



# Understanding women's under representation in union leadership roles: the contribution of a 'career' methodology

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## 16. Understanding the underrepresentation of women in union leadership roles: the contribution of a ‘career’ methodology

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### INTRODUCTION

For the past 20 years, a vast literature examining women’s participation in trade unions (Cunnison & Stageman 1995; Munro 1999; McBride 2001; Colgan & Ledwith 2002; Kirton 2006a; Kirton & Healy 2013; Guillaume 2018a) has explored the permanence of gender inequalities. Despite their increased presence in the labour market and among union members, women still have difficulty accessing positions of leadership and reaching the ‘critical mass’ (Kanter 1977) that could significantly advance equality. This convergent observation may come as a surprise, as trade unions can be very different, whether in terms of size, constituency, political orientation/affiliation, level of feminisation or equality policies. How can we explain the permanence of gender inequalities within the union movement?

This chapter argues that a methodology based on the interactionist concept of career (Barley 1989) developed by Everett Hughes (1958) and Howard Becker (1960, 1966), offers an innovative research design that enables us to understand the (un)making of women’s underrepresentation in union leadership positions. Muriel Darmon (2008) claimed that the concept is particularly interesting for analysing careers in ‘areas where this notion is not already a conventional term or idea’. Actually, the concept of career is most often absent from the vocabulary of trade unionists, probably because it is usually associated with paid work and most union activity is unpaid and voluntary (Kirton 2006b). However, by emancipating itself from the categories used by trade unionists themselves, which often borrows from the repertoire of ‘vocation’ (Fillieule et al. 2019), the concept of career allows us to explore how union activism is built and maintained in a ‘permanent dialectic between individual history and institution, and more generally the contexts’ (Fillieule 2010).

The objective of this contribution is to illustrate the usefulness of a ‘career’ methodology for investigating how different institutional, organisational and individual processes help to reproduce gender (race and class) inequalities within trade unions, while unveiling the conditions, including individuals’ agency and equality/diversity policies, that have enabled progress to be made in some unions. Previous articles (Guillaume & Pochic 2011, 2013) have laid the foundations of this approach, inspired by the founding work of Sue Ledwith and Fiona Colgan (Ledwith et al. 1990). This chapter provides an illustration of this methodology drawing on a com-

prehensive research project that investigated four unions in France and the UK (Guillaume 2018a).

## WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN UNIONS: SOME METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Previous research has exposed the various structural factors that explain the under-representation of women in trade unions. They include the gender segregation of the labour market, with women concentrated in precarious and part-time work, and the gendered division of domestic labour. Women's work patterns are more likely to be discontinuous and located in non-unionised contexts. Low-skilled, precarious and migrant women working in the private services sector and small businesses have fewer opportunities to get involved in trade unions. Having a stable, skilled job, or a supportive partner or grown-up children help to maintain women's union participation. These structural difficulties have been further exacerbated by labour market deregulation and the decline of trade union membership in all European countries and particularly in France (Lescurieux 2019).

Moreover, previous research has described the context of gendered barriers and constraints that women activists and union leaders have to navigate. It has highlighted the role of the organisation of union activity and the masculine construction of trade union careers in explaining women's lower participation in union structures. In particular, the informal nature of union recruitment, the role of (male) mentors, the importance of 'time served' as a critical marker of career promotion, the permanence of a charismatic definition of leadership and the importance of personal power, the absence of a formal definition of authority and a lack of training, as well as the requirement to work long hours and to be geographically mobile, all contribute to the distinctive nature of union leadership (Pocock & Brown 2013) and explain the gendered aspects of that experience.

However, scholars have also argued for contextually/historically grounded analysis as a means of understanding the structure and dynamics of unions' 'inequality regime' (Acker 2006) defined as the 'interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organizations'. Studies have shown that a number of institutional characteristics influence the extent to which equality is achieved in different union contexts. They include size (Kirton 2018), unions' internal labour markets (Guillaume & Pochic 2011) and internal democracy (Healy and Kirton 2000; McBride 2001), the framing of gender equality strategies as more or less feminist and/or intersectional, and the interlinking of class and gender framing (Dean 2015; Guillaume 2018b). Furthermore, research has pointed to the importance of women's agency in the union context (Briskin 2006; Kirton 2006b); how women negotiate the barriers and constraints; how they seek to challenge the existing gendered culture and masculine practices; and what kind of individual resources and strategies might help them, including job qualification (Guillaume & Pochic 2013) and feminist orientations (Kirton & Healy 2012, 2013; Pochic 2014). This abundant literature has called

for a methodology attentive to the interconnectedness of structural, organisational and individual dimensions in the making and/or weakening of gender inequalities in trade unions, depending on period and organisational context.

Moreover, the investigations of women's trade union careers have emphasised two aspects that are often under-analysed in the case of men. First, far from a restrictive vertical and homogeneous vision that does not adequately reflect the characteristics of union careers (especially those of women), which can be horizontal and discontinuous (Kirton 2006b), research has pointed to the need for women to balance multiple parallel careers, which can come into conflict with each other, while at other times being mutually supportive (Kirton 2006b; Lescurieux 2019). Second, some authors have emphasised the complex interaction of these different life careers over the life cycle, depending on objective and perceived constraints and opportunities in the work, union and family contexts of individual women (Kirton 2006b; Guillaume & Pochic 2013; Guillaume 2018a). This points to a dialectical and dynamic relationship between the subjective/moral career of the self and the objective circumstances of the career path and to a specific focus on processes of 'adaptation in the making of careers where individuals modify their aspirations to fit the circumstances they perceived themselves to be in' (Kirton 2006b).

Through a dual process of aggregation and comparison of individual experiences (Crompton 2001; Darmon 2008), a career methodology seeks to investigate the link between contexts of action and individual dispositions, adopting a dynamic approach that is attentive to the plurality of potentially conflicting sites in which social actors are involved and to the ways in which individuals' representations, values and strategies have evolved depending on their experiences. By comparing different organisational settings, it seeks to explore what is common and specific to unions' 'inequality regimes' (Acker 2006) while at the same time emphasising differences and to understand the conditions, always specific and historically/nationally located, that have enabled progress in some unions.

## METHODOLOGY

This chapter builds on a comparative research project undertaken between 2008 and 2015 in four unions: Confédération Démocratique Française du Travail (CFDT) and Solidaires in France; GMB and UNISON in the UK (Guillaume 2018a). It is based on 104 qualitative interviews with women activists at different stages of their union career: activism, consolidation and directing (Ledwith et al. 1990). Each of these stages may encompass very different situations in terms of union time (full-time or not) and type of status (paid, elected, seconded). We chose to focus on formal and consistent levels of activism in order to understand the characteristics and challenges women union leaders face in different union contexts, as well as the role of equality/diversity policies and women's agency in the promotion of equality. All these interviews were analysed using biographical tables (see Table 16.1), divided into three columns (work, family, union activities) with specific attention given to 'turning

**Table 16.1** *Example of Corinne's biographical table*

	Education and profession	Family and residence	Union
1968	Born in Paris.	Initially inactive migrant mother who fought against her husband in order to be able to work.	
1985	Obtains the French baccalaureate and begins a course in foreign languages.		
1987	Passes the Customs Officers exam and undergoes training for six months in La Rochelle.	Moves to La Rochelle for six months.	
1988	Is assigned to a brigade on the northern border of France, as office head.	In a relationship with a customs officer who works in a small town in the Alpes.	
1989		Gets married and asks for a transfer to be close to her partner.	Major dispute begins at the Ministry of Finance. Two-week strike. Joins the CFDT.
1990		Gets her transfer and falls pregnant.	Remains unionised, but not very active due to her family life and the geographical remoteness of her workplace.
1991	Complicated and alternating shifts (night/day) with weekend and public holiday work.	Birth of her first child. Both spouses take turns taking care of the child.	
1992			Becomes secretary of the CFDT local union following the retirement of the former male secretary. Election of Nicole Notat, first female general secretary of the CFDT.
1993		Birth of her second child.	Intense internal political tensions in the CFDT. Participates in the national bodies of the federation and confederation. Her local union opposes the confederal line.
1996			Leaves the CFDT and sets up SUD-Douanes (i.e. Customs) with other trade unionists. Period of very intense union participation at the local and national levels.
1997		Divorces and moves to a bigger town with her new partner. Wins custody of her children.	Loses all her elected union roles because SUD-Douanes is not recognised by the administration, but maintains a SUD-Douanes local representation with few members.

	Education and profession	Family and residence	Union
2000		Birth of her third child.	
2006		Birth of her fourth child.	
2007	Changes to part-time work (25%) because she gets 75% facility time for her union roles.	Tries not to attend too many union meetings far from her home until her youngest child turns 3.	Manages to be re-elected thanks to changes in the electoral system following the regionalisation of her department and successful legal battles leading to the recognition of SUD-Douanes. Becomes secretary of the regional union, following the retirement of her colleague and sits on many regional bodies.
2013	Fails the inspector exam (necessary to get promotion).	Constantly travelling for her union roles. Her spouse, who is also a customs officer, is very supportive and takes care of the children.	Elected as national secretary. Four women out of 11 members sit on this national committee. Agrees to sit on Solidaires women's national commission
2014	Evidence of union discrimination. Her career progression has been much slower than that of her non-unionised colleagues. She is considering taking legal action, but hopes to pass the inspector's exam, which will make up for her accumulated salary discrimination.		Wants to carry on with her union career but does not see herself becoming the general secretary of her union.

points' (Abbott 1997) defined as 'an alteration or deflection in a long-term pathway or trajectory that was initiated at an earlier point in time' (Sampson and Laub 2005: 16). Other examples – marriage, birth of a child, loss/obtaining of job, moving house, experience of a strike, new union role, among others – can constitute turning points that can alter the course of a lifetime. However, these are not isolated events; they are embedded in social contexts that need to be analysed and understood, especially when it comes to unions' institutional dynamics, including the existence and framing of equality policies.

Taking four individual careers as examples, the following sections intend to show what this approach brings to the understanding of the (un)making of women union leaders' careers and reflect on what the study of trade unions, as specific organisations, reveals about women's difficulties in gaining access to leadership positions and the limitations of equality policies. These lessons will also certainly be useful for the analysis of other organisations, with regard to the challenging issue of the implementation of equality policies (Mazur 2017).

## THE FEMINISATION OF GOVERNANCE BODIES

In comparison with other types of organisation, trade unions are meant to be democratic. It is in the name of this aspiration that feminist researchers have criticised the ‘gender democracy deficit’ (Cockburn 1995), a term that denotes the underrepresentation of women in union decision-making structures. Consequently, in order to get women and their concerns onto their agendas, most unions have developed a range of policies and practices aiming at promoting women’s participation and inclusion. Amongst the four unions investigated, UNISON, one of the biggest and a highly feminised union (77 per cent of women members in 2016) in the UK, is often cited as an example, due to the precedence of its radical constitutional changes and the resources dedicated to its equality/diversity policy (McBride 2001). First, UNISON has introduced measures aimed at achieving proportional representation for women and other minority groups in the form of reserved seats on elected bodies (National Executive Committee, NEC). Second, UNISON has gradually adopted ‘fair representation’ objectives in order to ensure that all members are represented, regardless of their age, salary level, working time, sector of activity, race, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability. These objectives take the form of reserved seats for low-paid women, BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic), young people and pensioners. Finally, UNISON has set up separate structures, called ‘self-organised groups’ for women, BAME, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ members. The results of this policy are incontestable, with women making up 61 per cent of the NEC. As Charlotte’s career illustrates, the opening up of numerous participation opportunities for elected women and minority groups, through radical measures, has enabled many grassroots activists, with enough biographical availability (McAdam 1986), a stable job and supporting family, to get involved in the union’s governance structures, even when they were working in low-skilled jobs.

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### CHARLOTTE, ‘TOP LAY MEMBER’

Charlotte was born disabled. She was educated in specialised institutions. She learned shorthand typing and started working at the age of 19 in 1976. She was lucky and found a job quickly because the council where she lived near London was recruiting. She worked in a team of secretaries for 13 years. She did not join the union immediately, but eventually joined the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU) in 1987 because one of her colleagues was rude to her. *‘I thought I’d better organise myself to protect myself, I didn’t know exactly what I needed to protect myself from, but it seemed like a good idea. And then my colleagues were unionised too’*. Her parents were both union members, *‘but they were not activists and we had little discussion on the subject at home’*. She then applied for a position in the Child Protection Department. Her boss was not very supportive, and she asked for a transfer to the social services unit. She also became more active in her union and

became a shop steward in order to make sure that, in case of harassment, she would know how to act.

In 1994, she decided to change union and joined UNISON, which had organised a pay strike that the TGWU did not support. She was also attracted by UNISON's equality policy, which took into account her disability, something the TGWU had never done. She quickly became a shop steward and disability officer. She obtained seven hours of facility time per week for her union roles and was also asked to sit on the branch committee, then on the Regional Disabled Members' Committee. She joined the Women's Committee shortly after. In 2006, she was asked if she would like to run for a seat on the National Executive Committee. She was elected to one of the seats reserved for women. She also sat on the National Disabled Members' Committee.

Charlotte is single. She lives with her parents who have always been very supportive. She uses lots of her own time off to handle her different union roles. Since 1999, she has also been a criminal magistrate. She was chosen because of her disability and the proactive policy put in place in the judiciary at the end of the 1990s. These combined experiences have given her enough self-confidence to feel ready to serve on the NEC. The union has encouraged and supported her and provided the help she needs. She has never applied for a paid position in her union because she loves her work and her union roles. *'I am at the top of the union hierarchy, at the NEC, we manage the union and decide its policy'*. She hopes to be re-elected in two years' time.

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## THE CHALLENGING CAREERS OF WOMEN'S OFFICERS

In addition to policies aimed at feminising elected decision-making bodies, most unions have also appointed women's officers. Like other specialised roles that have developed in trade unions (Guillaume & Pochic 2013; Guillaume 2018a), these positions have opened up opportunities for women because of their professional and essentialised skills. Who better to take care of women than women? However, the experience of these positions is often mixed. While some women's officers have remained in their role for many years, such as at UNISON, turnover has been much faster in other unions such as the CFDT, which has seen five different national equality officers in 15 years. However, the CFDT, which has now reached gender parity (52 per cent of the membership), has one of the oldest equality policies, with a long-established women's commission and women's officers at different levels of the organisation. In the 1990s and 2000s, the turnover of national women's officers could be explained by the mismatch between their individual profiles and the nature of the position. Being qualified professionals or recent graduates, they found themselves squeezed into a role that had become quite technical and lacked internal legitimacy since equality policy had been reframed around work and employment issues, a far cry from the societal and feminist perspective that characterised the pre-



vious decades (Le Brouster 2009). Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult for women in trade unions to identify with 'feminism', particularly in France where this label is associated with 'radical/leftist feminism'. Many feminist women leaders have experienced sexism and been ostracised by their male colleagues, especially when they have served as women's officers. While some women union leaders, mainly in feminised contexts, claim to practice 'feminist leadership' (Kirton & Healy 2012), assimilation strategies and the adoption of masculine leadership approaches seem to be a much more effective route to union legitimacy (Pochic 2014; Guillaume 2018a). Marie's career demonstrates the dilemmas that women's officers often face, and the vulnerability of their union careers.

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## MARIE, A SHORT CAREER IN A CONTROVERSIAL ROLE

Marie became politicised and converted to feminism in the 1968 movement, coming from a '*very traditional*' French Catholic family. Trained initially as a podiatrist-prosthetist, she went back to university in Paris and then joined a department attached to the prime minister's office in 1977. A member of the Revolutionary Communist League since 1973 and under the influence of her older brother, she decided to establish a CFDT union branch because the atmosphere in her department '*was nice, but we felt that it was opaque. Our management was a little bit of a mess*'. She was also a feminist activist and was involved in the fight for abortion rights, but for her, '*it was not a union fight*', even if the CFDT, at the time, was very involved in campaigning for women's rights. For years, she was active in her branch, taking on various union roles in her administration and changing jobs quite often.

She had two children in 1979 and 1984. She managed to reconcile all her activities, particularly because her managers in the Ministry of Labour were inclined to recognise the unions' role. In the 1990s, she met a young female colleague who was recruited by the CFDT and Marie was then recommended for a position as officer in charge of immigration issues in 2002. Marie was then 52 years old. She told herself, '*I can move out of the Ministry, it's now or never, with not so many risks*'. She accepted the position because she knew the topic but she got bored pretty quickly. After a few months, she was offered the position of national women's officer. She had not expected it, but was delighted. She replaced a female activist who had not had a very good experience in this role. It was explained to her that it was because this woman was '*too openly opposed to the prevailing machismo*' and she decided to take that lesson to heart. '*It became clear to me that there were numerous machos around, and I thought I'd have to sit on my feminism a little bit*'. She knew that the CFDT equality policy had been well established since the 1980s (mainly with gender quotas for national seats) but had always been kept at arm's length by individual (often isolated) women. She loved her job and worked a lot. Her children were grown up, but she suffered from the invasion of her private life, even if her husband supported her. Because of her heavy workload, she was forced to abandon some of her charity work.

Marie succeeded in setting up action programmes with different federations and organised a national women's conference with 1,500 activists. Her relations with the female national official she reported to were quite stormy because they did not share the same feminist values, but she felt supported by the general secretary '*who was not a feminist but saw what supporting equality could do for his image*'. However, her action was highly criticised by another female national officer in charge of race discrimination issues, who felt in competition with her. Relationships with her manager became tense and Marie was fired. Being a civil servant and holding her union role while still being employed (and paid) by her Ministry, she managed to return to her previous job, but she remained very resentful and frustrated. Marie felt she had invested a lot of energy in her role but had had to face many internal rivalries. She regretted that the CFDT was unable to define a clear framing for its gender equality policy.

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## THE RESISTANCE OF MALE OLIGARCHIES IN THE UNIONS

The 'top-down' feminisation of elected bodies and the presence of women's officers have not given women (and minority groups) greater access to paid officer positions (in Great Britain) or to intermediate/national leadership roles in either country. Indeed, access to these roles continues to depend on informal identification and selection mechanisms and the support of mentors (often senior white men) who open the door to leadership positions and provide advice on developing as a leader. This peer support is all the more important in organisations where formal leadership training is rare (Kirton & Healy 2013) and little offset by the existence of women-only education (Kirton 2006a), particularly in France. The permanence of a standard and linear career path including progression through a series of key roles at the workplace and regional levels is highly discriminatory for qualified paid officers recruited directly at the regional or national level, and for women confined to certain specialised roles, such as women's officers. Furthermore, contrary to more controlled organisations, the decentralised and democratic nature of unions gives local/intermediate leaders freedom to decide whether or not to implement national equality policies. Compliance issues can be addressed by different types of control (Acker 2006), but formalised mechanisms are more difficult to implement in volunteering organisations than in bureaucracies. In male-dominated unions, such as the GMB, which is expanding in the public sector and therefore becoming more feminised (49 per cent women in 2013) and has also recently developed a mix of radical and (mainly) liberal equality measures, women's exclusionary experiences are not uncommon. Catherine's career exemplifies the many organisational barriers women might encounter.

## CATHERINE, A SURVIVOR IN A MALE-DOMINATED UNION

Catherine was born in 1948 in the north of England. After high school, she won a place at university, but did not really know what she wanted to do and started working in the purchasing department of the Ministry of Defence, where she realised that she was paid half as much as her older men colleagues. She then joined a bicycle manufacturing company in 1969 as a 'trainee' and progressed up the hierarchy until she became deputy head of the department, following a return to university. She stopped working for a while to raise her first son alone. She then met her first husband and was hired as a purchasing manager in a gaming company. In 1982, she became pregnant with her first daughter and quit her job because she almost had a miscarriage and her employer had not been very supportive. She then had two other daughters and stopped working for five years. However, her husband had accumulated gambling debts and she had to go back to work full-time in the bicycle business, before eventually filing for divorce. Although she was very organised, she had difficulty managing her family and work, and then ended up having to sell her house because her ex-husband stopped paying maintenance.

Catherine then decided to stop working for private companies and became involved in the local Labour Party. Between 1992 and 1997, she was elected to various local Labour committees. She also volunteered in the 1996 election campaign and was eventually recruited by a Member of Parliament. She worked as his assistant for a year and a half, but she couldn't stand his arrogance and the fact that he spent all his time in Westminster, rather than caring about his constituents. She then applied for a position as a recruiter for a union in her town. *'I didn't know much about GMB, its culture. And it was a great shock to me. My integration was very difficult. My targets were enormous. I had to recruit 1,200 new members in the first year and more thereafter'*. After three months, an organiser role became available. Catherine applied and was not recruited. *'I should have had the job, but I didn't get it. The Regional Committee interviewed me, 17 elected members. I was the only woman in the room, so I know it's because I was a woman that I didn't get it'*. Her workload as a recruiter was too heavy. After three years she went on sick leave for depression for six months. No one called her to support her. When she decided to return to work, her boss explained to her that she had been transferred to another rural and conservative town, 60 miles away, to do the same work. *'It was my punishment'*. Catherine was forced to sell her house and moved out. Her children were grown up and her new husband was unemployed. She decided that she would show them what she was able to do. *'To succeed, you have to be tenacious, solid, confident in what you are doing. Women must constantly show men that they are wrong. It takes courage'*.

Catherine decided to work with migrant workers and managed to set up a specialised unit, with the help of two migrant women. Her initiative was awarded 'project of the year' by the Trade Union Congress. Following the restructuring of the region, she applied for a senior organiser role, but was not selected because there was a local male candidate. The following year, she finally got the same position for the south-

ern part of the region, replacing another woman. Catherine now leads a team of 200 people. She has six years left to work before retirement and would like to continue her career within the GMB, but she is also considering becoming a consultant. Feminisation is '*a big problem for the union. All leaders are men, they have their own little kingdom. Culture is about scratch my back and I'll scratch yours; we've been friends for a long time, the next job is for you*'.

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## EXCEPTIONAL TIME, EXCEPTIONAL WOMEN

Trade unions are 'contested organizations' (Hyman 2001). Depending on periods, strong internal rivalries between political factions may weaken leaders' careers and/or facilitate the renewal of executive teams, opening up unexpected opportunities for women. This was the case of the first *Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques* (SUD) unions that emerged from the late 1980s in France, following the breakaway of groups from the CFDT in various parts of the public sector (health, post and telecommunications, and railways) and their affiliation to *Solidaires* in 1998. These unions included experienced former CFDT women activists such as Corinne (see case below), who were able to access leadership positions. Women's participation was also encouraged by the small size of SUD unions (Kirton 2018; Sayce et al., 2006) and by their unique conception of internal democracy based on consensual decision-making, avoidance of full-time officers, rotation of elected officials and strong workplace unionism (Guillaume 2018b). However, since most SUD unions have had to fight through the courts to obtain recognition, they usually have fewer resources and facility time than other, bigger unions, which causes specific difficulties in terms of work/union life balance. Moreover, the persistence of a heroic (Briskin 2011) and masculine style of leadership, intrinsic to the social construction of militant (radical) activism, also constrains women's participation. In a more subtle way, the highly politicised and ideological nature of union debates, relying on grandiloquent and sophisticated speeches, can also discourage less qualified and less politicised members, regardless of gender. Many SUD women activists identify strongly as feminists. Nevertheless, they tend to 'neutralise their gender to better represent their class' (Pochic 2014) or that of those they represent, in the name of a quest for social justice (Healy & Kirton 2013). Besides, as union leaders they usually have to conform to the masculine norms of union careers – long hours and frequent business trips – whether with help or opposition from their partners, as Corinne's career illustrates (see also Table 16.1, p. 252).

## CORINNE, AN EXCEPTIONAL WOMAN IN A FEMINIST TRADE UNION

Corinne passed the Customs Officers exam in France in 1987, after her baccalaureate. She was recruited and left home for six months' training. At first, she was a little lost, but she was rather sporty and excelled quickly in shooting sessions, which earned her the respect of her many male colleagues. She was then assigned in the north of France, as head of a team of about 20 men. The first two months were difficult, *'you have to be firm and attentive'*, but the fact that she was in a relationship with a more experienced customs officer helped her. He advised her. She then requested a transfer to get closer to her spouse, in the French Alps. She fell into *'a nest of CFDT trade unionists'* at the beginning of 1989, one of the biggest disputes the Ministry of Finance has known, which led to a complete overhaul of pay scales and job classifications. She then became pregnant, which put a stop to her union involvement. When her second child, born very soon after the first, was old enough, she was elected head of the local CFDT branch, *'naturally'*, when the male former secretary retired. Her spouse, who was a union member but not an activist, supported her. Following the election of Nicole Notat as head of the CFDT in 1992, major internal political tensions led Corinne to go to Paris regularly to participate in internal debates. The Finance Federation, which was rather far to the left, led a head-on fight against the national union leadership. At that time, Corinne was often away from home and eventually got divorced. She does not know *'whether it was her union commitment that led to the divorce or whether it was because her relationship was in trouble that she made such a commitment'*.

In 1996, tired of fighting internally, the customs branch followed other unions and left the CFDT to found the SUD-Douanes union. *'We were left in a vacuum, without the right to organise, without recognition by the employer'*. Corinne followed people she trusted, *'intelligent and charismatic'*, but this departure was *'painful'*. Being quite young at the time (36 years old), she was attracted to the SUD unions' philosophy that placed great emphasis on union democracy and the absence of hierarchy. However, SUD-Douanes took ten years to be recognised by the Finance Ministry. Meanwhile, Corinne married another customs officer and had two more children. When, finally, the union obtained the required level of representativeness, through sustained legal battles, she became branch convenor at the regional level, with 75 per cent facility time. Shortly after, she was elected to serve at the federation level. The general secretary, a man, absolutely wanted her to sit on the federal bureau because she was a *'founding member'* of the union. Her second husband, who had always been supportive and taken care of the four children, started to be a bit upset because she was away from home several times a week. At the same time, Corinne tried to pass an exam to get promotion because her career had suffered from her union role and because she wanted to gain more legitimacy in the eyes of her management and union fellows. *'Being a woman and not being a manager does not help'*.

Interestingly, SUD-Douanes recruits members from among non-managerial occupations but is run by 'intellectuals' (Guillaume 2018b). The union does not have an

equality/diversity policy, but Corinne believes that '*SUD is the least macho union amongst customs unions*'. The number of women in leadership positions is proportional to the level of feminisation of the profession (30 per cent), which justifies not imposing quotas for fear of not finding candidates. At the local level, on the electoral list of the region, three women are elected. This feminisation makes it easier to recruit women members. '*Women talk more easily to women*'. Corinne considers herself a feminist and finds that her union does not pay sufficient attention to gender discrimination and sexual harassment issues, which are increasingly violent and not properly dealt with by management.

On a personal level, she feels that she has never been discriminated against or harassed in the union or at work, because she has always been in a relationship with customs officers and because she knows how to defend herself. Interestingly, Corinne never mentions race discrimination at work or within her union or being BAME, except when she evokes her mother's struggle to work with a 'white chauvinist husband' (her father). She does not intend to stop her union career. She has been asked to sit on Solidaires' national women's commission, but she does not want to be full-time or become general secretary, although she thinks a man–woman tandem would be good. Anyway, the union has not suggested she should stand, probably because she '*doesn't have the necessary qualities*'. She thinks she is '*too spontaneous*' for that kind of role.

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## CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that a career methodology provides a comprehensive, multi-space and dynamic understanding of women's career development in trade unions and offers an innovative methodological perspective that can address some of the gaps and limitations of gender and management studies. First, because it is a situated approach, it makes it possible to understand the specificity of each 'inequality regime' (Acker 2006) and to isolate what is unique in the barriers to and enablers of women's participation and the limits of the equality/diversity policies implemented. Difficulties that can be linked to tangible (but sometimes implicit) factors, such as the lack of biographical availability or the professional skills necessary to meet the requirements of a leader career, as well as symbolic dimensions, such as the more or less feminist framing of equality policies and its links to class (and race). Second, far from being merely a description of these inequality regimes, this approach examines the institutional, organisational and individual processes, and their dynamics and interactions over time, that explain the permanence of inequalities or, conversely, the advancement of equality. Third, this approach emphasises the importance of women's agency and the adjustments they make between the different spheres of their lives, which may, on occasion, come into conflict, 'since they are permanently

subject to the obligation to comply with different norms, roles and logics that are sometimes incompatible' (Fillieule et al. 2019: 313).

Overall, this detailed and situated understanding of women leaders' experiences makes it possible to highlight the challenges of implementing equality policies, starting with the difficulty of imposing and controlling equality policies in decentralised and democratic organisations; the challenge of opposing informal norms and mechanisms for identifying and selecting future leaders (in a context of strong competition for these roles); the often exceptional context of leadership that causes women leaders to face difficult situations and have shorter careers (Ryan & Haslam 2005); and the possible backlash women leaders experience when they reach upper levels of management without the necessary political backing and/or experience and peer networks.

However, we acknowledge that this situated approach comes up against specific ethical difficulties to which it is necessary to be sensitive and to address. Since career narratives can be quite detailed and because of the small number of women (union) leaders, the anonymity of interviews can be difficult to preserve in a small world (Fillieule et al. 2019). Several solutions are available to the researcher. The first one, to which we resorted, is to opt for an anonymisation *de façade* by slightly modifying the person's social markers (names, places, dates) and/or to mention only individuals who have left the organisation, but without any guarantee of maintaining total confidentiality. That said, we argue that social actors rarely read academic literature and that they would really have to engage in a guessing exercise to identify the interviewees. A second, rarer solution is, as Fillieule et al. (2019) suggest, to use fictitious portraits, i.e. 'the reconstruction of cases that are sociologically correct but socially false' (p. 314), based on a combination of several real cases that are considered close and that are combined to create one. This can be an interesting solution if it enables researchers to maintain the necessary contextualisation of individual careers. However, readers may be confused about the veracity of the data, or rather the lack of it. Moreover, to avoid the limitations of an approach based solely on case studies (Yin 2016), any form of career approach suggests a comparison of several cases whose comparability needs to be worked on, especially in a cross-national context, which in itself presents a number of methodological pitfalls (Guillaume 2018a).

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