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The organisational nature of union careers: the touchstone of equality policies? Comparing France and the UK

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Abstract
The equality agenda has gained a much higher visibility in the UK and in France. Most unions have adopted specific measures to improve women's representation in their structures. However, even in highly feminised unions, women remain under-represented in union leadership positions. To understand the gap between the presence of women in the lay membership/activist population and their slow disappearance at the higher levels of the union hierarchy, this study is focused on the role of organizational contexts. We argue that to understand the feminisation of union leadership, we need to consider the characteristics of "internal union labour markets": ports of entry, typical/atypical career routes, norms of job evaluation, internal job segregation and hierarchy, human resources management and gender equality policies. To fully grasp the influence of contexts on the process of feminisation, specific attention to the evolution of the repertoires of action by unions is also useful.

***Keywords*:** union, equality, gender, career, organisation, France, UK

1. Introduction

The paradox of the contrast between the continuous feminisation of the workforce and the constant under-representation of women in the structures, cultures and agendas of unions has been confirmed by recent national (Briskin, 2002; Cobble and Bielski Michal, 2002; Contrepois, 2006; Kirton, 2006a) and comparative studies (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Silvera, 2006). Although women contribute to the stabilization of union membership[1], they remain under-represented among branch officials and paid national officers. The creation of women trade union leaders has been identified as a key issue for unions, both as a way to challenge the oligarchic nature of union leadership and to instigate organizational changes (Healy, Kirton, 2000) and as a lever to bring the necessary amount of equality and democracy for union renewal (Foley, Baker, 2009). Among the classic putative causes of the under-representation of women in the labour movement, research papers refer to different structural factors that could explain women's lesser propensity to participate, such as the historical under-organization of female workplaces, male trade unionists' unwillingness to represent women's interests, work-life balance issues, or women's specific working patterns - notably part-time and temporary contracts. Following recent developments in the sociology of gender and organisation (Halford and Leonard, 2000; Wajcman, 1998), other articles have focused their analyses on the embeddedness of gendered inequalities within trade unions (Kirton, 2006a; Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Cockburn, 1991). This theoretical approach acknowledges the internal organisational structures, practices and cultures that result in and maintain gender inequalities within unions, providing a new understanding of the permanence of the gendered nature of union careers.

Because they are widely envisaged as democratic organisations, especially in the UK literature, unions are rarely scrutinized as employers (Kelly and Heery, 1994; Watson, 1988). However, unions select and train their officers/officials, promote them and occasionaly dismiss them or

help them to get back to their former occupations. Despite many controversies about what should be the democratic nature of union careers, a large majority of union leaders (even when they are elected, eg. senior national officers in the UK) embark on atypical "organisational careers" (Glaser, 1968). The different career routes, based on election or appointment, are less distinctive in practice than in theory within the two countries being considered. In the UK, lay reps. sometimes apply for full-time paid positions and almost all paid officers have previously been activists (Heery, 2006). In France, these two routes are even more interconnected as full-time paid officers are elected by members (or other elected officials) most of the time, and very often are paid by their employers[2] (see table 1). Most officials are full-time, partly elected, long serving paid officers, but most of them have refused, until recently, to view their union commitment as a "career". Informal processes, such as pre-selection of motions of support during congresses or interpersonal arbitration with potential rivals, are often organised to secure the career of top union leaders and to shut out opposing views, taking advantage of the power of incumbency and bureaucracy (Michels, 1962). The organisation of union careers is also built on "masculine-neutral" norms – the culture of long working hours (Franzway, 2000) and available geographical mobility. These norms create difficult work/life balance issues, especially for mothers/parents and workers with specific employment patterns. As employers, unions also tend to develop internal equality policies to tackle these issues. Depending on periods of time and contexts, these policies are more or less sophisticated and effective, while producing their own side effects and limitations.

In this article, we explore the selective and unequal representation of women within the labour movement from a comparative perspective. By choosing two European countries (France and the UK) and three unions displaying different approaches to equality and different levels of feminisation, we want to draw attention to the role of organisational contexts and periods in the under-representation of women in union government. To understand the feminisation of union leadership – its shape and dynamics - we suggest that unions could be considered as a specific category of "internal labour markets" (Doeringer and Piore, 1971), with distinctive characteristics: ports of entry and exit, typical/atypical career routes, internal job segregation and hierarchy, norms of job evaluation, human resources management policies and gender/race equality policies. We also argue that the presence of women is linked to the variations in unions' "repertoire of action" (Tilly, 2008). The transformation of union practices/agendas and the model of unionism are critical in understanding the kind of profiles of those unionists selected and hired to work for the union. In France and in the UK, the recent emphasis put on collective bargaining and/or social partnership has offered new opportunities for men and women with professional expertise and higher qualifications (Heery, Kelly, 2001), yet with no activist background. Comparing the three unions, we will highlight the main organisational and institutional processes that help or prevent women from accessing leadership union positions.

2. Methodology

Drawing on biographical matching and comparative analysis (Crompton, 2001), we have used career narratives to explore the organisational processes and career norms required for the formation of trade union leaders: the different sequences that a "union career" follows (Kaminski and Yakura, 2008; Ledwith, Colgan, Joyce and Hayes, 1990), the necessary steps, main tracks, atypical routes and turning points of such sequences, and also the role of "significant others" (Hugues, 1958). This approach of union careers (Kirton, 2006b) emphasizes the articulation and interferences between different spheres, and the role of the identities of trade unions in the

promotion of specific profiles of trade unionists (in terms of age, sex…), depending on periods of time considered. This cross-national comparison based on trade unionist biographies allows us to embed these objective and subjective trajectories of women and men in complex and evolutionary organisations; trajectories that would be difficult to analyse through questionnaires. All these interviews have been analysed entirely using "biographical tables", describing in three separate columns the different sequences of occupational life (appointment, promotion, change of job), family/residential life (marriage, births, relocation) and union/political life (union participation, union roles, political commitment). Particular attention was given to dating individual events in order to establish a link with the corresponding trade union history. This approach can be classified as a « societal » qualitative cross-national comparison, which integrates class, gender and ethnicity[3] (O'Reilly, 2006). But between the micro-level of individual life experience and the macro-level of employment regimes and equal opportunity policies, we have placed an emphasis on the meso-level of each trade union, paying attention to period and generational variations.

In 2007, we asked two major UK trade unions, UNISON (Britain's, and also Europe's, largest public sector union) well known for its high commitment to equality and diversity, and GMB (a general union resulting from many amalgamations) that has supported such an agenda more recently, to allow us to interview visible activists (20 each). These 40 trade unionists with national, regional and local responsibilities, comprising 28 women and 12 men, are almost all working full-time for the labour movement, and are either paid by their union or are on time release (main features presented below, Table 1). In France, we asked the CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail), the second major representative French union confederation, with a pioneer commitment to internal equality ('*mixité*'), to allow us to interview 40 visible trade unionists, with national, regional and local responsibilities, most of them being elected paid officials. To be able to make a comparison with the two UK unions, we have selected CFDT unionists from different industrial federations covering sectors that are more or less feminised (health, education / energy, metalwork). These 24 women and 16 men range from a female member of the national executive committee (3 women out of 8) to local rep. Although union density is not at the same level (28% in England but only 8% in France) and the *industrial relations regime* differs strongly within each country (Hyman, 2001), we have defined functional equivalents in terms of union roles in order to use a "union career" methodology when comparing France and the UK. We have distinguished three stages in a typical "rank and file" career: entry into positions of union responsibilities at local level (rep., shop steward in the UK / elected *'délégué du personnel'* or nominated *'délégué syndical'* in France); consolidation of a power base outside the workplace (branch level in the UK / *'syndicat'* level[1] or '*union départementale*' or '*union régionale interprofessionnelle*' in France); development of a directing role (paid-official at regional or national level / office holders and paid-officials at national level in the UK, *'fédération'* or *'confédération'* in France). These biographical interviews were then completed by using archives and documents on equality policies.

Table 1. Profiles of trade unionists sample

	France		UK	
	Men	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**
Total	**16**	**24**	**12**	**28**
Responsibility level				
National level (political) (*)	5	6	6	14
National level (technical)	2	8	1	4
Intermediary level (branch, *union départementale, syndicat*)	7	8	5	9
Local level (entreprise or administration)	2	2	0	1
Status				
Elected paid-officers (senior national officers, *secrétaire national)*	1	5	4	5
Non elected paid-officers (regional officer or organizer, assistant national officer, *secrétaire confédéral*)	6	11	8	18
Elected non paid officers (lay rep., branch chair or secretary, *délégué syndical, secrétaire syndicat*)	9	8	0	5
Age category				
Young (less than 35)	2	5	0	7
Middle (35-49)	7	14	6	8
Senior (more than 50)	7	5	6	13
Membership seniority				
New members (less than 10 years)	7	8	0	9
Middle-range members (10 to 19 years)	4	11	2	4
Senior members (more than 20 years)	5	5	10	15
Education level				
Graduates (degree or *bac+2*)	9	20	3	11
A level or under (A-level / *bac* max.)	7	4	9	17
Family configuration				
Children (**)	11	16	8	16
No child	5	8	4	12

(*) for France, national level = *confédération* and *fédération*
(**) this information is not available for two men interviewed in France

3. Forms and dynamics of union equality policies in each country

To understand the selective and unequal representation of women in the structure and agenda of unions, formal equality policies first need to be considered. Over the years, unions in Europe, and especially in the UK, have tried to develop new forms of a more inclusive trade unionism.

3.1. UK: an early recognition of the "democratic deficit" for women

In the UK, the issue of delivering union equality was identified more than twenty years ago, pushed by second wave feminism movements and vanguard equality activists (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996; Heery and Conley, 2007; Heery and Kelly, 1988). In a changing political and

social environment, it seemed untenable for unions to fail to properly represent the interests of a large and increasing proportion of their members while at the same time claiming to be democratic organisations. However, the drive to diminish this democratic deficit for women (and other minority groups) has also been analysed as "an instrumental rather that a moral or ethical concern" (Dorgan and Grieco, 1993), in the context of a huge membership decline (union density has fallen from 54% in 1979 to 29% in 2005), especially among male blue-collar workers, and of a growing level in the employment rate for women (73% in 2005). In 1979, the equality agenda was translated into recommendations by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in its charter for Equality for Women within Trade Unions. This leading role of the TUC, also encouraged by key unions (UNISON, MSF, CWU), has never ceased. The TUC has also made constitutional changes to increase diversity in its own structures. Following this example, in order to encourage the representation of varied constituencies within trade unions, most large unions have switched from liberal (women-only courses, equality officers, women's conference) to radical measures[4]: proportionality, "*fair representation*" (McBride, 2001) for elections and conference delegations within the union, and self-organised groups in UNISON.

However, progress in the unions affiliated to the TUC has been described as "uneven, piecemeal and incremental" (Kirton and Healy, 1999), very dependent on the level of activism of women, black, lesbian and gay, disabled and young trade unionists, on the action of feminist senior activists, and on the recognition by the existing leadership of the importance, to the revitalization of the union, of emerging activists/leaders representing particular social groups (Healy and Kirton, 2000). In our study, UNISON and GMB give a good illustration of this variety. UNISON is always cited as an example because of its long-established equality policy, not only in terms of the amount of resources made available, but also in the actual representation of women in the governing body members and in the executive team (43% of full-time national officers in 2008, cf. Table 2). After years of limited resources being allocated to the existing equality structures, the GMB has recently conducted an equality review, under the supervision of its first female deputy general secretary, recognising that "major steps towards making the GMB a more inclusive union needed to be taken"[5] : women were only 30% of full-time national officers in 2008.

3.2. France: a mix of pioneer measures and discontinuous concern for equality

In the 70's, propelled by strong feminist movements, vanguard female equality officers and numerous women's strikes (Maruani, 1979), the CFDT took a leading role in the adoption of an agenda dealing with the condition of women (1976 congress) that included a wide range of women's issues (free abortion, contraception, working time, domestic work), and strong links were built with feminist associations. From 1978, the CFDT took a new direction and started to distance itself from political parties, social movements and "non-work" issues. The huge membership decline that started at the end of the 1970s (union density in France was 28% in 1950 and 8% in 2010) led to the redefinition of union goals and doctrine. The CFDT dispensed with class analysis and socialist values to convert to "*reformism"* – an acceptance of capitalism and the use of a paramount strategy of negotiation with employers (Defaud, 2009). This conversion was linked to the promotion of a "*mass unionism"* able to address issues for everyone, including women, and the promotion of a participative model of unionism, called "*syndicalisme d'adhérents*[6]". Specific campaigns were launched in different sectors to attract women members, and a specific training was designed to promote the new political line and to train future female leaders. In 1982, the CFDT adopted a mix of liberal measures (dedicated

financial resources, specific training courses, equality officers, equality conferences) and radical measures (reserved seats for the national executive committee and minimum representation for congress delegations). The CFDT was the first confederation to have a woman general secretary, Nicole Notat, who served for more than 10 years (1992-2002). These measures were quite controversial at the time. They were seen as a tool to promote a new leader profile, more in line with the reformist approach promoted by the confederation (Le Brouster, 2009). Shortly after the election of François Mitterand in 1981, this internal policy was weakened by the subsequent departure of feminist union leaders, including Jeannette Laot who had been in charge of equality in the CFDT for 20 years (1961-1981). These feminists were absorbed by "State Feminism" (Mazur, 1995) upheld by the Socialist Party, and they consequently ceased to stimulate unions.

Since then, the CFDT has shown reluctance toward any association with feminist movements, especially any described as "radical" (e.g. near to left or extreme-left ideology). Overall, equality measures and feminisation of membership have led to a certain level of feminisation at the upper levels of the confederation and of major industrial federations (32 % of federation executives in 2004, cf. Table 2). However, this equality policy has had diminished results at the lower levels of the hierarchy (24% of local union secretaries in 2004) and advances remain difficult in the less feminised federations (blue-collars sectors). The CFDT is now caught between their determination to achieve better female representation at all levels and the difficulty in taking new enforcing actions. Because the *confédération* feared being unable to fill more reserved seats, complete parity for the *Bureau National* (equivalent of the NEC) was not decided on at the last 2010 congress, in contrast to the actions of the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail, the first general trade union confederation in France) who set an example with the "parity law" adopted in the political field (Bereni, 2007). Similarly, the CFDT seems to hesitate between promoting mainstreaming actions and maintaining separate structures and actions. The principle of "self-organisation" for women or any other type of minority group is not easy to implement within a general union tradition.

Table 2. Female representation and union equality policies in the two countries

	CFDT[7]	**GMB**	**UNISON**
General Secretary	François Chérèque (male)	Paul Keany (male)	Dave Prentis (male)
Members	600,000	600,100	1,390,000
% of women members	women comprise 44% in 2004 (42% in 2002)	women comprise 45% in 2008 (42% in 2005)	women comprise 77% in 2008 (77% in 2005)
% of women in union government	**Local and regional levels** - 24% of local union secretaries (*'syndicat'*)[8] in 2004 (22% in 2001) - 27% of regional executives in 2004 (24% in 2001) **National Level** - 32 % of federation executives in 2004 (29% in 2001) - 35% for the Bureau	**Local and regional levels** - 20% of full-time regional officers in 2005 - no female regional secretary in 2008 **National Level** - 41% of CEC in 2008 (36% in 2005) - 30% of full-time national officers in 2008	**Local and regional levels** - 50% of stewards/reps. in 2007 - 49% of branch officers in 2007 - 43% of full-time regional officers in 2008 (36% in 2005) **National Level** - 65% of NEC in 2008 (idem in 2005)

	National (BN) in 2004 - 33% of the Commission Executive (CE) in 2006 (idem in 2002)	(38% in 2005)	- 43% of full-time national officers in 2008 (50% in 2005)
Main aspects of equality policies	**Radical measures :** - quotas : minimun of 10 female members out of 28 for the BN; minimum of 29% of women for the CNC; minimum 3 women for the CE **Liberal measures :** - equality policies for each federation/region; national, regional and federal equality officers; - equality training, annual women's conference;	**Radical measures** : - 9 reserved seats for women, 5 for race. **Liberal measures :** - single equality body: GMB National Equalities Forum with two representatives specialising in each of the following areas/groups: women, racial mnorities, LGBT, young, disability and migrant workers - national officer for equality and diversity - annual national conferences for each of the equalities	**Radical measures** : - 42 reserved seats for women on the 65 member NEC - 13 reserved seats for low paid women, 4 seats for black members, 1 seat for young members - 4 Self-Organised Groups* (SOG) at all levels, with reserved seats for national delegates - women only trainings (*Pathways into UNISON*) **Liberal measures :** - branch, regional and national equality officer, women's committees and conferences - support for members/activists with caring responsibilities (childcare facilities) - equality trainings; annual women's conference and other equality conferences

* "self-organisation" is a principle that aims to "guarantee women space to develop their collective ideas and a platform from which to make themselves heard" (Cunnison and Stageman, 1993, pp. 167-168).

This comparison shows that union equality policies are very diverse comparing one country to another, but also within the same country depending on various factors. The organisational gender composition of each union seems to have an influence on the career moves of men and women. If we look at the feminisation level of the union government within the CFDT and UNISON, compared to that of the GMB, we may agree that having higher proportions of women at the "focal job level" improves the probability of the promotion of other women into that level (Cohen, Borschak and Haveman, 1998), confirming the hypothesis of a "critical mass" (Kanter, 1977b) required to reduce gendered inequalities. However this effect can not be isolated from a broader analysis of the organisational context. As other studies have demonstated, the presence of female managers has the strongest desegregating effects in larger and growing organisations (Huffman, Cohen and Pearlman, 2010) and may decrease over time. This assumption helps in the understanding of the relative stagnation of the increase in women leaders within the CFDT, as membership stagnates.

It also indicates that union gender desegregation challenges equality policies and the repertoire of action. As we can see in Table 2, the feminisation level can drop over time even when it is initially above 40%, as in the example of UNISON at national level, between 2005 and 2008. Radical measures, such as quotas or reserved seats implemented at the top level of the union hierarchy, can conceal remaining difficulties in challenging male norms which contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities. We can argue that the feminisation of the CFDT government is maintained thanks to the quotas implemented in 1982. This artificial stimulus conceals the fact that women remain under-represented at lower levels of the hierarchy, and that the advance of internal equality is encountering the maintenance of decentralised forms of organisations (Kelly and Heery, 1994), and the weakening of a top-down leadership-driven strategy (Voss, 2010), and that this advance has not been seen as a priority since the growing gap eventuated between the CFDT and feminist movements. Compared to UNISON, where the equality agenda has constantly been pushed by feminist national leaders and by coalitions with social movements encouraged by self-organised groups (McBride, 2001), the CFDT case displays a more discontinuous story. Its conversion to "reformism" has led the union to de-politicise its action, moving away from any type of social movement, including feminism. Over and above the legislative context which is quite supportive to equality in France (successive equality laws since 1982 and "parity" laws since 2001), internal equality is mainly shaped by the changing identity and agenda of the CFDT. Although the CFDT has contributed to the adoption of equality legislation, as UK unions have done, its internal policy underlines a claimed union autonomy and/or a clear disconnection with political parties and broader social movements.

4. Barriers to women's activism: the organisation of union careers

Even in favourable organisational contexts with supportive policies and a high rate of membership feminisation, women seem to have difficulties in accessing union leadership positions, especially at the local and regional levels where there are no radical measures. To understand the transmission of these difficulties from one generation of women to another, we have analysed the careers of our sample of women and men at three stages of their union career.

4.1. The involvement: becoming an activist

For men and women, union participation is highly dependent on job stability but also on union density and recognition at the workplace level. In France, more so than in the UK, the availability of union roles secured by the law and the huge membership decline have combined to open new opportunities for members to be elected as union rep. or to be nominated as "*délégué syndical*". Many young representatives have been '*sucked into the labour movement*', becoming member and rep. almost at the same time in the 1990s or 2000s. Union officers have approached them and offered them a role at the local or even at the "*syndicat*" level. In the UK, this "vacancy" effect is less noticeable. Union participation of new members is only triggered in newly organized workplaces. In both countries, it remains dependent on time-off agreements, thus explaining the strong difference in union density between public and private sector. The French legislation is more generous than the UK one, but time-release is also linked to local bargaining, which can be very unequal depending on industrial sectors and employers. Union repression can be quite strong in the private sector but also in the public sector in the context of privatisation, as seen in the UK since the 1980s. Whatever the context, union participation depends on the sponsoring by existing union officers. This selection can take different forms, from a quick detection to a long recognition process, from mentoring (by men or women officers), to rivalry (as women are often younger) and gendered favouritism. These processes of mentoring are even more crucial in

contexts of membership decline or repression, where trade unionists are often alone and cannot rely on a group of peers. However, union participation also rests on specific circumstances. In stable union environments, dominated by long-established senior leaders, access to union responsibilities is aided and enhanced by unexpected dismissal or resignation. Within contexts of political or financial crises, the promotion/election of new profiles are favoured (Voss, Sherman, 2000), with a higher probability of failure however. Other factors influence the promotion of new entrants (including women), such as the development of new union practices. The focus put on recruitment strategies since the 1990s, in both countries, has allowed different profiles to get elected at the workplace level but also to get visibility for future promotion, should they achieve good results in terms of membership growth, as was the case for Annick.

At 58, Annick is the organizing and training officer of the steel and mining *'fédération'* of the CFDT (FGMM). Because she left school at 16, she has always felt that she was not capable of getting promotion within the union. At 19, she entered a steel tube company as a non-qualified white-collar worker in the personnel department (punch card operator). Two years later, she joined the CFDT because they produced a leaflet concerning a migrant worker's case. She felt moved by that campaign as she was giving literacy courses to migrant workers, with her friends from a Catholic youth movement. During a big strike on pay issues (8 weeks in 1975), she achieved visibility by being on the picket line at night "*with the men'.* Afterwards the regional officer offered her the opportunity to go on a French-German unionists' exchange. Within three years, she was nominated "*déléguée syndicale*" after the dismissal of the former leader, following his financial negligence. Throughout her career, she has been sponsored by the (male) union treasurer, who said to her when she was asked to become the secretary of her union in 1986: *"If they ask you, you have to trust them; they judged that you are capable, so you have to go.'* After six years of local responsibilities, and very good results in terms of recruitment of new members, Annick was offered two different positions at the regional and federal levels, as the previous leaders were about to retire and the federation was striving to promote women. Because she was not sure of her political base at the regional level following political struggles over the election of Nicole Notat as General Secretary in 1992, she agreed to take a full-time paid (non elected) position at the federation level in Paris. She then had to leave her elected seat in the governing board of the federation and became a paid-officer, responsible for organizing/recruiting policy. As she was single with no children and had resigned from her job, she agreed to commute from Monday to Friday from her village, 180 miles away from Paris. She knows she will never be asked to become a national (elected) officer, not only because she is a woman in a very male-dominated federation (the one woman out of nine national officers has just resigned), but mainly because she is more confident in her organizing skills than her political ones, and is always acutely aware of her lack of formal credentials.

Although more women can now access these first levels of lay activism, especially for elected-positions, they are over-represented in certain types of union roles, where they are responsible for social activities or daily representation (rep. in UK, '*délégué du personnel'* in France). The gendered job segregation is often reproduced within the union practices, sometimes justified by female "skills" (altruism, empathy…). Skills that can be claimed by new entrants, men and women, to instil a new vision of trade unionism, emphasizing democratic and participative principles (Guillaume, 2007), but that are inadequate for a direct path to union management, whilst very legitimate for election as senior lay rep. in the UK or rep. in governing bodies in France (*bureau régional, fédéral, national*). But the real question is the effective power of these

elected bodies compared to union management. Likewise, the development of new roles, such as those of equality or health and safety rep., has also allowed women to take side roads (alternative or parallel careers, Kirton, 2006b but maybe dead-end careers), leaving the most prestigious roles (grievance handling and contract negotiation) to men. This specialization has had an impact on union trainings that are offered, and this can have resulting effects on women's careers, at least in France. Although labour education is necessary to develop basic skills (Kaminski and Yakura, 2008), the over-specialization, characteristic of union courses on specific/technical topics, will not contribute to improving the necessary political/general background leading to promotion in the union hierarchy. While union participation relies more on formal credentials, the traditional forms of "*militant capital*" (Matonti and Poupeau, 2004), acquired through experience, become devalued and this can prevent oppressed social groups from gaining visibility and thus access to officials/officers roles.

4.2. The consolidation: entering the union structures

In both countries, permanent union roles at the branch or *syndicat* levels are key positions in building a union career, but they are less feminised than those experienced at the national level. In both countries, the union employment market is more or less open to new entrants, with strong competition to access the rare full-time positions available in the UK, and a slightly more open situation in France but with a higher turnover. The filling of these positions always depends on detection/co-option processes under the control of regional or local officials. Because of the decentralisation of structures and policies in each country, the equality agenda remains very dependent on the political will of the local executive team. In France, the absence of external publication of job vacancy increases the weight of co-option and social networks. In the UK, each union has its own HR practices, more or less structured. In the GMB, regional secretaries are responsible for the dissemination of internal adverts, whereas in UNISON the use of external job publication through national newspapers (also for reserved seats at regional level) has increased the number of applicants and has also allowed a change in the candidates' profiles (external women from the volunteer sector or women coming from administrative/secretarial union staff). Even in this context, internal applicants with an activist background are preferred. And they often can discover in advance that there will be a vacancy. In France, this co-option is also based on political control. Being perceived, or not, as being in favour of the reformist orientation chosen by the CFDT can boost the career of young activists. Following numerous internal struggles, many leaders since the early 1990s have left the CFDT, sometimes joining more "radical" unions such as the CGT. These departures have offered an opportunity for the reformist leaders to promote new leaders with less politicised views (and little feminist consciousness), including numerous young women. To counter the reluctance of male officers to promote junior women with a different background, senior women officers with feminist convictions (especially in the UK) sometimes opt for active mentoring, with activists, or with their own assistants (even in administrative roles). Women-only training and self-organisation structures in the UK (and especially in UNISON) also have the intention of helping women to build their self-confidence. Labour education also exists in France, but it is less gender-conscious than in the UK.

At this level, as with the workplace level, the evolution of the union movement in the two countries has opened up new career routes for young activists. In the UK and to a certain extent in France (Guillaume, Pochic, 2009), the switch from a servicing model to an organising model (Heery, 2006) has allowed the development of specialised positions ("organizer" in the UK and

"*développeur*" in France), that have been offered to new profiles to fit with the 'like recruiting like' principle. More attention has been given by the CFDT to sex, age and a higher level of qualification ("*cadres*"[9]), whereas UK unions, and especially UNISON, have extended their policies to reflect race and class (low-paid members, linked to campaigns focused on low pay, Thornley, 2006). These differences reveal different organizing strategies, the CFDT becoming in the 1990's a union dominated by professionals and white-collar workers. Beside this membership dimension, several 'expertise routes' (legal action and advice, health and safety, economic analysis, social policy, international and European action) have been encouraged both by the evolution of union political action and by employer-union relations. Because of their present moderate leadership, the unions we studied have been involved as a negotiating partner or advisor on pension issues, unemployment benefits, working time, minimum wages, health and safety, equality or redundancy. In both countries, this growing union participation in socio-economic regulation at the national or local level has led to the promotion of officers and activists possessing new types of qualifications and professional expertise. Dedicated trainings, together with special targeted attention, are provided to retain these would-be senior officers. However, they face the risk of being directed into less valued positions. To reach more general positions/roles, these new entrants need to have strong personal resources (activist background, qualifications and personality) and to benefit from equality policies to continue to progress at national level, as Adishri demonstrates.

At 32, Adishri is very proud to be *"the first Asian women national officer"* and considers that *"the GMB has given me a lot in terms of my own confidence and skills"* through support and intense training. She became an activist for equality rights at 18 after refusing a forced marriage arranged by her family from the British Pakistani community. As a blue-collar worker in a female-dominated textile factory, she started as a shop steward for the GMB, being particularly active in race equality and in youth campaigns. Very quickly, she became involved with the Northern region black workers' committee, where she met her husband, an activist who returned to university and became a teacher on finishing. At 26 she was offered the position of a six months' placement as a recruiter and she continued after this in a permanent position for four years. "*Very committed and determined",* she became the specialist on race equality, both for the GMB and the TUC, and also for the Labour Party in the Northern region, and felt *"very empowered"* by the international campaigns she pursued through the Commonwealth TUC. When a national equalities officer job was advertised, she felt she *"had nothing to lose and everything to gain".* The fact that she has also assumed responsibility for the chemical and pharmaceutical industry, and has led the negotiations on behalf of the GMB in higher education, gives her the appropriate roles to "*figure out the politics*" and feel confident in her job. She had to move to London during the first year, but then decided to commute from the Northern region to London the following year. She is now on maternity leave. Very conscious of work/life balance issues, Adishri is convinced that her partner will be supportive, and she wants to negotiate time-off for equality reps., to encourage more women to become active.

4.3. The directing stage: accessing national offices

Although the effects of equality policies are more visible at national level, women officers still have great difficulties in penetrating "prestigious" domains such as negotiation, management and political action (strategy, campaigning, lobbying). The exercise of power continues to be male-dominated, particularly in France and/or in less feminised unions in the UK such as the GMB. In UNISON, the introduction of management methods (targets, annual appraisals, equality audits)

has helped in the promotion of experienced and graduated women. But this policy is facing a practical limit: senior male officers do not want to give up their seats. In the UK and in France, the policy of reserved seats for women or quotas at national level has noticeable side effects: suspicion about lack of skills, risk of 'tokenism' syndrome (Kanter, 1977a) and of being labelled as 'feminists' (apart from UNISON). In the UK, many women have stayed in those reserved seats, finding it difficult to get elected onto a general seat. Union officers who access senior national officer positions still "complied with the male model of senior trade union official, that is, a long, unbroken record of active experience and offices held" (Ledwith, Colgan, Joyce and Hayes, 1990, p.121), and have thus managed to convince male-dominated, rather conservative panels, especially in the GMB. At that level, there is fierce competition among a small pool of long-serving loyal officers (mostly men), with repeated applications and numerous lateral moves, enabling them to stay in the union movement and to increase their visibility and their inclusion in networks inside the organisation. Unspecified hours and geographical mobility are key factors that favour climbing within the union organisation, just as they are in corporate careers (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009a). For national positions, officers need to live in London or Paris, sometimes leaving their family during the week, as is the case with Clara.

At 42, Clara is a senior officer in charge of working conditions for the Health and Social Work *fédération* of the CFDT. As a nurse, she became a member in 1995, because she agreed with the CFDT position in favour of the social security system reform proposed by the right-wing government, in the context of a huge national strike (3 weeks), but also in recognition of the assistance she received in a grievance about her third maternity leave. Following a restructuring plan in her hospital that the CFDT had negotiated, she agreed to become full-time convenor and took a couple of union courses. Soon after, she was also offered an organizing role and was elected to the executive committee of the region, mainly to prevent another dissident candidate from being elected; but at that time she "*was not aware of that political issue*". She managed to have good results in terms of recruitment. She was then selected and offered a part-time job in Paris, in charge of the organizing section. She commuted every day from her home (2½ hours each day), becoming very tired as she also had to look after her three young children. In 2001, she obtained a full-time position in Paris, living apart from her family during the week. She finds that she is "*more available for my children during the week-end and less stressed",* and organising this is possible as her husband (train steward) has days off during the week. In 2005, in a development that surprised her, she was elected senior national officer. However she is not very satisfied with her situation, as she has been away from home, Monday to Friday, for 7 years, and one of her teenagers is now having problems at school. His teacher has told her that it is her fault. She feels a lack of confidence in her job. She is obviously very frustrated by her union environment. She will not finish her mandate and is thinking about her next move. She does not want to return to her nursing job, for fear of appearing incompetent, but also because of her newly acquired organizing skills. But she has no firm ideas about possibilities for her career outside the union movement.

Sometimes, as Clara demonstrates, new entrants can benefit from internal political struggles, appearing as "neutral" candidates, especially within the CFDT. In each country, as the officials are indirectly elected by the union members (through union/branch/region representatives at the congress - with low participation rate), the result of elections depends less on objective skills than on 'factionalism groupings' (Ledwith, Colgan, Joyce and Hayes, 1990). These informal networks, 'clans', are traditionally based on political orientations but also on shared experiences

inside the union. The absence of a regional power base is particularly detrimental to the careers of experts, even if some of them have built their national visibility through innovative projects or media exposure. More recently, formal networks based on a specific generation (youth sections in France) or on gender (women's committees in both countries, or self-organised groups in UNISON) have tried to campaign for their candidates, generally upholding a different strategic orientation for the union. This networking by women within and across unions, 'gendered factionalism' (Healy, Kirton, 2000), has a real impact from below when there is a critical mass, in female-dominated unions, as with UNISON. The election of women officials may also be supported from the top, depending on critical actions of senior executives with political will and feminist values. But in this case, these women have to deal with a 'token' stigma (Kanter, 1977a) and have to fight to build their legitimacy 'on the job'. Although the introduction of low-paid seats in 1998 tried to address the class gap in the governing bodies of UNISON, it has been more difficult in the face of such fierce competition to develop trade union careers for women with working-class background. This selective union recruitment is really striking, albeit not really acknowledged by the unions investigated (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009b). Most of the senior female unionists interviewed have a degree, sometimes obtained through continuous education. When they access national positions, working-class women tend to become and stay senior lay members, avoiding the "management" route.

5. Conclusion

This comparative work on the glass ceiling in unions draws attention to the making of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) depending on the characteristics and dynamics of union "internal labour markets" and the rules that organize union careers. Following Acker, we can differentiate various components of inequality regimes. By comparing the three unions, we argue that the degree of inequality is linked to the level of feminisation of the union hierarchy, but only to a certain extent. Even in feminised unions, a sharp horizontal and vertical job segregration prevails. When women are offered new routes to enter union careers, either as organizers or experts, they seem to have difficulties in achieving more general positions, such as general secretary or senior national officer. This issue could be seen as a question to be resolved with time, women leaders being younger than men leaders (at least in France), but this belief is rather optimistic given the internal organisational processes that result in maintaining gender inequalities. The effect of equality policies is also questionable. Radical measures such as quotas or reserved seats are useful in feminising upper levels of union hierarchy and union government bodies, but they may hide a wider difficulty with feminising the entire union hierarchy from bottom to top. This uneven feminisation lessens the possibility for the training and encouraging of new generations of future leaders. This situation can be explained by a lack of political will and feminist ideology as in the French case, or can be seen as a side effect of "tracking" women into less valued roles. Overall, the decentralised organisation of unions, the weakening of national strategies in the CFDT and the isolation of self-organized groups in UNISON seem to be the main obstacles to the implementation of effective equality policies. This account confirms the centrality of "organisational repertoires" in institutional changes (Clemens, 1993).

If we look closer at the organisation of union careers and the nature of union work, the picture is rather ambivalent. Some aspects remain detrimental for women. Union work requires putting in long hours, especially for full-time national positions, but also for elected roles at the workplace level. Union activity also implies frequent commuting or "militant trips", given the centralisation of union organisation in France (even for governing elected bodies at the *fédération* level) and to

a certain extent in the UK. Recruitment and hiring processes based on co-opting and informal practices tend to exclude atypical candidates, especially at the second stage of union careers, where equality policies fail to be properly implemented and controlled. The lack of social capital and internal networks is probably the main obstacle encountered by women when trying to reach the upper levels of the union hierarchy. Women leaders at the top continue to face "tokenism syndrome" (Kanter, 1977a) and often feel isolated. Their small number tends to create competition rather than solidarity, and very few of them feel entitled to promote other women, at least in the French context, probably because of their low feminist conscientiousness and/or the wish not to be identified as "feminists". In the UK, self-organized groups help and support elected female senior lay reps. (Regional or National Executive Council), but their influence is less visible for full-time paid officers.

Other dimensions of union internal labour markets seem more favourable to women. The demography (and the number of available positions) is a factor that favours younger leaders, at least in France where a vast number of union leaders, at all levels of the hierarchy, are about to retire. The professionalization of union practices, the need for paid officers to possess a higher level of expertise, and the creation of more specialized union roles at the workplace level have opened opportunities for trade unionists with a different profile. This study shows that women leaders have a higher level of education than men, especially when they hold full time paid positions. As in other male-dominated organisations, women have used the "qualification lever" (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990) to get hired and get promotion. This is probably less true at the workplace level and for elected positions, where women can be chosen in the name of their supposed ability to promote (and identify with) a "tranformation leadership style" (Heery and Kelly, 2001). However, this rhetoric does not alter the internal job segregation, and may in fact reinforce it, while maintaining unspoken class (and race) inequalities. Despite their formal commitment to internal democracy through "*fair representation*" or "*syndicalisme d'adhérents*", we can wonder if UNISON and the CFDT really reflect this issue in their equality policies.

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[1] According to the Labour Force Surveys, in 2005, women accounted for 46% of those in employment in both countries. In 2003, women account for 39% of those affiliated to a union in the UK (TUC, 2006) and for 35% of those affiliated to a general union in France (MSU Survey, 2004). According to the Labour Force Surveys, in 2005,

in the UK union density for women is 30% and 27% for men; in France union density for women is 7% and 9% for men.

[2] Until recently, the amount of time-off for different union roles was linked neither to the number of members nor elections scores, but was given equally to five different unions that were considered as "legitimate" and which could designate employee representatives in any company with more than 10 employees for "délégué du personnel", more than 50 for "comité d'entreprise".

[3] This ethnicity issue has not been included in the study, as it has never been included in internal equality policies in the CFDT and remains unquestionned.

[4] This distinction was introduced by Nick Jewson and David Mason (1986) Radical measures aim to create fair procedures through bureaucratised processes, such as trainings, to enhance women participation. Liberal measures seek a fair distribution of rewards, through the politicisation of decision making and the raising of conscientiousness, and promote positive discrimination.

[5] Source: CEC Report to congress 2007. *Progressing equality issues in the GMB.*

[6] Translated as a « trade union of members », this idea suggests a participative unionism model, opposed to a « trade union of officials », close to the US notion of *« business unionism »*.

[7] For the CFDT, access to statistics remains quite difficult, apart from the confederation level. Most of the figures we have do not give details for each federation/region.

[8] A *'syndicat'* in France is a local general union, affiliated to an industrial federation.

[9] Specific occupational status almost equivalent to "managerial and professional staff", represented by specific unions, status integrated in collective agreement and associated with specific advantages (such as pensions).