

Diversity, Identities and Strategies of Women Trade Union Activists

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Diversity among women trade union activists is explored with reference to feminism and the women's movement, and the social and civil rights movements of black, disabled and lesbian and gay groups. Relationships between this diversity and women's individual and group identities and priorities are traced through some of the women's own descriptions and reflections on their trade union activism. These are drawn from our research with the public service union UNISON, in particular, two questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. We draw on theories of social identity, the relations of out-group status and gender group consciousness to help to understand and explain the complexity of the social interactions involved. This frames our central analysis of the role of self-organization in the union in the construction of women's identities and consciousnesses, and the potential of self-organization as a site for collective action leading to organizational challenge, change and transformation.

Introduction

This article is about the diversity among women who are active in their trade unions, and the fluid and dynamic relationship between this diversity, women's different identities and consciousnesses, the strategies they pursue, and the connections with women's autonomous organizing — 'self-organization' — within their union.

Our aims are twofold. First, to explore the character of women's identities and forms of union activism among an increasingly diverse trade union membership. Second, we wish to investigate the interrelationship between women's identities and women's autonomous self-organization; the shape and character each takes in relation to the other, and the efficacy of self-organization in the development of women's activism.

Our analysis draws on research carried out with UNISON, the UK's largest trade union, over a three-year period.¹ In particular, self-organization (SO) within UNISON is explored as a political space in which to develop voice and individual and group identity, and as a strategic means of transforming the culture and structure of the trade union.

To try to make sense of these constitutive processes, we draw on social identity theory in order to view women as a political, but also diverse, category; as outsiders, as members of an out-group or outside groups in trade unions. In turn, this allows us to focus on these interactions with and the impact on women's individual social identity, gender

identification, group consciousness and collective action.

Diversity and identity

Women are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences differ, and are interpreted, often simultaneously, through lenses of race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, disability, and so on. These, plus other factors such as historical context and time and geographical location, also need to be taken into account in explorations of women's race and ethnicity (Cornell and Hartmann 1998), studies of lesbian politics (Phelan 1997) as well as feminist analysis (Maynard 1995, p. 9).

The diversity among women activists has implications for women's solidarity within their union. While it is in *all* women's objective political interests to see women becoming actively involved in processes of organizational decision-making in order to ensure that women are visible and that their voices are heard, it is not realistic to see women as a single interest group when it comes to 'women's concerns' (Cockburn 1995, p. 79). Commenting on the problems which women's diversity poses for the labour movement and for the 'notion of sisterhood' Yuval-Davis (1998, p. 168) argues that feminist politics should now incorporate the notion of 'women's positionings' into its agenda by developing 'transversal' coalition politics, whereby women in different constituencies are rooted in their own membership and identity, but at the same time are prepared to

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shift into a position of exchange with women with different memberships and identities.

In our research with women active in the UK public service union UNISON, we have listened to, interviewed, discoursed with, received questionnaires from a hugely diverse range of women. Among the UNISON women there is a broad agreement that having more women active in the union is good for the union and good for women. However, when it comes to the detail of agreeing ways and means, interests and priorities, differences and divisions arise.

The challenge is how to usefully understand and present this diversity among women, especially its impact on strategies on organizational gender politics. As Franzway (1998) finds, there is a tension around the notion of women's difference. A focus on difference among women may undermine the possibility of 'tactical unity' while conversely, unity may 'submerge their differences'. Without an exploration of difference, there is also the danger of misreading and of inappropriate interpretation — although there is always that danger anyway. As Vogel (1995, p. 93) puts it, the 'woman question', especially acute in the 1990s, is that of finding alternative — and for us, appropriate — frameworks for theorizing diversity. Writers on ethnicity and race grapple with similar problems (Modood *et al.* 1997; Hall 1996, p. 4). Our analysis is also framed by these debates, including the developing analyses of social movements (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1990, p. 116; Griffin 1995, p. 9; hooks 1982, 1984, 1991; Phillips 1987).

In-groups, out-groups and social identity

Much has been written on identity from a variety of disciplines (Matza 1969; Gleason, 1983; Rosenberg 1987), with recent feminist perspectives focusing on the complexities of race, ethnicity and sexuality (Allen 1998, p. 46; Cornell and Hartmann 1998, p. 72; Esterburg 1997, p. 14). Identities may shift, being constructed as individuals engage with the broader social relations and wider structures of society. Identity is interactive and dynamic, both assigned to particular groups or categories by significant others (Bacchi 1996), and asserted by individuals and groups themselves (Cornell and Hartmann 1998, p. 80), and emerging within the play of specific modalities of power (Hall 1996, p. 4).

The positioning of women as outsiders, members of an out-group, as a political category, and the implications for the development of social identity, gender consciousness

and activism have been considered by a number of writers (Hedlund 1988; Miller *et al.* 1988; Bacchi 1996; Kelly and Breinlinger 1996; Sinclair 1996). Out-groups are defined and positioned in relation to in-groups, which also use their power and influence to stereotype and reformulate out-groups as 'problems' (Bacchi 1996, p. 49). Thus features of out-groups entail shared beliefs and shared identity; solidarity, with a strong sense of relative deprivation, and attribution for problems to external forces (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996, p. 174).

Identity is sustained and developed through group support and solidarity, and self-perception as an activist feeds further activity. It is the comparative nature of the social status of in- and out-groups and the awareness by group members of these comparisons which result in a psychological sense of group distinctiveness and motivation for changing the social status of the group (Miller *et al.* 1988, p. 121). This stems from *group identification* which implies a person believes that she has ideas, feelings, interests and characteristics in common with others in the group and these are distinct from those of members of other groups. *Group consciousness* is seen by Miller *et al.* as going beyond group identity, reflecting cognitions that arise out of comparing the social status of the group with that of another (1988, p. 112). Three main types of consciousness were identified; a traditional women's view, a feminist perception, and black consciousness. It was the combination of identity and consciousness which the authors suggest offers propensity for collective action; the processes by which group identification becomes politicized (*ibid.*, p. 121).

Three strategic approaches are proposed for out-group members pursuing a positive social identity; one being individualistic and the other two being group-based challenges (Tajfel and Turner 1986 in Kelly and Breinlinger 1996, p. 41). First, *individual mobility* is a strategy of actually leaving, or if not possible, psychologically withdrawing from the low status group. It may be an attempt to achieve upwards individual mobility and status without bringing about any change to the group as a whole. Since 'women' is ascribed by the 'real world' as an identity category whereby women are objectively identifiable (Bacchi 1996, p. 3), individual women cannot actually leave. Instead they may distance themselves, for example not identifying gender as relevant to them, or taking a position of being anti-feminist. The first strategy implies a lack of salience of gender consciousness, and the second a low,

but negative, level of gender consciousness (Miller *et al.* 1988, p. 117).

Social creativity and social change/competition are both collective challenges to the low status group's subordinate position. *Social creativity* does not involve any change in the position or status of groups, but rather attempts to develop strategies whereby a social identity which was viewed as negative is seen more positively. *Social change/competition* seeks to bring about actual change in material circumstances and objective social relations between groups. It implies collective action by low status groups, for example, by feminist groups' self-organizing, in order to challenge and transform both ideas and social structures and thus improve the status of the group — women.

Individuals identifying strongly with the group will be more likely to get involved in collective action on its behalf, whereas individuals with weak group identity are more likely to engage in individual action (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996, p. 41). A second key factor in moving towards collective action is whether the status hierarchy is perceived as illegitimate or unstable thus allowing out-groups to conceive an alternative to the existing status quo. In the past 20 years, trade unions have been increasingly criticized for being 'male, pale and stale' (Rees 1992; SERTUC 1994, 1997; TUC 1998). Political challenge, membership decline and union mergers have also provided fluid conditions whereby out-groups have seen opportunities to push for changes in culture and structure (Heery 1998; Colgan 1999b).

In-groups, out-groups and trade unions

In capitalist societies like the UK, class conflict situates trade unions as oppositional organizations, or out-groups, which are an important source of individual social identity for members, and in particular of a collective identity of solidarity and unity (Hyman 1975, 1994; McIlroy 1991, 1998; Kelly 1998). Yet there are also significant differences of interest between women and men and between white trade unionists and black trade unionists, for example in situations around workplace trade union democracy and local bargaining (Colling and Dickens 1989; Fosh and Cohen 1990), and industrial action (McDermott 1993; Westwood 1984).

Within trade unions women have been systematically excluded from mainstream power structures through the gender politics of closure. Thus women are 'outsiders' even within their unions (Sinclair 1996, p. 249). As already established, however, not all women

share the same concerns, and so do not necessarily have a collective identity or agenda for action. In an earlier study of women trade activists in the print union SOGAT '82 (Ledwith *et al.* 1990), we found differences among the women in their current levels of gender consciousness and trade union activism. Four major groups of women were identified; women who were active in order chiefly to pursue a limited 'welfarist' agenda to rectify an injustice against women at the workplace (welfarists); women working collectively within a traditional solidaristic union framework which denied difference between women and men (traditionalists); those who were active primarily as a result of their socialist ideology but also acknowledged a feminist consciousness (socialist-feminists), and women whose union activism although informed by socialism, was in a form driven mainly by their feminist beliefs (feminist-socialists).

Given such diversity, strategies of social creativity can provide important means of building both intra-group and inter-group solidarity and developing understanding, consciousness and skills among different women. These strategies may also include preparation for collective action in pursuit of social change. Here women's self-organization could be pivotal. In Kelly and Breinlinger's study of women's participation in collective action in women's groups (1996), for example, women trade unionists, and members of other women's groups and campaigns, stressed the importance of support from other women and 'doing something positive for women'. Virdee and Grint (1994, p. 221) found that black self-organization in the union NALGO was a means of constructing a black identity as well as developing strategies to tackle racism. It was also a catalyst for greater class-based unity among black socialists. Colgan (1999a) also found lesbian and gay self-organization was an important means of constructing identity, encouraging lesbians and gay men to 'come out' and become active as lesbian and gay trade union members.

Women's self-organization in British trade unions

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the establishment of separate unions for women was principally a response to exclusion from mainstream 'male' trade unionism (Drake 1984; Boston 1987; Davis 1993; Walby 1997, p. 147). Regardless of their demise and incorporation into male unions,

separate unions were significant in the organization and politicization of women. This can be characterized as one form of women's separate, or autonomous organizing (Briskin 1993, 1999).

In the past 20 years, a different separatism has developed, this time *within* union structures. Described as 'interim separatism' (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996, p. 170), this takes on many forms, such as women's officers, women's committees and women's conferences and education schools (SERTUC 1997). Women, black, lesbian and gay and disabled union members have campaigned for a range of liberal and radical equal opportunities measures within their unions. This internal pressure, combined with the external pressures created by legislation and 20 years of trade union membership decline have provided strong imperatives for union structural and cultural change. Strategies of social creativity and social change/competition, initiated by out-groups, have led to the introduction of women's self-organization, and in some cases black, lesbian and gay and disabled self-organization in British unions (LRD 1997, 1998). So far, however, only the public service union UNISON has gone down the radical road of formally constituted semi-autonomous self-organized groups, each with their own structures, officers, and support systems, for women, black members, disabled members and lesbian and gay members (Terry 1996; Colgan and Ledwith 2001; Colgan 1999b).

Self-organization enables women (and the other designated groups) to be legitimately represented as an 'oppressed social group' (Cockburn 1995, p. 92), with the women elected or appointed via this route explicitly speaking for these members rather than as individuals or simply as members of a sex category. Women's self-organization thus provides women with space and voice to debate women's concerns, develop consciousness, confidence and skills, to experience and acknowledge the diversity of priorities among women, formulate policies and practices, and strategies to get these onto the trade union agenda. Self-organization in itself does not, however, guarantee achievement of the oppressed social group's aims, existing in a state of almost permanent challenge from mainstream traditionalists and institutionalized norms (Mann *et al.* 1997). Self-organization therefore becomes contested terrain for both supporters and opposers. Its members become characterized more clearly as an out-group, with its activists as outsiders. Formal self-organization carries with it high visibility and expectations, the aims of

which, like policy, are open to variable and partisan interpretation. Ownership of the most significant of these interpretations belongs to the main in-group; traditional union orthodoxy, manifested chiefly through elected lay and paid official power holders, at local level are the quasi-elites (Batstone *et al.* 1977) and at higher levels in the union, the power elites. These are a major focus for self-organization activists in managing and challenging the political relations between self-organization and the traditional, 'mainstream' structures of the union.

To summarize, these studies illustrate key issues relevant to our exploration of women's identities as union activists and the range of strategies which they employ, especially within self-organization in UNISON. First, that women in trade unions, as in the wider society, can be identified as a political category and one which is classified both objectively and subjectively as an outside-group, but that within it there are other, diverse groups, some of which, such as black, lesbian and disabled women who might see themselves as separate out-groups. Second, that the out-group is a significant site for the development of women's social gender identity and gender consciousness, interacting with women's experiences of the wider society, of family, of work and in the union, and there may be ambivalence, and perhaps competition between the constituent aspects of women's identities. Third, that self-organization can provide an autonomous space for trade union women for the development of strategies of social creativity and social change and competition. For women where a strong sense of feminist identity and consciousness are shared, there may be a propensity for collective action in pursuit of strategies for social change/competition.

Self-organization in UNISON

The delivery of gender equality was central to UNISON's aims both during the merger discussions between the three partner unions COHSE, NALGO and NUPE² and when the new union was set up in 1993 (Terry 1996; Colgan and Ledwith 2000). Recognizing that women would be in the majority in the new union's membership, the three unions agreed a new approach building on the elements of women's self-organization which each already had in place. The mechanism for achieving gender equality was threefold. First, women's proportional representation — 'Proportionality' — in all the elected structures was to be achieved by the year

2000. Second, 'Fair Representation' whereby representation should aim to reflect the spread of members throughout the union; those working part-time, full-time, black women, lesbians, disabled women and so on (UNISON 1997, p. 10). However, proportionality and fair representation were not to be just a 'numbers game'. It was also about getting women and the other identified groups involved in the structures and in setting the collective bargaining agenda (Mills 1994). Self-organization was the form of positive action chosen to help deliver women's proportionality through women's committees, conferences, women's development and training, and so on. It was to exist at national, regional and branch levels and was to be supported by dedicated women's officers at national and regional levels.

Self-organization was also set up to help develop members of three other 'disadvantaged'³ minority membership categories: black members, lesbian and gay members and disabled members. The purpose of a SOG according to UNISON rules (1997, pp. 19, 20) is to enable the members within these groups to:

- meet to share concerns and aspirations, and establish their own priorities;
- elect their own representatives to other levels of self-organization and to other appropriate levels of the Union's organization;
- have adequate and agreed funding and other resources, including education and training, access, publicity and communications;
- work within a flexible structure to build confidence and encourage participation and provide opportunities for the fuller involvement of disadvantaged members;
- work *within* the established policies, rules and constitutional provisions of the union. (our italics)

The purpose of self-organization as outlined in the rule book implies that self-organization does provide the potential for strategies of social creativity and social change through the development of identity and group goals, consciousness and strategies. Anyone who self-identifies can become part of a SOG. Some members may be active in more than one, often apportioning their commitment differentially depending on their current personal or political priorities.

Thus self-organization in UNISON offers an important political and personal space for its particular members as well as a place for developing identity, consciousness and action. Its purpose, from the union's perspective, is to develop and prepare activist

members from previously oppressed groups to a position of capability to take on elected representative roles in the mainstream (to some, the 'male-stream') in numerical proportion to their representation in the broader membership. A view held among members of the mainstream power elite of lay and paid officers, and also among some women in SOGs, is that once this proportionality is achieved there will no longer be any need for self-organization. We would suggest, however, that this represents a misreading of the role and functions of self-organization as perceived by many of its members, and that the existence of SOGs offers a site from which to organize resistance and challenge to that very power elite in the mainstream, as well as providing a springboard for future members of the power elite.

Activism, identity and strategies — women in UNISON

Having established a framework for analysis, we want to examine how the identities of women union activists in UNISON are constructed and the significance the self-organized groups (SOGs) play in this process. This leads in turn to an evaluation of the significance of women's self-organization as a site for developing strategies of social creativity and social change/competition.

The research

To explore these issues we draw on research carried out with the public service union UNISON between 1994 and 1998. The methods used included reviews of the union's documentation and reports, observation at national and regional meetings and conferences, including women's self-organization and other SOG meetings and training events at national and regional levels. Over 200 interviews with officers and activists and two questionnaire surveys of activists provide qualitative and quantitative data on UNISON activists.

In the first survey in 1995, 375 women active at national and local level completed questionnaires covering their family, work and trade union roles and their attitudes to equality measures in the union. They were women who attended that year's UNISON Women's Conference,⁴ plus a further sample of women active in both self-organization and/or 'mainstream' UNISON structures. We visited all 13 of the UNISON regions where we interviewed the regional women's

officers or their equivalent and met regional officials and activists. Issues explored here included the role and significance of women's self-organization (and other SOGs) and the priorities and levels of participation of women in the region. Given the size of UNISON and the complexity of the gendered social processes at work, we supplemented the qualitative interview programme with some targeted research in three UNISON regions. This included a second survey (in 1997) in 13 newly merged UNISON branches, when 148 women and 110 men active at local, branch level completed questionnaires.

Between 1995 and 1998, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 124 women and 30 men lay activists, and 31 women and 20 men paid officials at all levels of the union. Interviewees were asked about their own personal routes to activism, their own current involvement and attitudes to UNISON's equality initiatives.

Propensity to union membership and activism

In our previous study of women active in the print union SOGAT '82, we discussed the genesis of women trade unionists' propensity for activism (Ledwith *et al.* 1990). There we identified women's class, family and educational background as interacting to influence their attitudes towards joining trade unions and becoming active; as important constituents of their social identity. Once in work, negative experiences, usually of inequity, sexism and discrimination against women by employers, were powerful triggers to women becoming active as workplace representatives. Within the union, encouragement, or 'bringing on' of prospective activists by existing active members, often

part of the quasi-elite, was also important. Women active in UNISON also presented similar characteristics and experience in their inclination to join their union and become active.

In UNISON, among the women activists in the 1995 questionnaire survey, a union-minded family background was the most important influence on them first joining a union. This was followed closely by their socialist beliefs, with events at work being the third most important influence. In the 1997 survey at local, branch level, events at work were the main reason women gave for joining their union, with socialist beliefs and family influence following closely. Table 1 summarizes the data from the two surveys on the seven most important influences on women becoming active. In the 1995 survey the major reason had been because nobody else would take on the position, with problems at work as the second most important influence. Among the women active at branch level, surveyed in 1997, problems at work were the most important influence on their first becoming active. Gendered dimensions here were important. The women overwhelmingly worked in feminized areas; 76% in the 1995 survey, for example, worked mainly with women. In the interviews when women talked of work issues which triggered activism, these were frequently related to the impact on themselves and colleagues (women) of change imposed by their employers; for example, nurse re-grading, privatization and compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). Time and again women told of the frustration in their branches when the women's concerns about these changes were not addressed, and how, for example, as a result of this exclusion, women took on leading branch roles: 'I used to be very vocal

Table 1: Seven most important influences on first becoming active within the union*

	Women activists (1995 survey) Number (rank)	Women branch activists (1997 survey) Number (rank)
No one else would take on the position	130 (1)	35 (3)
Problems at work I felt strongly about	118 (2)	64 (1)
Encouraged to take on the position	109 (3)	53 (2)
Could do a good job for the members	99 (4)	n/a
Interested in being active trade unionist	73 (5)	29 (4)
Make sure women were represented	58 (6)	6 (6)
Could do a better job than current rep	51 (7)	10 (5)

Note: * Respondents were asked to identify up to 3 major influences.
n/a — not applicable

and stand up and say "Look, point of order, we've got something to say and you're not listening to us" (Branch Secretary 1997).

Being encouraged or persuaded was the third most important factor in 1995 survey and the second most important for the branch women activists. At workplace level, this encouragement often came from women workers or representatives but for those involved more at national and regional levels, it was male activists who had encouraged them especially; a reflection of the scarcity of women role models at these levels.

Although women's identity and women's interests were significant for the women activists, in both surveys, making sure that women were represented was only the sixth/seventh most important factor encouraging them to become active in the union. This low priority among women implies that identification with feminism and gender politics may appear weaker than identification with trade union values, although interviews with women activists did indicate that often the two went hand in hand given the gendered dimension of 'problems at work' (Sugiman 1993).

Involvement in women's self-organization

When it came to involvement in women's self-organization, among women in the 1995 survey, 38% said that they were already active within it and a further 16% were interested in becoming active. However, this was only two years after the formation of UNISON and the implementation of self-organization, which was a new concept for women from former COHSE and former NUPE. Two years later, in the 1997 branch survey of active women and men in the three case study regions, 42% expressed interest in joining a women's branch SOG (SOGs at local branch level are not yet well developed, Fairbrother *et al.* 1996, p. 7; Colgan and Ledwith 2000a) and only 18% of the women were members of a branch SOG. However, 23% of the women branch activists said they would not join a women's SOG.

In the 1997 survey 56% of the 148 women branch activists said they were in favour of self-organization compared with 44% of the 110 male activists. Only 11% per cent of women opposed self-organization and over a third (36%) of the women didn't know if they were in favour of it or not.

In both surveys women not in favour of, or not interested in becoming involved in women's self-organization fell into four groupings. One group said they simply did not have time given other pressing union,

work and family commitments; a second group were in branches where no groups existed, the third were socialist-feminist women who prioritized working in the 'mainstream' structures although expressing support for self-organization. The fourth group were traditional women who were opposed to self-organization.

Also important for members' propensity for activism in self-organization in UNISON was their previous partner union and its culture and structures. For while the push for women's proportional representation and equality within the new union had come in different ways from all three partner unions, it was NALGO, the white-collar and professional union that provided the model for self-organization. This was consistent with NALGO's ideology of being 'member-led' rather than officer-led; implying that autonomous activism was a cultural norm within the union (Miller 1996). Nevertheless during the 1980s, campaigns to establish self-organization for women, black, lesbian and gay and disabled members had initially been met with strong hostility by NALGO's mainstream power elite (Mann *et al.* 1997; Colgan 1999a). Self-organization remains contested among dominant power holders from all three previous unions.

In-groups and out-groups in UNISON

In UNISON the main in-group, or power elite, comprises a coalition of the lay, elected National Executive Council, and the paid officers, particularly the all-male senior management team of General Secretary and deputies. However, there are a number of other important in-groups. The membership crosses seven different public service industries, each of which operates semi-autonomously especially when negotiating terms and conditions for the members. Each of these has its own national service group executive, which are also powerful players in the union's mainstream. Since UNISON's inception the NEC and the National Service Group Executives have resisted reserve or observer seats for SOG representatives. Although members of the power elites support the concept of self-organization, in our research interviews they were also often critical of SOG activities, seeing the women's SOG especially as being more concerned with themselves (i.e. as an out-group pursuing strategies of social creativity or social competition) than with their strategic alignment with the mainstream union (Colgan and Ledwith 2000a). Other powerful in-groups include the regional secretaries (paid officers)

and regional lay office holders, some of whom may also hold lay positions in the national service groups and NEC.

In UNISON, the majority of paid and lay officers are still predominantly white men, but following the introduction of proportionality into the new unions' rule book in 1993, increasing numbers of senior lay positions at regional and national level are held by white women. A number of these women activists identify as traditionalists, appearing to adopt strategies of individual mobility, choosing to distance themselves from, and in some cases state their opposition to, women's self-organization. These women emphasized that they did not need 'special treatment' to succeed, in some cases preferring: 'the company of the males ... the guys accept me for who I am. I've never had to prove myself as a woman in UNISON ... they've accepted me because of what I do, they don't accept me as X, because you're a woman' (mainstream activist, interviewed, June 1996).

Another key group of senior women identified primarily as socialists and had succeeded by being aligned with 'left' groups and prioritizing mainstream activism. One woman describing herself as a 'communist' saw: 'being active in the trade union goes with the territory ... Women's self-organization wasn't around when I started becoming active.' Although she supported self-organization she prioritized activism in the 'mainstream' because of her 'political standpoint' and because 'that's where the power is'.

However, proportionality and fair representation are increasingly encouraging women identifying as socialist feminists and feminist socialists, to stand for positions particularly at branch and regional level. These women are frequently SOG activists or supporters and can act as advocates for a social creativity and/or social change agenda as we will see below.

Despite these shifts, in most parts of UNISON, the SOGs straddle an uneasy and contested borderland, being both formally in, but culturally out (Colgan and Ledwith 1998). The SOGs continue to be perceived with suspicion by the mainstream in-group, some of whom (both men and 'traditional' women) in interviews expressed concerns that SO should not be allowed 'to get out of control'.

Women's identities and self-organization

Nevertheless, for many women in UNISON, self-organization is a 'safe' place to be, often for the first time, and particularly for women

from previous partner unions COHSE and NUPE. Their past experience of being mainly officer-led has led some ex-NUPE women to especially value women's SO in UNISON:

Although I was on the national Women's Committee [of NUPE] it wasn't the sort of voice that I would have preferred because when you came back to your own branch you were sort of quietened; if you came back with ideas and that sort of thing to your branch, to hopefully get a women's group [going] — because that's what I'm hoping for in the new UNISON branch because we are three-quarters women, but we need a women's committee within our own branch. (Women's SOG activist, interview, February 1997)

This woman had initially become active as a result of challenging the manager who was harassing and bullying her. She got the manager moved and the branch secretary who supported her encouraged to become a steward. 'A lot of things were happening in my own life at the time. I was splitting with my husband; I'd brought three children up and they were sort of grown up and on their way then, and I'd got myself a flat and my daughter came to live with me.' This was a liberating and exhilarating time of personal growth, and social creativity, and she became increasingly active in UNISON, both in the mainstream and in women's self-organization at regional, and national levels. On her identity and consciousness now she had this to say: 'I've been through it all ... a marriage ... all that crap. If I'm a feminist I'm a feminist for myself because I believe now in what I'm doing. I believe in myself ... I'm a woman in my own right now.'

For another woman manual worker, becoming involved in women's self-organization had helped her understanding of gender politics and was instrumental in her becoming active: 'It's been so encouraging, the women's group, and supportive ... I first went on this women's weekend and I started to think about the balance of power between men and women and it was a real eye opener (mainstream and women's SOG, national and regional activist, February, 1997).

Other women with perhaps a more developed sense of gender identity and feminist consciousness were at stages of political development and formulation of strategies for collective action:

It's purely because the women's issues are so dear to me and important that I've taken that route. But if I cut all of that out

and I was into the other mainstream bit, I would still be fighting for those issues in the main. It wouldn't be left behind. I mean there may come a time when I'm not on the women's committee because I've got to let other people take that place ... I mean the more women that can be educated — I don't mean they are idiots — but do realize that they can do this, and the opportunities that are open to them, the learning curve they jump onto, I think the better. The other thing I think is that it makes you feel stronger and more confident within yourself and able to relate to other people and I suppose to stand up for what you believe in. (activist, National and regional women's SOG, interview, October 1996)

The existence of self-organized groups in UNISON was pivotal in encouraging some women to join and become active in the union. Black women, for example, discussed the way in which UNISON's black members' SOG had been an important factor in their decision both to join and become active in the union:

In terms of the union, I've got to say that it is very white and I didn't really want to subscribe to some white organization that I wasn't going to get anything out of or that wasn't actually going to do anything for me or support me ... it would just be a waste of time giving money to that organization ... once I knew about the black members group it was different because at least there were people there that you could relate to and talk to ... you would have a say, you would get a support for whatever endeavour and so that really encouraged me to pay my subscriptions. (activist, Regional black members and women's SOGs, interview, June 1996)

Lesbian women at preliminary stages of activism described how UNISON's recognition of the rights of lesbians through rule book legitimation, enabled them to come out within the union and develop their identity more clearly through lesbian and gay self-organization:

For the very first time I got to become a branch officer and I found I could do things and there was support for me to go to a lesbian and gay conference as well, and all these things that have never been available before. UNISON's — it's like it's opened a door. (Women's SOG member, interview, February 1997)

As well as being liberating for women, the space of disabled members' self-organization

was profound for the personal and political development for some disabled women members:

How significant it was to suddenly learn there was a political framework for our disability issues, and the contacts that I then made and the learning that went on about the political disability movement. That is where it started really, it has been tremendously important and it was one of those happy coincidences I suppose that my personal needs were met and they kind of coincided with the ... huge political development within the disability movement; I was just there lapping it up really. It was exactly what I needed. (National and regional disabled SOG activist, interview, February 1997)

Three other disabled women, now senior in self-organization, were also on women's committees, but agreed that they prioritized disabled self-organization as their main area of activism. One disabled, lesbian woman active in both SOGS at regional and national level and in her branch and region was clear that 'If it wasn't for self-organization, I would not be a UNISON activist' (National and Regional SOG activist, March 1997).

Among some of the women, increasing gender and political consciousnesses led them into making sometimes difficult choices about where they put their priorities. This complexity is well illustrated by this senior lay activist. She considered herself a left-wing socialist, and though her identity as a lesbian was also significant, for her, feminism and women's self-organization were her priority as an activist, and she carried these into her activism in elected positions in the mainstream:

A feminist I think, because I think socialism is inherently flawed with sexism So, yes, I have always said, I mean I live with a woman now, I haven't always lived with a woman, I have interests in all sorts of issues but my heart lies with women and the broad church that women are, and the broad issues that affect women as a group, and I think that is often harder than to be more specific. I think, say you are a lesbian, and you choose the gay and lesbian self-organized group, I think that is much more easy because it is much more focused. I know that the challenges are much different, but you have got to appeal and achieve for a very wide mass of women through this trade union, so yes, definitely women are my first concern. (National and regional women's SOG activist, interview, October 1996)

Diversity and self-organization

Black women frequently talked of the marginalization they felt in women's self-organization in their union, and of how they shared these experiences with lesbian and disabled women. Yet a minority also felt a strong loyalty to women's self-organization, for example, defending it to black colleagues. One black woman who identified as a feminist chose to make women's self-organization her priority, partly because she didn't like what she described as the hierarchical and conflictual nature of the black self-organized group and partly because she wished to ensure black women were active within women's self-organization. Yet, rooted as a black woman, she still felt in a minority and marginalized by her white female colleagues, although she did work with women from the other SOGs to try to ensure that the women's SOG recognized and reflected the concerns of black, lesbian and disabled women.

Among black women whose race identity was foregrounded, different choices were made and routes developed. Racism in the union was described by many of the women activists interviewed — black and white — and was the cause of some serious conflict in women's self-organization. Black women were nevertheless developing a strong identity and sense of strategic possibilities within self-organization:

I think it's something to do with this new breed of black women, actually — this goes way, way back. To cut a long story short, black women, not just within the union, but within themselves, have become more empowered, and they're moving on, getting better jobs. If they're single parents they manage, get on with it ... basically they're leaving the men behind. And in doing that, it helps them within the union itself. They're just going for it ... simple as that, and the men don't attend meetings anyway — so we just do it. (activist, Regional black members SOG, 1996)

For some this was underpinned by a class analysis as well as one by race. Several black women prioritized black self-organization because for them, women's SO was for white middle-class women, who were in the majority:

For many black workers you're in the minority ... so I think it's partly for those other black people who are in a similar position and to give that support. We really just talk about issues. I think that's what took me down the black road rather

than down the women's road, although there are obviously many issues for women that are dealt with at that forum. (activist, Branch and regional black members SOG, December 1996)

Certainly black women were in the minority in women's self-organization, and probably not present in proportion to their membership — although the partial monitoring of black membership in the union does not enable us to provide figures. On all regional women's committees and the National Women's Committee there are automatic seats for representatives of the other SOGs (usually two from each). However, it was unusual to find black women active on these women's committees over and above this allocation. We found cases where black women stood for election in their own right and were not elected. Only one of the regional women's officers was black, and in this region, strategies of inclusion and transversalism were well developed, with a black woman as one of the Regional Women's Committee Co-Chairs and 15–20% of places on the women's committee taken by black women members, thus ensuring that diversity was reflected on the region's women's committee and in its work priorities.

In most cases lesbian women working across both women's and lesbian and gay self-organization prioritized the latter. One of the women, a lesbian and a feminist, who was active in both women's and lesbian and gay self-organization (which she now prioritized), offered this analysis of the difference between what was often seen in the union as disarray among women in self-organization, and clearer strategic vision among the other three SOGs:

The problem I think is that they [women] have with the way they work and everything is that unlike the black members, the disabled members and the lesbian and gay members, they haven't got a clear sense of their own oppression. I mean, homophobia's pretty clear, racism's pretty clear, disable-ism's all over the place. We're much more clear about our oppression and what we're fighting. The women I think have a terrible time because they've got husbands and boyfriends and they feel disloyal if they actively take against the men in the union, and I don't think they understand about power and what men will do unconsciously to keep themselves in power, and that they actually have to fight You're talking about a battle, and I think the trouble with a lot of women is they don't actually understand that.

(National and regional lesbian and gay and women's SOGs, interview, June 1996)

She said it was important to ensure that lesbians and gay men did not become invisible within traditional trade unionism; 'we were always fighting, and that certainly can bring out the best in you, it can make you have to be more political'. The 'fight' was essential to the lesbian and gay group in maintaining its presence, its visibility, its space: 'we had to be there, we had to be fighting the NEC, we had to be putting motions up, we had to be seen to be active and not let people for a minute forget we existed, otherwise we lost things. We lost our voice.' Another lesbian also on her regional women's committee, prioritized lesbian and gay self-organization in part because her activism was fired by her 'lesbian identity politically, that's where I put all my energy in all areas of my life'. Although she found her regional women's committee 'lovely', she had given up on women's self-organization at national level because she was frustrated by its slow implementation of fair representation (activist, National and regional lesbian and gay and women's SOGs, March, 1997). A number of black and disabled women agreed with this view.

Notwithstanding their misgivings about women's self-organization, all of these women were committed to working transversally with the other SOGs at branch, regional and national level to progress equality issues for women:

The union has been very complacent and ... it has to change. One thing self-organized groups have realized, there's no way we can work in isolation to one another, we have to be working together. (National and regional women's and black SOG activist, interview, March 1994)

Women's self-organization: strategies

Women's self-organization is still considered to be fragile; feminist identities and a consciousness of gender politics seem to be less clearly defined. Feminists who could be expected to take the lead in developing strategies of social creativity or social change remain in the minority. For example, in the 1995 questionnaire survey of women active at all levels of the union only 44% identified as feminist, 43% did not, and 13% said that they didn't know. Feminists frequently articulated their consciousness as being constituted by both their experiences of oppression and their beliefs, and as being instrumental in identity, consciousness and action: 'I love the Feminist movement. It helps women to be strong.' However, among feminists there were differences about the efficacy of self-organization. One woman wrote on her questionnaire: 'I am in favour of *fairness* and equality of treatment. I disagree as strongly with positive discrimination as I do with negative discrimination.' Thus some of the women's feminist identities can be seen to be competing with their solidaristic class and trade union identities.

There were similar, though slightly more positive, responses to the questions about support for special measures to ensure the representation of women, and of black, lesbian and gay and disabled members in the union. Only just over half of active UNISON women in both surveys were in favour of special measures, as can be seen in Table 2, although among women who described themselves as feminists, 75% were in favour of the measures for women and for black, disabled and lesbian and gay members.

Helping to draw women in, helping develop women through education and training sessions, and then encouraging them to carry the women's identity, consciousness

Table 2: Special measures to ensure the representation of women, black, lesbian and gay and disabled members in UNISON

	There should be special measures to help women to get elected to leadership positions in the union (%)		There should be special measures to ensure representation of black, disabled, lesbian and gay members in leadership positions in the union (%)	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Women activists (1995)	203 (56)	157 (44)	209 (58)	150 (42)
Women branch activists (1997)	70 (58)	51 (42)	74 (61)	48 (39)

and concerns into the mainstream was the essence of what one regional women's officer saw as her and the regional women's committee's 'programme of work'. After the first four years, they felt that this was beginning to be effective; mainstream members of the power elite, especially in local government, the largest sector of the union, had begun to develop more inclusive and equity centred ways of working by using the flexible models of working developed by women's self-organization. The regional black members SOG was also doing this. Among the strategies adopted in this particular region's self-organization was that all posts be job-shared if possible, thus doubling the impact of development work, even though it also created problems and seemed very slow at times. This approach contributed significantly to the development of one of the black woman described above, despite the division of loyalties between her race and her gender. Being drawn into women's self-organization through a weekend school had led her to become a tutor herself, to develop networks with other women, to speak out and hear her voice, and to allow herself to be encouraged onto, first her regional women's committee and then the national women's committee.

In two other regions social creativity and social challenge strategies could be seen to have changed how SOGs were perceived, as well as increasing their power, status and resources. In one of these regions the four SOGs worked transversally by supporting each other's initiatives, holding network days and co-operating closely when it came to regional elections. Here two feminist women (one black and one white) together with a manual male colleague, had successfully challenged the 'old guard' for the three senior elected positions in the region by standing on a slate explicitly supporting UNISON's equality policies and being supported by the SOGs and others favouring culture change in the region. All three had a history of activism in their branch and region and the two women were active in self-organization at regional and national level. One of the woman admitted that she had had to think 'long and hard' before standing but had thought it was important that she had stood and been elected in order to give 'a very big confidence boost to self-organization' and 'combat forces' in the region hostile to it (Regional Convenor and SOG National and Regional Committee member, interview, November 1997).

In the second region, another feminist woman had been elected as Regional

Convenor on an agenda of change, again with the support of the SOGs and groupings positive to culture change. Women active in self-organization supported her because: 'most of us believed in her' and felt that power had now shifted from the 'dinosaurs' to women and men in the region 'who supported UNISON's commitments to internal democracy and equality' (Regional Committee and SOG National and Regional Committee member, interview, May, 1997). In both of these regions, between 1993 and 1998 strategies of social creativity and social competition had brought about changes in the ways in which the SOGs were perceived as well as their actual power, resources and status.

Yet women's self-organization at national level has not experienced the same levels of success. More than one woman expressed the view that there was 'a deep-seated force at work to undermine women's self-organization and genuine debate to establish women's concerns'. Mainstream elements within the union were working to undermine women's self-organization (Senior SOG activist, November 1997). However, another woman thought that the National Women's Committee (NWC) had laid itself open to criticisms by over-emphasizing strategies of social creativity instead of developing strategies of social change. She thought the NWC needed:

to challenge the agenda, to say that this women's issue should be at the top of the list ... you can only do those things through bodies like the National Delegate Conference and the NWC is not doing enough of that door knocking and ear bashing, it's spending too much time doing what this whole trade union has been doing for the past four years, which is examining its navel and it's got to stop ... We have to start challenging those things in society that are wrong ... and as a NWC what we should be doing is campaigning to get those things on a mainstream agenda, because otherwise they are marginalized ... My view is if we don't start doing more of that and being more visible and pushing the boundaries of the mainstream it gives all those opponents of self-organization just cause to say 'we don't need it, we can scrap it'. (Senior Women's SOG activist, February 1997)

One high profile priority for women's self-organization throughout our research period was the representative structure of the National Women's Conference. At successive women's national conferences, a motion was overwhelmingly passed demanding

that delegates to this conference should be branch-based (i.e. one-woman-one-branch) rather than representing collections of branches. Each year this was opposed by the national executive and by national conference — where around half of the delegates were women, on the grounds that it would be too expensive, would make for as big a conference as national delegate conference, and that women should be participating more in the mainstream. Ultimately the resolution was remitted in order for the women's national committee to discuss ways forward with the national executive. It is noteworthy that this strategy of challenge to the mainstream union came from the out-group, women, yet was defeated in the interests of solidarity, by a coalition of women and men.

Discussion

By exploring some of the ways and means by which UNISON women activists explain their diverse positions on gender politics in the union, it is evident that these are constituted through group and social identity, and that they are complex, dynamic and contingent. It is clear too from much of the women's testimony that self-organization is a significant site for the ripening of self-confidence, personal growth, activist skills and political development, through forms and strategies of social creativity.

Yet the contrast between the clarity of the analyses of their own political oppression and identity by the black, disabled and lesbian women quoted earlier, and the doubts expressed about women's gender consciousness illustrates the diversity among women. It also exemplifies the significance of multiple and constitutive identities for the type and direction of women's activism. Women may wish to support and further women's overall position and agendas, but are also bound by other identities, consciousnesses, contexts and politics at a particular point in time.

We have also seen how diversity can lead to divisions among and between women, for example on the grounds of race, sexuality and disability, class and politics. These have important implications for the form and character of women's self-organization in UNISON, and through that for the culture of the mainstream union. Yet there is also increasing evidence of effective social creativity through innovative and inclusive strategies within women's self-organization, especially at regional level. Bringing on women, developing positive group identity and

consciousness, and supporting them to come through to take on leadership positions within self-organization, the mainstream, and often across both, are now well established in all the regions. Moreover, over time these cultural changes are being carried into some parts of the mainstream, as illustrated by the impact of regional 'programmes of work'; an effective strategy of long-term social change and transformation. The development of liaison structures being set up with the mainstream power elites also offers opportunities for bringing about change.

Thus the indications so far are that women's self-organization is an effective site for strategies of social creativity, but its ability to develop and carry through more radical collective action for social change and transformation is still limited, particularly at national union level. Witness the defeat of successive attempts to get the form of women's conference women activists wanted despite women being the vast majority of the membership. Thus, while women have critical mass in terms of membership numbers, as Dahlerup (1988) suggests, it is the critical act — or in this case action, informed by a collective gender consciousness — which is more likely to be significant. For example, central in the debate over the women's conference representation was the notable absence of Fair Representation; the under-representation of black, disabled and lesbian women. Subsequently, development of transversal coalition politics with women from these other SOGs, both formal and informal, has led to the engagement and informing of views, and joint strategies among women in the union. One fruitful example was the creation of a harassment and homophobia policy for the union, developed through a cross-SOG working party (Mann *et al.* 1997, p. 216).

At the regional level, women working transversally across SOGs have shown that by engaging with coalition politics, they can successfully challenge their union's traditions, develop 'women-friendly' policies and practices and be elected to mainstream leadership positions. Many leading women within self-organization itself are clear that women's self-organization 'can't operate in isolation', especially given the ambivalence and opposition to it from some mainstream men and women in the power elites. So, vanguard socialist feminist and feminist socialist women are moving to develop self-organization more widely in the union particularly at regional and branch level. But they have much work to do. Although over half of the women activists we surveyed were in favour

of self-organization, a third remained unsure about it, although they were in no doubt of the need for better representation of and for women in the union.

However, it is not only other women who need to be persuaded. Since women as a category are always asked to provide grounds to defend an increase in their representation in positions of influence (Bacchi 1996, p. 10), other key players in the union will also have to be convinced. Powerful and vocal members of the mainstream power elite remain opposed to women's self-organization, arguing that as women make up the majority of the membership there is no need for this form of 'special treatment' or that it is a drain on resources, and is mere political correctness (Mann *et al.* 1997, p. 219). At the formation of UNISON, 'midwives' to UNISON's birth and its constitution anticipated that the union's equality goals would not be achieved overnight. There would need to be a staged approach with targets to be monitored and reviewed, and the system would need to be supported, at least for an interim period and 'probably for much longer' (Terry 1996; Mann *et al.* 1997, p. 203).

So, while attitudes within the union's leadership groups towards UNISON's equal opportunities agenda are espousedly favourable, what is contested are the methods for achieving this. By continuing to position women, and members of the other self-organized groups, as political categories, as out-groups, rather than legitimate constituencies the mainstream union preserves its democratic prerogative over the gender equality project, especially when for example claiming that women's self-organization is seen to fail to engage with the mainstream. Yet the aims of SOGs, as set out in the rule book, involve 'establishing their own priorities' (UNISON 1996, pp. 20, 21). Where the interests and priorities of the in-group (mainstream power elite members) conflict with those of the out-group (self-organized group members), disputes will arise. As Bacchi comments, 'when the category "women" appears to gain recognition, this is often part of a political manoeuvre to limit political change for women' (1996, p. 10).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the comments of the anonymous referees and to the women at the Gender, Work and Organization conference, January 1998, for their discussion and comments on an earlier version of this article; particularly Ardha Danieli.

Notes

1. The research was part of an ESRC-funded award 1995-8: 'Strategies of Women Activists in Response to New Trade Union Structures: A Comparative Study of UNISON and the GPMU'.
2. UNISON was formed in 1993 from the amalgamation of three public service unions: COHSE; the Confederation of Health Service Employees organized members across health service occupations, with a particular stronghold among nurses (mainly male) in the mental health sector (201, 253 members, 79% women). NALGO; National Association of Local Government Officers. A white-collar union, in 1992 had 744,453 members of whom 55% were women. NALGO membership ranged from clerical to professionals such as architects, surveyors and accountants, and vertically from junior staff to chief officer level. NUPE; National Union of Public Employees, traditionally referred to as a manual union, nevertheless organized a wide range of members across the public sector, including refuse collectors, home helps, hospital porters, municipal gardeners and nurses. At amalgamation its membership was 605,000, of whom 74% were women.
3. The ambiguity around the position and functions of the self-organized groups *vis-à-vis* the mainstream is exemplified in the description in the pre-merger reports of the four SOGs as representing 'disadvantaged' groups (out-groups?). It was recognized that there were some problems with this terminology, but it was adopted anyway, as a 'convenient shorthand' (COHSE-NALGO-NUPE 1991, p. 38).
4. The survey of 1,250 women activists (1995) achieved a response rate of 29% overall. Questionnaires were distributed via two routes. Five hundred questionnaires were distributed at the Second National Women's Conference, 135 were returned, a response rate of 23%. Some 750 questionnaires were distributed to key women activists in either self-organization and/or 'mainstream' UNISON structures in each of the 13 UNISON regions; 232 were returned, a response rate of 31%.

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