	2.1	2	4	3	0	0	2.1
... union/external groups have actively responded to issues raised by WS	2	3	7	1	0	2.6	2	2	2	3	0	2.7

Sources: First UK and Canadian surveys (TUC union n = 14, covering WS n = 91; Canadian union n = 9, covering WS n = 95).

TUC union respondents: Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (Unifi), Fire Brigades' Union (FBU), Community, PCS, National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), Unison, Prospect, National Union of Journalists (NUJ), National Union of Teachers (NUT), Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Graphical, Paper and Media Union (GPMU), Connect, CWU and TSSA. Canadian union respondents: Teamsters, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Canadian Federation of Nurses' Union (CFNU), Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union (COPE), SEIU, USW, CUUPW, CAW and IAMAW.

Note: A lower average score indicates higher agreement.

Further, extant works report that much of women's organizing through WS has focused on their institutionalized links with union collective bargaining strategy (or relative absence of, in the UK) (Dickens, 1998; Briskin, 2006). Although the data collection instruments here chiefly sought data about WS' union-centered interests in respect of women's equality, it emerged from many UK and Canadian interviewees that WS' concern with externally-oriented equality interests (e.g., work-life balance, childcare), as part of their wider collective bargaining concerns, has directly affected women's capacity to access and participate in unions (see also the TUC (2007) although there is no monitoring of the results of equalities bargaining at local level in most unions). The union-centered focus of the data collection tools may also help to explain why Canadian informants did not flag up a tendency among women's organizing in their unions to link with women in other unions, political parties and community groups, "cooperation [which] has meant that trade union women work with community-based feminist groups to build coalitions around key issues such as child care and pay equity, to pressure the trade union movement to respond to the feminist challenge" and weaken "the tendency towards individualistic solutions" (Briskin, 1999).

Moreover, a minority of WS were found to have helped "revision" their union's approach to particular issues, away from treating them as "women's issues" to couching them as diversity matters or "issues for all." For instance, the Teamsters' female Education Director who responded to the second survey commented that its WS have encouraged this shift with respect to bullying and sexual harassment, with implications for women's relations within the union and beyond. Similarly, PCS' National Women's Forum (NWF) and Group WACs support its major campaigns on pay, pensions, job losses and relocation whilst asking "What's our perspective?" (experienced PCS NWF member).

Union Leadership Roles

LRD and SERTUC WRC data indicate that women have maintained or increased their share of the national executive body in most large UK unions over the last decade. As a proportion of national full-time officials (FTOs), women's share has also tended to grow (particularly in Unison (the large female member-dominated, public service union), the General Union (GMB), USDAW and the sizeable, female-dominated National Association of Schoolmasters' Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)), though it should be recalled that absolute FTO figures can be small. Considerable improvement has also been recorded regionally. However, as with local position-holding and convention attendance, this growth seldom reaches a level that is commensurate with female membership share. Most of these trends were borne out by the first UK and Canadian survey and interview data, though a decline in female leadership shares was reported for several Canadian unions (CUPE, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and the large Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC)).

However, across unions in both countries, WS—particularly women's committees, conferences and courses—were credited by informants with contributing somewhat to a stable or increased female presence in leadership roles. They did this by encouraging

female unionists, and providing a springboard for their own members from which to progress in the union. Indeed, a significant minority of the UK interviewees, strongly represented by experienced female national FTOs, felt that their involvement in WS had provided vital support for their early union careers, particularly in accessing and operating effectively within local union posts and union conventions.

A significant proportion of WS in both countries' unions have also sought or altered elements of their union setting on the premise that the attainment of women's proportional representation on existing posts and structures has not automatically led to power equality with male unionists. For example, the first UK survey revealed that at least 13 WS in eight unions focused on getting women into existing or *developing* union posts and structures for women, both within and alongside existing organizational arrangements. And at least 18 WS across 11 UK unions have sought greater representation of female sub-groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, youth) via special posts on existing and proposed union structures. Several unions also pointed to WS' growing special representation on and coalitions with external bodies (e.g., IAMAW's NWC will pursue seats on "like-minded" external boards; a number of Canadian respondents mentioned the significance of the Canadian Labour Congress for links to WS beyond their union or even the labour movement).

Obstacles and Change

A small minority of UK and Canadian WS were found to have successfully encouraged their union to inform some of its organizational features with "longer," more ambitious or power-conscious equality notions (see Cockburn, 1989), with attendant meaning for women's (power) relations within and beyond the union setting. However, many, of varying rank, had encountered impediments to the introduction of change-seeking and power-shifting internal equality goals, encouraging a more evolutionary and piece-meal approach to change. In a number of unions, barriers were said to include:

- *structural deficiencies* such as a relatively low number of women unionists or their low concentration in the union; the absence of "a solid plan to move groups forward" (IAMAW respondent); mainstream bureaucracy and "abstruse procedures;" limited membership control over leaders' actions; non-enforcement of constitutional arrangements; the predominance of WS with advisory (cf. policy-making) status; women's level of representation in leadership posts (e.g. the female president of a COPE local observed that the union's executive committee female majority has led to "a belief [held by some] that WS are not required" and that "too many of the women on the local women's committee are also on the executive—there's a need for new women to be involved to make challenges").
- *resourcing issues* including funding shortfalls (e.g., CUPE's Equality Director indicated that WS issues were constrained by limited time, money and opportunities to meet). Further, resource shortages can vary across WS within a union (e.g., the Teamsters' international women's committee is strongly supported and funded

by the International Executive Board while its newer sub-national women's committee "doesn't have adequate funding—for now." However, several UK and Canadian informants were ambivalent about union resourcing of WS because it could provide another source of union control of their ambitions.

- *union culture, custom and communications*: Traditionalists and critics, including those who regard WS as divisive forces within their union or perceive that women have "achieved" equality, were cited for limiting WS' ability to act (e.g., the Teamsters Education Director felt that the union's executive board "like to promote WS during an organizing campaign, [but] are afraid that strong women would take their places in the structure." TSSA's lack of branch support for WS has meant that "it's very hard to get women involved because we have a lot of opposition [and] negative connotations" (TSSA regional WiF member). Several informants noted that WS expend considerable energy guarding against the active reversal or withering away of their achievements; and the female COPE local president identified that "communication does not flow down from the [women's seat on the executive] to the local women's committee or *vice-versa*."
- *internal WS factors*: despite adequate union resourcing and leadership and officials' support for WS in COPE, the attitudes/behaviours of union members, politicking within WS, and the external time commitments of one local women's committee's members were seen to constrain WS progress. Variations in WS' age also played a part (e.g., an experienced male senior FTO from the UK Community Union commented that a year-old NWC in its Iron and Steel Trades' Confederation (ISTC) section was pursuing "fledgling" institutional strategies while the aims of Unison and PCS' longer-running WS embody various internal equality ideals and often a critical perspective of mainstream pursuits.
- *limited monitoring*: several respondents to the second UK and Canadian survey recognized that while some WS have influenced local union procedures, it was difficult to assess their wider union effects for progress on women's equality, particularly in respect of qualitative change (e.g., to union culture) and given complex influences on them (e.g., from other union equality groups' initiatives). For instance, a PCS Group WAC interviewee commented that WS and reserved postholders have helped to inspire black members to organize.

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

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

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

Echoing other respondents, a local women's committee in COPE was cited by its female president for apparently making more effort than mixed-sex union bodies in seeking to attract people to its activities, encouraging women's activism, focusing on developing members' skills and confidence, keeping (women) members informed of union policy and raising consciousness about the implications of union concerns for different constituents. Some survey and interview evidence also pointed to efforts by WS members to transfer their ways of working to the mainstream where possible (see earlier), though such essentially individual change efforts could be hard-going in the traditional union fora they sought to alter—even when wider benefits could be demonstrated. Several senior UK and Canadian FTOs asserted also that WS strategies which stressed constituent diversity (e.g., via tailored organizing) have enhanced the efficacy of union information-gathering and interest representation processes.

Discussion and Summary

Recent decades have witnessed notable improvements to women's participation in UK and Canadian unions. However, the findings confirm evidence elsewhere (e.g., TUC, 2007) that their participation still trails that for men. They also affirm the argument that the achievement of parity for women and men on traditional measures of union involvement does not automatically confer women and men with equal decision-making powers on or interest representation within masculinist contexts. Simply getting women "into" unions is thus not enough. For some, women's ability to have an "equal" union experience in power relation terms is linked to their holding a critical mass of positions of power, not just holding of union positions (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996; Date-Bah, 1997).

It also emerged that the analytical categories used to gauge internal union equality for women's union participation are interrelated, suggesting the need to develop conjoint measures which more sensitively assess internal union equality. Further, additional gauges are required to comprehensively adjudge women's level of union involvement (e.g., there is an absence of monitoring of the results of equalities bargaining at local level in most unions), and to provide greater analysis of factors underpinning (potential) downward trends in indicators of women's union equality (e.g., female union leadership numbers in several Canadian unions). Indeed, such trends suggest a call for the setting up of this type of indicator to promote the case of women.

Notwithstanding this, the study recorded a significant number of WS across UK and Canadian unions and showed that experts in the field see them as playing a significant part in improving women's involvement in conventional union structures,

as well as in effecting uneven progress on other equality indices. The latter range from more inclusive language in union constitutions through to union action on interests that reflect gendered structural inequalities. However, future research that incorporates in-depth, longitudinal data collection could help to validate or extend the informed but largely “snap-shot” orientation of most informants’ responses. Related to this, WS have worked towards internal equality goals of varying “ambition,” largely via an evolutionary approach to change which reflects the varying obduracy of impediments to their goals. One possible dilemma of this combinatory “approach” is the potential for incompatible effects from different equality strategies, itself a potential obstacle to further change. For example, the pursuit of women’s integration into extant union roles as an “end-goal” does not address, and could delay or hive off resources for efforts that seek to address power imbalances between women and men in unions. On the other hand, a “cherry-picking” application of different ideas on women’s equality underscores the presence of common and differing barriers to internal change, union women’s pragmatism, and the dynamism of equality goals; indeed, most informants felt that WS’ projects are on-going.

Although a significant minority of Canadian and UK unions plan to develop their existing WS network (e.g., in CUPE, the NWC “wants to establish more local women’s committees to mobilize more women and build leadership and knowledge” (Equality Director)), the extension of WS might be further extended by efforts to persuade cynics of their positive influence for all. For instance, *regular* monitoring of WS’ internal equality impacts and their meaning for progress on key institutional goals such as union membership growth, strong identity and internal cohesion could foster wider support. Greater promotion of WS’ achievements, particularly by high profile cross-border and national WS, could be valuable in a context of union decline, and more particularly, to counter negative developments such as a recent decline in Canadian female union leader numbers.

Further, European Trade Union Confederation (2003, 2007) studies reveal that in some affiliates, women’s issues have been merged into an intersectional equality agenda of an Equal Opportunities Department or Committee, a trend in unions detected by the TUC (2007) and echoed by the development of a single UK Commission for Equality and Human Rights. However, the same studies show that a large majority of ETUC affiliates continue to host a women’s committee, department or a body dealing with women’s equality issues, and a substantial minority hold women’s conferences. As with the WS examined here, while the work of ETUC affiliates’ WS is widely judged as adequate, in order to be more influential, “they should be capable of influencing the work of the daily management committees and other standing committees” (ETUC, 2007: 34). The advisory status of many ETUC affiliate, UK and Canadian union WS calls into question whether they can significantly influence union decisions, moreover. Their effectiveness is further increased when they have adequate staff and financial resources, though budgetary problems for ETUC affiliate WS seem to have declined in recent years. Such comparisons stress the need for subsequent research that would use both in-depth and broad-brush analyses of union WS as a basis for a comparison with additional countries.

This study's findings also point to more process-oriented areas around which unions and WS could extend their cache of internal equality gauges (e.g., changes to union structures, processes, culture, attitudes, formal and informal ways of working) in order to better explain women's agency and capacity for interest representation in unions. There will likely remain issues about how best to measure WS' qualitative and interactive effects; difficulties in procuring information in certain union environments; WS' differing capacity to gather information; mainstream responsiveness to such information; and so on. However, an approximation of WS' contribution to internal equality for women needs to be clarified, not least to secure their presence as internal union critics and protectors of existing equality advancements for women. Efforts to concretize an expanded repertoire of internal equality measures might also encourage unions to evaluate the fullness of conventional measures of their influence (e.g., TUC, 2007). This is imperative for the UK and Canadian labour movements whose renewal strategies are reactions to both curtailed institutional, procedural and substantive powers in a context of tough economic conditions and individualist politics, and to the goal of balancing diverse interest representation with strong union identity and cohesion aims.

Notes

- 1 UK unions have had a stronger political voice under the New Labour government, which has delivered gains (e.g., a national minimum wage, transposition of EU laws). However, much of this has been cautious for Labour to maintain its pro-business face, and laws on industrial action and statutory union recognition are limited. Despite some gains, the labour movement has been unable to position itself as a major political actor with whom the Government must interact despite the increasing significance of lobbying in the policy-making process, and its contribution to Party funding. Godard (2004: 451) similarly depicts a weakened institutional context for Canadian unions, surmising that they "have become increasingly marginalized in policy circles. At the federal level, government policy has come increasingly to focus on economic productivity and innovation, with little if any role countenanced for unions or the values they have traditionally stood for ... In addition, support for collective bargaining seems to have given way to one of mere tolerance at best. This has been reflected in government policies, especially the weakening of labour laws in a number of provincial jurisdictions ... Even ostensibly labour-friendly governments have been hesitant to improve labour laws, even where doing so would only reverse the anti-labour changes of a previous government."
- 2 "At least" denotes a conservative estimate because some sub-national WS numbers were unavailable.

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SUMMARY

Progress on Women's Equality within UK and Canadian Trade Unions: Do Women's Structures Make a Difference?

Many Canadian and UK trade unions host collective structures for women unionists. These structures continue to widen in form to encompass women's conferences, committees, courses, meetings, seminars, workshops, caucuses, branches and networks. The bulk of extant work on union women's structures focuses on their concern with improving women's conditions in the workplace. However, a growing body of works acknowledges their role as agents for change *within* the union setting in promoting women's equality and in supporting union revitalization efforts.

This study focuses on women's structures' meaning for progress with women's equality within UK and Canadian unions. Using national surveys and semi-structured interview

evidence supplied by a wide variety of unionists, it "maps" and cross-nationally compares equality achievements for women in this setting. The assessment is structured by a typology of union dimensions where progress on women's equality has been emphasized in the literature: i) union membership and participation, ii) union education/training, iii) local union position-holding, iv) convention attendance and v) union leadership. Thematic and simple quantitative analyses were employed to account for the nature of progress in these areas for women in relation to women's structures' presence and activity.

It emerges that the dimensions for women's union involvement are interrelated, and that women's union involvement to date has not been comprehensively gauged, particularly in terms of its parity with men's activity and empowerment in unions, and also with regard to the influences on the level and character of advances towards union equality for women. Further, women's structures are shown to play a part in effecting uneven progress for women on *additional* equality indices that emerge from the data, ranging from more inclusive language in union constitutions through new union ways of working to union action on interests which reflect gendered structural inequalities in that setting. According to the informants, the uneven character of women's union equality advancements reflects the varying obduracy of impediments to women's structures' equality goals and the ambition of their equality initiatives.

The article's concluding discussion centres on the significance of equality developments in UK and Canadian unions for progressing institutional goals (e.g., union membership growth, strong identity, internal cohesion, diverse interest representation) and for refining assessments of women's advancement towards equality in unions. Further, it emphasizes the need for women's structures, advancements as internal union critics and guardians of existing women's equality achievements, to profile their "contribution" to union equality. Efforts to develop an expanded repertoire of internal equality measures might also encourage UK and Canadian unions themselves to re-evaluate the fullness of conventional measures of their influence, given continuous pressure on union strategists to find a solid and innovative basis for union revitalization.

KEYWORDS: women's structures, trade unions, equality, union renewal

RÉSUMÉ

Les progrès dans l'égalité des femmes au sein des syndicats en Grande-Bretagne et au Canada : les collectifs féminins font-ils une différence ?

De nombreux syndicats canadiens et britanniques comptent des collectifs pour les femmes syndicalistes. La forme de ces structures continue à s'élargir et englobe des conférences, des comités, des cours, des réunions, des séminaires, des caucus, des branches et des réseaux destinés aux femmes. La majorité des recherches qui existent sur les collectifs féminins au sein des syndicats porte sur leur préoccupation envers l'amélioration de la condition féminine dans le milieu du travail. Toutefois, des travaux de plus en plus nombreux reconnaissent le rôle d'agents de changement *au sein* du cadre syndical lui-même que jouent les collectifs dans la promotion de l'égalité féminine et la revitalisation syndicale.

Cette étude porte sur l'importance des collectifs féminins pour l'avancement de l'égalité des femmes au sein des syndicats canadiens et britanniques. S'appuyant sur des sondages

nationaux et des témoignages recueillis au cours d'entrevues semi-structurées auprès d'un large éventail de syndicalistes, elle schématise et compare au niveau transnational les réussites des femmes en matière d'égalité dans ce cadre. L'évaluation est structurée selon une typologie des dimensions syndicales où les progrès relatifs à l'égalité des femmes ont déjà fait l'objet de travaux : i) l'adhésion à un syndicat et l'engagement, ii) l'éducation et la formation syndicale, iii) le poste occupé dans un syndicat local, iv) la participation aux congrès et v) le leadership syndical. On s'est servi d'analyses thématiques et quantitatives simples pour tenir compte de la nature des progrès des femmes dans ces domaines par rapport à la présence et à l'activité de collectifs féminins.

Il en ressort que les dimensions de la participation syndicale féminine sont interdépendantes et que, jusqu'à présent, l'engagement syndical des femmes n'a pas été mesuré complètement surtout pour ce qui est de sa parité avec l'activité et le pouvoir exercé par les hommes dans les syndicats ainsi qu'en ce qui a trait aux influences que cet engagement exerce sur le niveau et le caractère des progrès vers l'égalité syndicale pour les femmes. De plus, on voit que les collectifs féminins influencent les progrès inégaux réalisés par les femmes sur des indices d'égalité *supplémentaires* qui ressortent des données. Ces progrès vont d'un langage plus inclusif dans les constitutions syndicales à l'action des syndicats sur des intérêts qui reflètent des inégalités structurales liées au genre dans ce milieu, en passant par de nouvelles méthodes de travail. Selon les sujets interrogés, l'inégalité des progrès reflète l'insolubilité à divers degrés des obstacles aux objectifs en matière d'égalité que se sont fixés les collectifs féminins et l'ambition de leurs initiatives.

La discussion qui clôt l'article se concentre sur l'importance que jouent les initiatives en matière d'égalité dans les syndicats britanniques et canadiens dans l'avancement des objectifs institutionnels (p. ex., augmentation du nombre de membres, identité forte, cohésion interne, représentation d'intérêts divers) et dans le perfectionnement des méthodes d'évaluation des progrès des femmes vers l'égalité au sein des syndicats. De plus, elle souligne le besoin pour les femmes d'avoir des structures, de progresser en qualité de critiques internes et de gardiennes des réalisations actuelles en matière d'égalité féminine afin d'établir le profil de leur « contribution » à l'égalité syndicale. L'expansion du répertoire de mesures internes de l'égalité peut aussi encourager les syndicats britanniques et canadiens eux-mêmes à réévaluer l'exhaustivité des mesures conventionnelles de leur influence étant donné les répercussions, dans leurs stratégies de revitalisation, de la réduction des pouvoirs institutionnels, procéduraux et de fond auxquels ils sont confrontés.

MOTS CLÉS : collectifs féminins, syndicats, égalité, revitalisation syndicale

RESUMEN

Avances en la equidad para las mujeres dentro de los sindicatos del Reino Unido y de Canadá: ¿las estructuras femeninas marcan una diferencia?

Muchos sindicatos canadienses e ingleses tienen estructuras colectivas para las mujeres sindicalistas. Estas estructuras dan soporte a la hora de realizar las conferencias, comités, cursos, reuniones, seminarios, reuniones de un día, de procesos de decisión interna ("caucus"), de rama, y redes de trabajo. La mayor parte del volumen de trabajo

de dichas estructuras sindicales de mujeres se focaliza en la mejora de las condiciones laborales en el puesto de trabajo. Sin embargo, un número de creciente de trabajos dedica su atención al rol de las mujeres como agentes de cambio en los propios sindicatos promoviendo la igualdad de las mujeres y apoyando los esfuerzos sindicales de revitalización.

Este estudio se focaliza en las estructuras sindicales de mujeres que se centran en el progreso de la igualdad dentro de los sindicatos ingleses y canadienses. Se utilizan informes nacionales y evidencias extraídas de las entrevistas semi-estructuradas a una variedad de sindicalistas, se establecen mapas y se cartografían y comparan los logros alcanzados en el objetivo de igualdad para la mujer entre los dos países. La valoración realizada está estructurada por una tipología de dimensiones, enfatizadas por la literatura, que definen a un sindicato y donde se detecta el progreso de las medidas de igualdad de género: i) sindicalización y participación, ii) educación y formación sindical iii) posición del sindicato local en el holding, iv) asistencia a congresos y v) liderazgo sindical. El análisis cuantitativo simple y temático se utiliza para dar cuenta de la naturaleza del progreso para las mujeres en dichas áreas de acuerdo con su presencia y actividad en las estructuras sindicales de mujeres.

Se desprende que las dimensiones de la participación sindical de las mujeres están interrelacionadas, y que la participación sindical de la mujer hasta la fecha no ha sido correctamente evaluada, particularmente en términos de la paridad con la actividad de los hombres y la capacidad de asumir poder en los sindicatos; y con respecto a las influencias sobre el nivel y el carácter de los avances sindicales en lo referente a la igualdad de género. Mas aún, las estructuras de mujeres desempeñan un papel desigual a la hora de obtener mejoras para las mujeres tal como sugieren los datos obtenidos en los índices adicionales de igualdad, que van desde el establecimiento de un lenguaje más inclusivo en los estatutos sindicales, a nuevos métodos de trabajo para la acción sindical donde no se refleje las desigualdades estructurales de género. De acuerdo con los entrevistados, el carácter desigual de los avances de la igualdad de la mujer en los sindicatos refleja la variedad obstinada de impedimentos a los objetivos de igualdad de las estructuras de mujeres y a la ambición de sus iniciativas de igualdad.

La conclusión discutida en el artículo se centra en la importancia de la igualdad de género desarrollada por los sindicatos ingleses y canadienses medida como progreso en los objetivos institucionales (por ejemplo, incremento de la sindicalización, fortalecimiento de la identidad, cohesión interna, representación de intereses diversos) y para hacer más fina la evaluación del progreso de la igualdad de género en los sindicatos. Además, hace énfasis en la necesidad de estructuras de mujeres, como respuesta a los críticos y guardianes de los avances sobre la igualdad de género, y como perfil a la contribución de la igualdad sindical de género. Los esfuerzos para desarrollar un amplio repertorio de medidas de igualdad interna podrían alentar a los sindicatos del Reino Unido y Canadá a reevaluar la totalidad de las medidas convencionales para ejercer su influencia, facilitando una reflexión sobre sus estrategias de renovaciones institucionales, de procedimiento y sustantivas del recortado poder sindical.

PALABRAS CLAVE: estructuras de mujeres, sindicatos, igualdad, renovación sindical