



**Challenging Male Advantage in Australian Unions**

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## Abstract

This thesis analyses the traditional union conception of the 'problem' of women in the union movement, and shows how this conception is wrong headed. The thesis makes an argument that the focus on women, always women, in conventional analysis, and the failure to name male advantage and resistance to women, have distorted our understanding of traditional unionism and questions of gender within it. The thesis highlights the importance of keeping men, women, and the relationship between the two in clear focus in any institutional study.

In its early chapters the thesis surveys some historical material, relevant feminist theory and the state of Australian unions today, to set the discussion of contemporary Australian unionism in context. This discussion is followed by three empirically-based chapters. The first of these analyses data showing the systemic over-representation of men in the Australian union movement, especially where power lies. The second examines the range of Australian and international union responses to the 'problem' of women's under-representation throughout unions. The third analyses the nature of women's and men's activism in their unions, revealing that many conventional explanations for women's lesser participation in unions are inaccurate and misleading, and that the different circumstances of women's and men's private lives underwrite the terms of their political engagement in public organisations like unions.

Finally, in theorising gender-relations in unions, the thesis argues for a much closer analysis of male resistance to women in unions, and in other similar political institutions.

### Statement of Authorship

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

.....Date..... 14 October 1956.

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While writing and conducting the research I swam in a sea of feminist activism in unions: many women influenced my thinking and they inspired and stimulated my work. These include, in particular, Jude Elton, Kathie Muir, Margaret Hallock, Suzanne Franzway, Claire Thomson, Leena Sudano, Jane Clarke, Ingrid Voorendt and Julie White.

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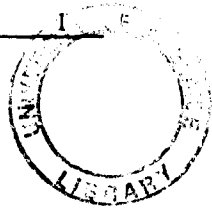
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## Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ACSPA	Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organisations
ANF	Australian Nurses Federation
AMWU	Australian Manufacturing Workers Union
ASU	Australian Services Union
CEQ	Centrale de l'Enseignement du Quebec
CFDT	French Democratic Confederation of Labour
CGT-FO	General Confederation of Labour (France)
CGIL	Italian General Confederation of Labour
CNV	Christian National Federation of Trade Unions (Netherlands)
CPSU	Community and Public Sector Union
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organisations
CLC	Canadian Labour Congress
CLUW	Coalition of Labor Union Women
COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees'
DGB	German Confederation of Trade Unions
DIR	Department of Industrial Relations
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
FCU	Federated Clerks Union
FEN	Federation del Education Nationale
FNV	Netherlands
FTF	Federation of Civil Servants and Salaried Employees' Organisations (Denmark)
GMB	General and Municipal
GSEE	General Confederation of Greek Labour
ICTU	Irish Confederation of Trade Unions
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ILO	International Labor Organisation
LO	Swedish Trade Union Confederation
MOA	Municipal Officers Association
NALGO	National and Local Government Officers Association
NPEC	National Pay Equity Coalition
NSW	New South Wales
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
NUW	National Union of Workers
NZCTU	New Zealand Council of Trade Unions
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OGB-L	Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (Luxembourg)
PSU, CPSU	Community and Public Sector Union
PSA	Public Service Association
SAIT	South Australian Institute of Teachers
SA	South Australia
SDA	Shop and Distributive And Allied Employees Association
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SERTUC	South East Region TUC
TCO	Central Organsation of Salaried Employees (Sweden)
TUC	Trades Union Congress (Britain)
ICEF	International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers Unions
RENGO	Japanese Trade Union Confederation

UAW	Union of Auto Workers
UIL	Italian Labour Unions
UGT	General Union of Workers (Spain)
USS	Swiss Federation of Trade Unions
USWA	United Steel Workers of America
UTLC	United Trades and Labor Council of South Australia
WEL	Women's Electoral Lobby
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League
WWC	Working Women's Centre





## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Fifteen years ago I went to my first residential union training course for men and women, mostly from private banks at the national union training college. At that time I worked in a bank and was a new workplace delegate in my union. The issue of sexuality dominated the five day program. Men speculatively viewed and pursued women as potential sexual conquests, questioned women about their sexual preference and threatened women with sexual violence. I was closely questioned about my sexuality, 'accused' of being a lesbian, and male participants attempted to break into my room at night. After playing pool with other participants one evening, I was (along with another woman) denounced next day by a union secretary for 'pretending to be one of us'.

Many of us stayed up late into the night with the well-meaning male course co-ordinator trying to work out how to deal with this wave of hostility. Unfortunately, all the trainer could do was suggest that we work on strategies to deal with 'it'; he took no responsibility for his institution: this was a personal problem (shared by all the women, against the majority of men). When the course finally ended, we took the issue up in our state union branches. So did the dominant group of men. They prevailed over our attempts to censure their behaviour, and from all accounts their state secretary was highly amused by their sport and has gone on to become a senior officer in this female-dominated industry, and no doubt many of the protagonists in that training program have gone on to hold (and hold on to) union positions.

Several things now strike me about this experience. Firstly, the sexualisation of women is stark (as quarry, as 'deviant', as object). Deciphering and naming our sexuality (particularly the possible presence of lesbians) was important to a significant number of men in the group. Secondly, the marking out of the women as different is also severe. I can only now guess, for example, that in being denounced as a 'pretender' to unionism, as a confident woman from a public sector bank, I had to be marked out by the union leader as an unreliable, (an)other - my sex, sector, class background and personality announced to undermine any capital I might have as fellow unionist, and anything I might have to say.

As a sex we women were marked as outsiders: a group against which the majority of men were pitted. Thirdly, we were left with the problem (with naming it, and attempting to address it), a problem which did not end with the training course itself, but permeated our unionism itself, where the dominant group of men could over-ride women and the perspective of a minority of men sympathetic to the women.

And the experience tells us more: over the years the feminists amongst us and in other unions have gone on to address such situations by establishing rules about sexual harassment at the national training college: a booklet in the bedroom of all trainees now defines harassment, including sexual harassment, and points out that it will not be tolerated. However, fifteen years later at the 1995 ACTU Congress a woman trainer speaks of the failure to stop sexual harassment (which we now know how to name) at the same training college, and the failure of senior leaders in unions to understand and prevent such harassment. So the fourth striking aspect of this experience is that, not only have our formal strategies failed in some ways to prevent sexual harassment, *they have not named or challenged the much more dense set of practices which constitute male resistance to women in unions*. Our responses, while necessary and no doubt having some effect on some forms of harassment for example, have not challenged the deeper discourse. This discourse does several things: it places women as outsiders to unionism; it locates the 'gender problem' with women; and it suggests that women - always women - must fix the 'problem'. We have mistaken the difficulties which confront women in unions as ones which can be met by strategies like exhortation to good behaviour, and we have not paid enough attention to the advantages men gain through their union position and power, and the resistances which they will make to women's 'challenge'.

I have hesitated to write this experience. Not because it is awful (though it is<sup>1</sup>) but because it is a single experience and because it is fifteen years old. However, I then remember that I have rarely had a prolonged conversation with a woman unionist who has not had her own similar story: such stories are the common informal material of women's

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<sup>1</sup>And I have censored some of the worst parts - it seems too dramatic to quote the male unionist - wasn't he only a freak? - who leaned over the pub table and shook his beer bottle at a woman unionist, saying "if you don't shut up I am going to smash this bottle and shove it up you".

meetings in unions. And while the story is old, I am struck by how long it has taken me to understand its sub text and how I have fallen into a focus on *women* in unions, with so little attention to men and their dominating practices. A strategy which conceives women's path to their full and proper place in unions as lying down the road of addressing 'women's disadvantage', while failing to see the brick walls of male advantage and resistance, cannot succeed. It is not *adequate*. So while this early experience is old, and only one, it provides a sign post to a forgotten and under-explored phenomenon: men in unions. It has its continuities into 1996 where there is still a steady, implacable resistance to conceding real power to women. In our equal opportunity strategies we have missed the importance and nature of the male advantage which is constructed and buttressed through unionism, and the strategies of male resistance which hold them in place.

Outright harassment is not common for me now. Other things have changed as well: when I recently attended the national college to run training for senior union officials, I worked with a new generation of elected leaders - still mostly men as we shall see - who energetically discussed the linkage between women's place in unionism (and men's resistance to it) and the future of the union movement. They decided to make 'managing gender issues' a focus of their part-time, year-long training program and invited me back, and into their unions. So while some things remain the same, others have certainly begun to change.

This thesis explores some of that change, along with its current shape and adequacy. It confirms the continuing, systemic over-representation of men throughout unions, especially where the power of decision lies. It analyses the traditional union conception of the 'problem' of women for the labour movement, and then shows how this conception is wrong-headed. The focus on 'women' in conventional analysis, the failure to consider - even *allow* - the 'difference' between women and men, along with male advantage and resistance, have distorted our understanding of Australian unionism and questions of gender within it. The thesis highlights the importance of keeping men, women and the relationship between the two in clear focus in any institutional analysis, and throughout the field of industrial relations where gender so rarely figures as a defining, critical category.

Many Australian feminists have looked hopefully to unions as important vehicles through which improvements in women's lives can be secured. There have been, and are, many qualifications attached to this hope (and many complexities contained within its definition: what is the feminist project of 'liberation'? what is 'feminism'? what is the meaning of 'women'?). However, for the purposes of this introduction it is fair to say that unions have been seen by many women as an important site of potential power through which to influence the actions of the state, to constrain and affect the decisions and power of employers and managers, and to influence the shaping of Australian social infrastructure and policy. In this belief, many Australian women have not only joined, but become activists at all levels and in many unions.

At the same time, disillusion with unions as a vehicle for the transformation of women's situation has not been uncommon and many women have been deeply critical of this hope from the early days of 'second wave'<sup>2</sup> feminism, while others have lost hope through experience (Zelda D'Aprano is an example (1995)). There are many significant questions about this sphere of feminist activism. How much can feminists hope for from, and through, unions in Australia and how are these hopes defined in the nineteen-nineties given our labour history and recent developments in feminist theory? How much power do women have in unions? To what extent have unions changed to 'accommodate' women and how have they changed? If unions remain an important site of feminist emancipatory politics, in what ways must they be changed and by what means? How do the practices and habits of masculinity resist women in unions? A great diversity of views and beliefs has existed and exists. For many, including me, the cloying muck of solidarity and its partialities have clouded our vision and contained our critique. This thesis attempts to clear some of that vision by analysing women's and men's current relationship to power in unions (in terms of power

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<sup>2</sup>Bremner has accurately spoken of the 'historical caricature' of second wave feminism 'which confines female activism to the 'Two Great Waves of Feminism', leaving in limbo everything between the suffragette campaign and the women's liberation movement since the 1960s' (Bremner 1982:286). Women's activism - certainly within unions but also more broadly - is not accurately portrayed as two waves. However, I use 'second wave' to suggest the rise in activism and the shift in feminist strategy which occurred from the late 1960s. Similarly, by 'first wave' I mean the cluster of activity around the suffrage movement late last century and early into the 20th century; this is not to suggest that only flat sea lay between these clusters or types of activity, or that the waves were unitary.



related to position), and by naming some of the current limits upon the possibilities for women in unions.

### **1.1 The Argument**

I argue that unions in Australia remain largely driven by men and that to survive, unions must change strategies with respect to women members and accelerate their implementation; specifically they must shift focus onto structural inadequacies within unions (which advantage men) and give up an analysis premised upon women's real or assumed 'deficits'.

Australian unions have historically been institutions run by groups of working men, to secure gains for those working men, often at the expense of less powerful groups of both women and men. A powerful traditional discourse of male unionism exists which limits the possibilities and power of women, which in turn weakens organised labour in Australia. Today power in the union movement remains largely in men's hands, though women have increasingly 'encroached' upon it or parts of it, especially over the last decade. Action within unions to more democratically represent women has been quite limited and generally undertaken within a discourse of female disadvantage and deficit, rather than male hegemony and advantage (to employ Joan Eveline's device of 'strategic inversion' (1994b)). A greater transformative power might be exercised by and for women in Australian unions through the construction of a new discourse of feminist unionism: one which places the diverse nature of women's paid and unpaid working lives at the centre of union organisation and representation, challenging the male norms and practices of traditional Australian unionism. This challenges a view that women can be 'added into' existing institutions like unions and secure a turnaround in union density, thereby helping 'save' Australian unions. This rescue relies on a much deeper transformation, leaving behind the old tactic of strategic concession to the 'other' sex in order to secure the consolidation of a mostly male movement, defending mostly male advantage.

### **1.2 The Importance of the Question**

The question pursued in this thesis is important for several reasons. Firstly, for women engaged in union activism (like myself) it is relevant to examine the limits which currently

forestall success for women in and through unions and, through that analysis, perhaps sharpen the tools available and accelerate progress for women and the necessary transformation of unions. It is timely to consider the limits and possibilities for women in Australia through unions.

The results of this study are also of interest to those Australian union officials, members and activists engaged in work within unions to make them more representative of women. How much change are they effecting? What means are most useful and powerful in securing change? What is wrong about the current effort and how should it be reshaped? Useful research to assist in answering these questions is very thin in Australia, leaving some yawning empirical gaps. For example, at the most simplistic level there has been no reliable data on women's share of union leadership positions within the country.

A large international literature exists on these questions. However, Australian contributions to it have been fairly infrequent and often made by men writing from the academic perspective of industrial relations. Apart from their small number, this Australian literature suffers from the limitations imposed by the general absence of a feminist theoretical perspective and research methodology. The current study attempts to address some of these limitations; it theorises gender relations in Australian unions and argues for an en-gendered labour studies and industrial relations.

These questions also have wider implications. Firstly there is international interest in the situation of women in unions and - at the most simple level - the progress towards fairer representation of women. The possibilities for progress towards various feminist goals through unions (in comparison with other means and vehicles) is also of interest to feminist activists internationally, especially where significant labour movements exist. An internationally comparative discussion is also relevant to the fields of labour studies and industrial relations.

Secondly, the study of women's situation within Australian unions provides an opportunity to contribute to a growing literature about the operation of gender - and specifically male advantage and resistance - in an institutional setting and to challenge existing male hegemony.

### 1.3 My Interest in the Problem

I am drawn to this research area for two reasons. Firstly I want to influence an important Australian institution in the direction of - what I view as - positive change for women. I have been a union activist throughout the period of this research and before it began. My participation in my own union, in state and national conferences, training and education, and union forums, has influenced my analysis, methods and conclusions. At the same time I have swum in a sea of feminist critique of unionism through my participation in formal and informal union women's meetings and discussion. Much of the data collection has been undertaken with the cooperation and support of individual unions and peak councils and, using research funds, many aspects and stages of the research have been reported and discussed with union committees, union members, feminist activists and union officials of both sexes.

While the active involvement of unionists in the conduct of the research has affected its structure and imposed limitations, it has ensured that the research has engaged with the organisations in which it has been based: in particular unions in South Australia especially those six unions and union divisions involved in the survey of members but also in national union offices where I have worked with union officials to draw out the implications of the analysis for individual union strategies.

Secondly, on a more personal level I want to attempt to answer the question: how much is possible for women through unions and at what cost is it worth pursuing? After fifteen years of involvement as an activist in various roles within Australian unions, I am drawn to examine the extent of progress for women through Australian unions and to analyse deeper questions about the limits and possibilities for women through unions and the nature of male resistance. My union activism reflected a socialist feminist orientation. Recent world changes and theoretical developments challenge this framework of belief and throw into question the meaning of words like 'class', 'feminism', 'progress', 'women' and activist projects 'for women'. They demand a reflection on difference. They challenge an analysis of power which relies on the twin fault lines of class and gender, and the privilege implied in socialism for issues of class over gender. Further the decline in union density throughout the Western world demands some discussion about the limits and possibilities for unions in

themselves as vehicles in defence of paid workers, let alone as a vehicle for women's liberation. Full answers to some of these questions are beyond this thesis, but the research it discusses is relevant to them. I conclude that unions remain one - amongst many - important site of feminist activism in Australia. This site cannot be privileged above others, given the dislodgment of unions from any status they might have presumed to once hold as primary or essential vehicles of emancipatory politics in Australia, and in light of their increasing incorporation (under Labor federal governments in particular) in the business of government.

In addition, this research suggests that we have focussed in the past too much upon the experience of women in our analysis of unions, and too little upon the experience and practice of men in 'their' institutions. At a practical level my own activism has confronted me with the high cost of union activism amongst women (and men), leading me to reconsider the extent and nature of men's resistance to women in these organisations and the extent to which, in holding on to their power and identities, men stand 'in the way of women' (Cockburn 1991). This cost requires - at minimum - confidence that the most effective actions are being pursued against properly diagnosed problems - and perhaps more: a weighing of costs against progress.

I have been a union activist and feminist since 1979. In that time I have been a member of unions in the banking, public sector, clerical and academic fields (four unions in total). I have held honorary positions as branch secretary (in banking), committee member (in two unions), and delegate to a Trades and Labor council, ACTU Congress, women's committees, annual union conferences and women's conferences. I have worked for three years in a full-time appointed union position at a state Trades and Labor council and for eight years I have taught unionists and those with an interest in labour studies within formal university programs.

Early in my working life, after several years working as a research officer in the Reserve Bank of Australia, I was employed by state and federal Australian governments on regional women's employment and training initiatives, and then to research women's situation in vocational education in Australia. Through this work and my union involvement, my (often unspoken) analysis of the road to improvements in women's work situation has changed. It

began with a belief in the importance of state intervention (a road which has been increasingly closed off in Australia with a fiscal crisis of governments and a retreat from state interventions in employment and training more generally). My experiences brought home to me the importance of *power* in underpinning possibilities through the state or other mechanisms. For example, my reading of equal pay struggles and the gross, gendered inequities in vocational training and skill definition in Australia, showed that reliance upon 'right' argument was never sufficient to win real change. Feminist advocates on equal pay, and on reform of our vocational education system are often right: the argument is often well researched and convincingly put. However, the institutions and power relations in Australian society frequently make *correct argument* irrelevant. Power relations in the workplace - reflected in the decisions and action of employers, the state and arbitration machinery for example - override logic on most occasions<sup>3</sup>.

This has turned my attention to union organisation as a vital ingredient within feminist politics, as a means of strengthening women's *power*. To give two examples: Australia's vocational training system, built around male unionists' definitions of skill and its training mechanisms (like apprenticeship), entrench the secondary status of feminised skills, *in reflection of women's low unionisation and the weakness of their unions*<sup>4</sup>. To argue the under-valuation of retail workers' skills without building their organisation and power in the market place, has proved (with some exceptions) as useless as arguing for better pay for nurses, without a simultaneous shortage of nurses and their union mobilisation: union organisation and labour shortages are generally the best predictors of labour market success for women - whether with respect to wages, access to work or promotion, or the construction of 'skill' or training structures.

In a second example, government programs with respect to women's employment or training can effect very little long term gain where unions are gatekeepers to key jobs and training opportunities (and where labour market conditions override most other factors).

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<sup>3</sup>There are exceptions. I have argued elsewhere for example that pay increases for clerical workers, and the partial redefinition of their skills through award restructuring in Australia, rested in significant part upon the argument of union advocates and social changes, rather more than upon industrial strength and market place power (Pocock 1995c).

<sup>4</sup>See for example Demanding Skill: Women and Technical Education in Australia (Pocock 1988) for a discussion of how this system has been built and reinforced through training arrangements in Australia.

Despite their ambivalent history for women then, unions have represented an essential instrument for influencing women's situation. But unionisation was (and is) not enough: representative women's leadership - reflecting a feminist perspective - is also essential. By this feminist perspective, I mean a one with its sights lifted higher than personal gain or wages, and set upon realising social justice goals more broadly and internationally. Evidence of the limits for women of a male-dominated labour movement lies all around us. In the clothing industry, for example, I have had the experience of working with unionists as they drafted proposed new classifications for their award: in the moment when male union leaders (with their experience in male-dominated cutting jobs in the industry) realised that it might be possible for machinists (where most of the women officials came from) to reach their classification and pay level, silence fell - soon followed by a cacophony of protest and argument: male unionists - good friends and colleagues of their female fellow union officials - were shocked at the notion that a sewing machinist, regardless of the difficulty of her work, could ever be permitted to reach the skill and pay level of a cutter. The same debates were played out amongst the unionists in the footwear industry (and many other places); in the clothing case, the women won - reflecting their strong presence and seniority amongst the gathered officials. Then they had only the employers and industrial relations tribunals to convince!

To summarise, my evolving assessment of feminist tactics has led me to unions, and especially to the necessity for women's feminist leadership of these important Australian institutions. Their links to parliamentary politics in Australia, their imprint upon arbitration machinery, and their social importance make them important organisations still, even in the face of conservative Australian governments. However, my assessment through this thesis is that they may not be for long, and that the project of increasing women's voice in a transformed union movement is an urgent one, with a narrow window of opportunity which many unionists fail to appreciate. In this light the research is actively aligned with the political goal of influencing women's, men's and union's actions now.

In the process of writing it, and working with a wide range of unionists, I have moved from a fairly unreflective stance of activism ('just get on with it'; a stance common amongst union activists and - as we shall see - especially for women, with their multiple jobs) to a

more open consideration of the worth of the project. I conclude that this form of activism is important and defensible, that real gains are possible and many women are aware of them and working towards them, but that a sterner stance is suggested by a reading of our history and the current 'crisis' of unionism in Australia. Women must more energetically assert and *take* their ownership of unionism, insisting upon the radical transformations which that ownership makes essential. Men must move over and move on from many key positions in unionism - whether at the level of workplace representation, or union secretary; they must make way and take on the work to ensure that women take their proper place.

Two other experiences are relevant to my stance in this research. Whilst undertaking it I have had two children and this has sharpened my sensitivity to many aspects of the study. For example I obsessively pursued the statistical links between activism and motherhood (to the consternation of my non-parent, male statistical adviser: it was much too weak and indirect for my taste on first reading). Secondly, I have lived the conflict between domestic and political work in a very local way, since I have been active in my own union and my partner has worked in full-time union work for much of the period. The struggle associated with the contest between public political work and personal domestic life has been lived and argued on at least two planes through most of the life of the research. Personal experience has certainly shaped my pursuit of many issues, just as it shapes all research.

#### **1.4 Thesis Structure**

This thesis falls into nine chapters. The next chapter describes the feminist framework used in the research and describes my research methods. Chapter three analyses the limits and possibilities for feminisms' projects (which need definition) in unions; it also locates the research in the current context of Australian unionism, and discusses the theoretical concepts which inform my analysis: difference, male advantage, and resistance. In chapter four I explore, through several themes, some of the ways that men in Australian unions have historically positioned women, and negatively affected their workplace and union status. I argue for a more assertive stance by women activists today in diagnosing and naming the contemporary 'othering' practices of traditional unionism and its discursive constructions.

In the next three chapters (5,6,7) I analyse the current profile of Australian union representation by gender (chapter five), the methods which unions have used to increase women's union involvement and voice (chapter six) and the nature of women's and men's activism in their unions (chapter seven). These three empirical chapters show a consistent picture of severe over-representation by men; a stumbling, erratic and mis-conceived approach to addressing that over-representation and, finally, significant gender differences in the nature, level and barriers to activism in unions.

Together the findings in these chapters mount a significant challenge to existing conceptualisation of the gender 'problem' in unions and provide some important signposts towards a reconceptualisation of these problems. I take up some of that challenge in chapter eight by taking a closer look at some of the mechanisms of male resistance and advantage, to which much greater attention could usefully be paid. The final chapter of the thesis (chapter nine) summarises my argument and suggests some areas for further research.



## Chapter 2

### En-gendering Labour Studies: Epistemology, Methodology and Research Techniques

#### 2.1 The Feminist Research Approach in this Study

Within the academic fields of industrial relations and labour studies<sup>1</sup> there are very few Australian examples which place both the struggle between employees and employers alongside or in the context of gender: that is in the context of the operation of patriarchal relations in the workplace<sup>2</sup>. Mainstream industrial relations has largely acted as if gender relations did not saturate most subjects of research and hold implications for theory, the construction of knowledge and research method. However as Briskin and McDermott note with respect to the study of Canadian unions: "gender is always significant". In making it visible we "liberate a deeper understanding of the reality of gender-specific oppression and simultaneously challenge the inherent naturalism which often organizes the societal understanding of gender dynamics" (1993b:10):

The commitment to making gender visible rests on the assumption that women have gender-specific needs, different ways of organizing, different expectations, and different priorities...making gender visible requires a reconceptualization of the analytic tools used to study union and workplace practices..gender specific analysis not only alters how we study industrial disputes involving women and assess strike

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<sup>1</sup>In which I work, research and teach, and where the study of unions is mostly undertaken. While there is a significant population of Australian industrial relations scholars, there is a much smaller group, and a weaker tradition, of academic *labour* studies in Australia. For the purposes of this analysis I define labour studies as study of the world of work and its institutions and organisations, particular from the perspective of the worker. This is different from the conventional perspective of industrial relations. There is, however, considerable overlap in terms of the area of study, which Fox et al. define for industrial relations as 'all those relationships that arise out of the employer-employee connection, and this includes relationships involving institutions as well as people' (Fox, Howard and Pittard 1995:2). Labour studies includes some of this 'relations' content, along with the study of institutions, but includes the broader areas of work, labour process and the labour market.

<sup>2</sup>There are such studies in other fields, however, such as labour history (Atkin 1991, Frances 1993) and in the field of sociology (Probert 1989, Williams 1988 and Pringle 1988a) with respect to the world of work.

tactics, but also has the potential to change how unions organize women (Briskin and McDermott 1993b:11)

Jill Rubery and Colette Fagan also make a strong argument that the field of industrial relations has largely failed to provide a gendered analysis with many implications for "the apparent 'fact' of comparative industrial relations research" and the policy implications of such research (Rubery and Fagan 1995:212). In Australia certainly we have been largely deprived in the field of industrial relations of an en-gendered analysis of unionism, of industrial gains, of struggle. The discipline's main journals in Australia (as in the US and Britain) provide relatively few points of reference on which to build an analysis of gender in industrial relations systems or events or in unions specifically. Interesting questions exist to be explored: for example, how have different employers 'used' gender? What does the balance sheet for women through unions look like? What commonalities are there in the work and experience of workplace representatives who are women, and those who are men? What has been the gendered character of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission?<sup>3</sup> What effect does the gender of Commissioners have upon the institutions and practices of industrial relations? How is industrial law gendered? What specific changes should individual unions undertake to mobilise women members? What effect has affirmative action had in unions? New methodologies also suggest themselves: research which separates out gender from job, parenting and age effects, along with workplace, industry and occupational characteristics (that is, adopting a 'job' rather than 'gender' mode of explanation as conceptualised by Feldberg and Glenn (1979)).

The fields of industrial relations and labour studies share this androcentrist and phallogocentric approach with the social sciences more broadly:

[I]n all these fields of social science...what we have had up to now is theory that purports to speak of human beings, of people - but theory that is in fact grounded in, derived from, based on and reinforcing of experience, perception and beliefs of men.

The male perspective throughout all our modern disciplines is overriding, and until

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<sup>3</sup>The AIRC has existed in one form or another for all of this century. Its functions have included the conciliation and arbitration of industrial relations at the federal level. Similar tribunals have existed at state level. These conciliation and arbitration tribunals have effectively regulated the terms and conditions of most Australian workers through the establishment of awards, and have been involved in the settlement of industrial disputes (Macintyre and Mitchell 1989).

very recently, with the beginnings of feminist scholarship, unquestioned, axiomatic (du Bois 1989:106).

Drawing upon feminist theory and the growing discussion about feminist epistemology and research methods, this study undertakes an analysis of women and men in the institution of Australian unions, focusing upon representation and activism.

In recent years some feminists have argued for the analytical separation of epistemology, research methodology and research techniques in the discussion of feminist research (Harding 1987 Maynard 1994). This separates out the epistemological "philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible... adequate and legitimate", from discussion of methodological questions ("the theory and analysis of the research process"), and the specifics of research techniques (Maynard 1994:10). I adopt this framework to describe my own research approach as it avoids collapsing different aspects of the research approach into a discussion of 'method'. In this chapter then, I first briefly outline my approaches under these three headings, then go on to explain them in detail.

To summarise, the epistemological underpinnings of this research are feminist standpoint theory. In applying a feminist standpoint, I make the categories 'women' and 'men' central to my research, and thus set aside some of the (valid) criticisms made by those working from a feminist postmodernist epistemological position. I do this in the interests of making a fully en-gendered study of aspects of institutional life in Australian unions.

Turning to research methodology, I adopt a "feminist research practice" (Kelly 1988:6), where I aim to ask questions which throw light on central feminist concerns (such as the ways in which women are oppressed and how this oppression can be challenged) and adopt a research process which puts the research results to political purpose. I have also adopted an action research methodology. This research is both closely linked to a set of political processes and to explicit feminist, political objectives. Reflecting these characteristics, the research evolved in a series of steps arising from these political processes, under my direction.

In terms of specific research methods, I use three techniques. The first two of these are written questionnaire/survey instruments (one of a group of unions about the representation of women and men in unions, and the second of a large group of women and men union

members about their activism and unionism). My third source of material is my own experience and that of women unionists I have worked with over many years, both before and during the period of this study. Feminist scholars have increasingly asserted the validity of women's experience in view of its long time exclusion from 'knowledge making' traditions in the social sciences. As Harding and Hintikka put it:

What counts as knowledge must be grounded on experience. Human experience differs according to the kinds of activities and social relations in which humans engage. Women's experience systematically differs from the male experience upon which knowledge claims have been grounded. Thus the experience on which the prevailing claims to social and natural knowledge are founded is, first of all, only partial human experience only partially understood: Namely masculine experience as understood by men (Harding and Hintikka 1983:x).

Such writers argue that the admittance of women's experience affects the "choice and definition of research problems" (Blaikie 1993:78) and this has certainly been true of my research. The use of experience has a long tradition in feminist research methodologies (Reinharz 1992:215). While not without its difficulties (whose experience? whose interpretation?<sup>4</sup>), my own experiences and the perspectives of women I have experienced unionism with, have had an important effect on my perspectives. These experiences are implicated throughout the study; they shaped the lines of inquiry, and appear explicitly on the page at various points (for example, when I discuss meetings I have attended or held with union officials and women in the process of the research). My experience makes many formal and informal appearances and informs the conclusions I draw from my empirical sources, and it especially affected my analysis of male advantage and resistance in the final chapters of the thesis.

## 2.2 Epistemological Concerns

I will deal with three main epistemological concerns: feminist standpoint theory, my choice to take both women and men as central foci of the research, and the consequences of my use of the categories 'women' and 'men'.

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<sup>4</sup>Maynard, for example, refers to the "unproblematized orthodoxy" of experiential research (1994:12).

### 2.2.1 Feminist Standpoint Theory

In this research I adopt a feminist approach which applies a variety of specific research tools within a model of action research. I make use of the epistemological tool of feminist standpoint theory. This theory defines knowledge as socially situated by building upon Marx's view that "human activity, or 'material life,' not only structures but sets limits on human understanding: what we do shapes and constrains what we can know" (Harding 1991:120); that in a society where men dominate women, women's view will be obscured in many of the processes of "knowledge production":

A feminist standpoint allows us to understand patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more humane social relations (Hartsock 1983:284).

Hartsock defines the feminist standpoint as not only an interested position, but one which is engaged. It is one which inverts the traditional relations of domination which underwrite 'knowledge production', and takes as its perspective that of the dominated sex group, who - as 'strangers' to the social order - offer uniquely critical perspectives to its understanding. As a method it aims to go beyond the 'surface' phenomenon and dominant ideologies to expose these as partial and oppressive. Such a feminist standpoint "carries a liberatory potential" which lies in its capacity for a "much more profound critique of phallogocentric ideologies and institutions than has yet been achieved" (Hartsock 1983:288-9).

Feminist standpoint theory makes women, men and their difference a specific subject of study, to pull into view "a missing portion of the human lives that human knowledge is supposed to be both grounded in and about" (Harding 1991:122). Feminist standpoint theory thus makes a strong critique of traditional scientific and social science epistemology and its claims of objectivity (Harding 1991). The notion of an objective, theoretical base to knowledge is contradicted by standpoint theory. Feminist standpoints lay bare the reality of studying from a point of view.

Of course this 'positioning' leads some social scientists to make the criticism that much feminist research is more 'politics' than 'research'<sup>5</sup>; Blaikie, for example says that the outcome of feminist research is a "political view of the truth" (Blaikie 1993:215). However,

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<sup>5</sup>And for many feminists this dual function is both possible and welcome (Maynard 1994).

this approach exposes the unnamed white, male, academic standpoint of much industrial relations research in Australia and - as we shall see - the research questions which are consequently never asked, or the methods used which give partial or simply wrong results. In Donna Haraway's words, "Only the god trick is forbidden" in favour of "the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway 1988:589). Her argument in favour of openly 'situated knowledge' is one I apply here, whilst also recognising the ways in which this study of 'women' and 'men' is an incomplete and partial one. Nonetheless it is an analysis which places weight on fully incorporating women alongside men and in the process of making it, I clearly situate myself as an engaged actor with a specific engaged standpoint, as I outline below.

The postmodern critique of standpoint theory argues that a great variety of (sometimes conflicting) feminist standpoints exist (Harding 1991, Maynard 1994). Feminist standpoint theory might have stronger claims to objectivity than more positivist methods but it cannot claim for itself the discovery of 'the truth', only perhaps make a claim for findings which are 'more true' than those established using methods which make a pretence at scientific objectivity, while clearly partial with respect to gender and many other aspects of social relations. I adopt a feminist standpoint in this work, which while it does not allow me to make a claim for presenting 'the truth' about the mechanics of gender relations in unions, can claim to be *closer* to the truth than some pre-existing studies and the prevailing masculine discourse where the perspectives of women simply make little or no appearance. Their partialities and perversities are certainly greater than those which afflict my research, I would claim.

### 2.2.2 My Interested, Engaged Standpoint

In terms of my personal standpoint, I research from the point of view of an active, feminist unionist - an English speaking, white woman with children<sup>6</sup>. As a woman union activist I

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<sup>6</sup>This last has proved more significant in the research than I would have guessed: the lived reality of conflict between activism and motherhood has sharpened my pursuit of the challenges it poses to union involvement, and at a quite practical level, led me to frame survey questions in different ways than I would have before my knowledge of mothering, child care, and exhaustion accelerated dramatically from 1990.

bring to the research a perspective of *identity with* women unionists and activists: one of the principle 'othered' categories in union life, *along with* a perspective which sees, or has seen, unions as a potentially significant emancipatory vehicle for working people. This personal standpoint has been, at once, a strength and a weakness in this work.

On the positive side, with respect to the mechanics of the research process, my extensive, mostly positive, prior relationships with a number of union officials and activists gave me relatively easy access and a degree of trust with a variety of women activists and male officials<sup>7</sup>. Working relationships were usually easily established; guarantees of confidentiality were never queried, for example, and a high level of participation was possible in the survey of all unions. I was able to meet with officials and activists without difficulty, both in organising the research and in discussing the results with unionists.

Being known and close to unions was also a disadvantage in several ways. Firstly, at least one large union, the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Union (SDA), refused to participate in the research and this may have been partly in response to my personal involvement<sup>8</sup>, though the union was also simultaneously in dispute with the peak council, which assisted with the survey of unions. The absence of this union was a significant weakness in light of the union's size and its feminisation.

Being close to the union movement also means that my method and analysis are infected (in an almost incalculable way) by those relationships. It is probable that the method of the research was constrained by an unconscious, self-censoring perception about what was possible. For example, in simple practical terms I was aware that most unions will not put sizeable resources into research, especially research with a particular focus on women; this made me cautious in the design of the research, tailoring methods to minimise the costs in

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<sup>7</sup>I had worked with many of these over some years, first as a full-time appointed union official at the United Trades and Labor Council of South Australia (UTLC) where I worked principally upon projects related to workplace organisation and democracy, workers' rights, union education, and union organisation in the workplace. In more recent years, my contact with union officials was continued through work in my own union, my membership of the Women's Standing Committee of the UTLC, the Left Women's Caucus, and occasional attendance at union meetings at the UTLC. As a lecturer in Labour Studies at the University of Adelaide I also have had contact with many officials, workplace representatives and unions as part of my teaching work.

<sup>8</sup>I am in fact guessing about the reason for this refusal, based on a subsequent experience where the SDA refused to work with me on an ACTU project because of their belief that I had interfered in a union election. This allegation was never substantiated.

time and money for unions (for example, keeping both survey forms as short as possible). While information about the extent and outcomes of union initiatives for women would have strengthened the research, my perception about the difficulties of obtaining more complex information from unions, stopped me from pursuing it.

In other ways that I might find difficult to name, these perceptions no doubt conditioned my perspective, and perhaps particularly the ways in which I analysed outcomes in reports to unions (these impulses are likely to be much weaker in this thesis and in material I prepared for general publication). Impulses to 'protect' unions, to avoid causing unnecessary anger, may have been at work. For example, before discussing one union's results with a hostile official I took care to find out what he had found so obviously irritating about the results and structured my presentation to maximise positive outcomes for women in 'his' union (this involved acknowledging what the union had done in relation to women in the past, before pointing to the challenges that remained<sup>9</sup>). In these ways, the politics of union life no doubt impinged in some, immeasurable ways upon the shape of the research.

A more subtle influence may also have been at work. Years of working with male and female officials left me a great awareness of the difficulties of union life, the unmeetable demands on union resources - especially upon people - and the larger public pressures upon unions in the face of international anti-union pressures and declining union density at home. My awareness of the imbalance of class forces, my sympathy for the role of unions in combating this imbalance, and my affection for many unionists<sup>10</sup>, gives me great sympathy for committed, effective unionists - to the point where I have no doubt overlooked serious sexism on occasion, or forgiven it in the shadow of this class struggle. These affections and politics no doubt cloud my sight at times. Kim Fellner gives some insights about her own experience of this:

After eighteen years as a union staff person, I am in the process of sifting through my own experience for lessons and guideposts...I think especially of my "home union,"

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<sup>9</sup>In another example, I thought carefully about how to present the results about women's severe under-representation to the UTLC executive: the goal was to be forceful in order to influence their actions but stop short of provoking anger and resistance and to avoid giving them cause to position me as irrelevant academic or hostile critic/stranger. The reality of these resistances and the attention I paid to them is interesting evidence in itself of resistance and my response to it.

<sup>10</sup>The fact that I live with a union organiser is also be relevant here.



SEIU, where I was mentored by a one-of-a-kind organizing director, John Geagan. He was a maniac, loud and lewd. But he lived to organize, and he loved those of us who loved the labor movement...He harassed and leered ceaselessly, he'd suddenly be lying on the carpet gazing up your dress - but I forgive him everything and laugh when I think of him. Because beneath that exasperating, sexist nonsense was a man who helped dozens of women move up the union hierarchy - and I have yet to meet the woman who took his blandishments seriously (although many understandably took offence) (Fellner 1993:400).

Fellner loves the loud lewd Geagan past his sexism in light of his union politics<sup>11</sup>. This sense of how my own perspective has been, and is, conditioned by my lengthy involvement in unions led me to stand back and reconsider or reweigh my standpoint with respect to unions. This reweighing is reflected in chapter four where I consider some of the historical evidence about women in Australian unions, through the prism of several themes, as a kind of feminist inoculation against the possibly corrupting effects of my own past affections, relationships and inhabitation of the house of labour.

This process led to a re-anchoring of my standpoint, and a reassessment of the possibilities for women in unions. It took me to a sharper view of unions, given women's historical fortunes within them, and made my stance in considering the results of the survey research more critical. I conclude that feminist unionists cannot allow a forgiving affection for our union brothers and 'the cause' to cloud a clear understanding of their failures and blindness with respect to women and union reform, so that they can maintain the comforts they find in making the labour movement masculine. Methodologically, reconsidering the burden of much of the historical material about women working in unions clarified my views and helped clear my critical faculties. As Barbara du Bois describes it, such research "rooted in, animated by and expressive of our values, empowered by community is passionate scholarship: necessary heresy." (du Bois 1989:112).

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<sup>11</sup>Fellner's own critique of the union movement, its 'wastage' of organisers and its lack of understanding about women's lives, is sharp and perceptive despite these affections (Fellner 1993, 1989).

### 2.2.3 Studying 'Women' 'Men' and 'Gender'

Kim Fellner has written that "union women inhabit the territory where the culture of the labor movement and the women's movement collide" (Fellner 1993:394). The formal study of unionism from a feminist perspective lies in similar 'unsettled regions' within academia. The territory common to the fields of feminist and industrial relations research is both unsettled and small: rarely do those studying industrial relations make gender, women or - overtly - men, objects or categories in their research. In contrast, feminist scholarship has been diligently unbraiding the complexity of the category 'women', the differences it conceals, and the uses to which it is put, for much of the past decade. For feminist scholars 'women' has become a central (and problematic) category, while in the formal study of industrial relations and labour the category is still relatively rarely invoked (except by a few mostly women researchers) and its use generally remains the activity of fringe-dwellers whose work is published as 'challenges' or in token chapters on 'women' in textbooks where the fabric of analysis is otherwise undisturbed by reference to 'women', let alone 'men'<sup>12</sup>.

Many researchers in the fields of industrial relations and labour studies have yet to - if not discover the terms women and gender - make very much practical use of them in their research methods (as Lake 1986c, Forrest 1993, Rubery and Fagan 1995 argue). On the other hand recent feminist theory has problematised the use of the category 'women'<sup>13</sup> for a number of important reasons (which make it necessary for me to discuss below the ways in which I use the term and who it represents, excludes or subsumes). The contrast between the two fields of study is extreme. I adopt a research approach here which keeps both women and men in view and, in making an argument for the 'en-gendering' of labour studies and industrial relations, offer an example of how that task can be undertaken with

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<sup>12</sup>See for example Terry Irving (Ed.) (1994) Challenges to Labour History which provides stimulating contributions opening the discipline of labour history to the challenges of 'women' and other categories 'othered' by mainstream discourse. A recent industrial relations textbook example of the irrelevance of the category 'women' is provided in Fox et al. 1995, where women are discussed almost exclusively within a single chapter under the headings 'Workplace equity: discrimination and equal opportunity' and 'Industrial awards, agreements and equity'. Deery and Plowman's 1991 treatment is very similar.

<sup>13</sup>At the same time the category 'men' has been problematised, as has the distinction between biologically defined sexes and socially constructed genders (Collinson and Hearn 1994:7).

useful results for policy makers in organisations like unions, along with the academic study of industrial relations and labour studies.

A first impulse in the face of women's absence from industrial relations or labour studies research is often to make women an object of study<sup>14</sup>; this was a significant impulse in feminist research in the 1980s. However, in institutions where masculine discourses are dominant, such an approach does not reveal important aspects of organisational life which cannot be revealed through the study of women, but only by comparative study of men and women, or explicit study of men in particular. Examination of the category 'women' without the parallel study of the category 'men' can lead to an incomplete - indeed unbalanced and perhaps misleading - analysis: 'women' are present in such research, while men are usually there but rarely named. They are 'citizens', 'unionists', 'workers', for example: usually men, but not named as men. They are the unrecognised 'norm', hovering over every aspect of study and institutional life. For example Griffin and Benson's 1982 Australian study of women in one union examines only women, without any comparative data about men: in such a study women are marked out as the unusual, the different, of interest because of their sex, while no mention is made of the male norms against which they are considered (Griffin and Benson 1989).

Such research can have two particular consequences: firstly, it may miss important clues to institutional life and, secondly, it can lead to an analysis which takes a view 'looking up' from the bottom. To take the second of these consequences first, an analysis from the bottom impedes the development of a full analysis of power and its imbalances; it allows us only a limited (though previously missing) view. As Peta Tancred-Sherriff and E. Jane Campbell put it:

The analysis of power relations by women writers takes the structure of power as a given. Thus, instead of concentrating on power holders and wielders, women are led to focus on powerless groups. This *orientation toward the situation of the oppressed* tends to produce an emphasis on examining the qualitative ways in which those without power experience and deal with their oppression. The vantage point from

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<sup>14</sup> In some of these cases the study of women is called the study of 'gender': the terms are conflated, as if pulling women into the picture signals that gender has therefore been dealt with, while in fact little is being said about the operation of masculinity. Such research often leaves 'men as men' out of view.

which women have explored questions of power is congruent with their own situation as a subordinate social group...It is therefore not improbable that this implicit understanding of the "view from the bottom" has *conditioned the approach taken by women to analyses of power processes within the organizational context*. (1992:40, my emphasis).

Not least of the consequences of the 'bottom up' vantage point are the failure to analyse the fabric of male behaviour and the resistance which men make to women.

The second consequence - that of leaving out an analysis of masculinity - has meant that masculinity and its practices remain hidden but powerful. Men are not named as men:

The categories of men and masculinity are frequently central to analyses, yet they remain taken for granted, hidden and unexamined. Men are both talked about and ignored, rendered simultaneously explicit and implicit. They are frequently at the centre of discourse but they are rarely the focus of interrogation (Collinson and Hearn 1994:3).

In the field of industrial relations, unions are a good example of this phenomenon: men are at the centre of its discourse, but rarely form the "focus of interrogation"<sup>15</sup>. Anne Forrest argues that the discipline of industrial relations (which she defines to include labour studies and labour history) and its scholars, have been largely disinterested in the experiences of women. Women's activism has "slipped through the fissures" in industrial-relations thinking (Forrest 1993:326). Instead 'workers' have been men, without qualification or explanation, while women are *always and only* women. Their situation is often *explained* by their gender alone; in contrast, scholars do not usually attempt to explain men's union activity by reference to 'male' characteristics (for example, their aggressive 'natures'). As a consequence researchers have paid inadequate attention to male power and privilege:

none of the commonplace practices adopted by unions which entrench male privilege has attracted critical interest: the point of view adopted by industrial relations scholars has been thoroughly male (Forrest 1993:336).

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<sup>15</sup>Some important exceptions exist, including Cockburn (1991) in the United Kingdom and Lake (1986 b,c) and Atkin (1991) in Australia.

In this literature, women appear on the research page, more often than not as women ('women-as-women'), while 'workers-as-men' are rarely recognised though they are often embedded in the text in these guises<sup>16</sup>. While the presence of 'women' means that at least one side of 'gender relations' is not ignored, explanations of phenomena with respect to these women workers are saturated with their femaleness ('women are less likely to join unions', 'women are anti-union'). In this way 'women' as a category of analysis has placed over-emphasis on the issue of women-as-women, and problematised that sex, while workers who are men are rarely spoken of with respect to their sex: masculinity is not in view (Forrest 1993). Feldberg and Glenn reach a similar conclusion with their analysis of 'job versus gender' models of work: job-related characteristics (the 'job' model) are the primary site of analysis with respect to men in the world of work, while women's personal characteristics and their family situations (the 'gender' model) are to the forefront of analysis for women (1979).

Marilyn Lake has made a critique of Australian labour history on these grounds: "historians have been slow to recognise 'manhood', 'manliness' and 'masculinity' as social constructions requiring historical investigation and elucidation. This is all the more remarkable in Australia as for men in this country their 'manhood' has so often seemed their chief source of pride and identity." (Lake 1986c:116). Lake argues that gender should be "a central category of all historical analysis" (Lake 1986c:116).

Turning to industrial relations, Anne Forrest makes parallel points: that industrial relations literature offers few systemic analyses of the costs of male unionism for women workers since the discipline has generally failed to conceptualise gender as a power hierarchy and to make men a subject of study. More specifically, as in other parts of the social sciences, *masculinities* are not examined and other critical aspects of feminist analysis are also often ignored: for example the relationship between the worlds of paid and unpaid work. Collinson and Hearn illustrate this with respect to the issue of leadership where men and

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<sup>16</sup>There is, however, a growing literature about women, gender and unions (much of it outside the field of industrial relations) and many contributions by women in the field of industrial relations about wages and gender, while some labour historians have mounted a sustained challenge to the masculine traditions of labour history (see for example Frances 1993 and Irving 1994) and labour studies (where there are many examples in the US, see for example the work of Alice Kessler-Harris and Ruth Milkman).

masculinity are conflated with "management and authority" (1994:4). The dominant discourse therefore excludes women and fails to problematise men and masculinity in relation to leadership (Collinson and Hearn 1994:3).

To avoid this it is necessary to establish some symmetry in the institutional analysis of gender: to make the categories of both 'women' and 'men' sites of analysis: to explore what being male means in certain contexts and situations, what being a mixed sex group might mean and what the implications of being a group of women are. *Gender* categories become relevant rather than the category 'woman'. Gender relations take their place on the stage, suggesting significant new questions for study<sup>17</sup>. The establishment of the category 'women' unless accompanied by the establishment and research of the category 'men' puts the spotlight on 'women' (and invariably their 'disadvantage', their 'deficits', their 'difference') without putting any spotlight on 'men'. Or as Daphne Patai puts it "men's gender is simply not attended to, it obeys a rule of irrelevance" (Patai 1983:187). As long as men's gender is irrelevant, women's is over-attended to, and as we see in subsequent chapters, concepts like male advantage and resistance to women remain out of view and unchallenged.

#### **2.2.4 Talking about 'Women' (and 'Men'), Subsuming Difference**

In undertaking feminist standpoint approach in this research I take 'women' *who are members or potential members of unions* as a principle category of focus, while keeping the category of similar 'men' in view at the same time. The use of these categories to keep gender differences in central focus means, however, that many aspects of specific women's (and men's) experiences are subsumed: most especially those affecting Aboriginal women and women from a non-English speaking background, along with difference associated with sexual preference or disability.

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<sup>17</sup>For example, Lake suggests that, in missing the study of men, Australian historians "obscured one of the greatest political struggles in Australian history: the contest between men and women at the end of the nineteenth century for the control of the national culture." (1986c:2).

The difficulties that feminist theory poses for this use of the category 'women' are profound and have long been a source of suspicion to women<sup>18</sup>. I will canvass four. Firstly, the category 'women' is suggestive of essentialist constructions of 'women' as biologically determined, a suggestion which most feminists forcefully reject (Caine 1995:2). Secondly, the category is historically constructed and cannot be used without reference to that constructed meaning:

'women' is historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; 'women' is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of 'women' isn't to be relied upon (Riley 1988:1).

Denise Riley goes on to explore the uses and misuses of the category 'woman'; she argues that the category is simultaneously a foundation and an irritant to feminism: "the trade-off for the myriad namings of 'women' by politics, sociologies, politics and psychologies is that at this cost 'women' do, sometimes, become a force to be recognised with" (Riley 1988:17). In becoming a subject 'women' risk subjugation, but also the potential of resistance to that subjugation; this means that feminism must contest the uses of the category 'women', critiquing its noxious uses in some circumstances, and manipulating it for gain in others. Nancy Cott has, in similar vein, written of the paradoxes of feminism and its uses of the category 'woman' (Cott 1986:49).

Thirdly the use of the category 'woman' collapses all the differences which lie between women. Clearly, 'women' includes a population of people who, while they might share some characteristics, are diverse with respect to many others. For many, other categories are more significant (their ethnicity, country of origin, Aboriginality, class, sexuality, reproductive status, and so on) and place them in conflict with one another. Multiple 'women' exist. Not least amongst these are the complexities of class: as Cockburn puts it, women are not "by virtue of being oppressed, innocent of the oppression of others" (1992:207). The use of the category 'women' does violence to all of these differences and is

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<sup>18</sup>For example in 1934 Winifred Holtby exclaimed: "Today, whenever women hear political leaders call their sex important, they grow suspicious. In the importance of the sex too often has laid the unimportance of the citizen, the workers and the human being." (Winifred Holtby *The Clarion*, 24 March 1934, quoted in Riley 1988:63).

indicative of the hegemony of white, middle class, Western women who are the keepers of second wave feminism: its 'custodians', in Anna Yeatman's word (1993:238).

Fourthly, Carol Bacchi warns us about the manipulation of categories through examples in her study of 'category politics' and affirmative action (Bacchi forthcoming). Bacchi argues that the category 'women' is in constant operation as a *political* category and the tasks of feminism are to deconstruct the political uses to which the category is put (now against the goals of feminists, now in their service). Bacchi thus liberates the meaning of the category 'women' from a charge of false universalising and essentialism in seeing it as a category which has a changing *political* meaning and life. If the uses/meanings of 'women' are political, then they are not essential, nor universalising, but always changing and often different.

Bacchi goes on to illustrate through her study of affirmative action, how the category 'women' has been used to advance and retard women's cause in different national settings, and draws the conclusion that the category has been marshalled with little political clout, is used at times to force a competition between 'outgroups' and to direct attention away from women, and from the differences between women. Further, while its use can bring success for women, there is a need for a constant deconstruction of the use to which it is put. She argues for more specific study of the uses of the category 'women' to enrich our understanding of how the category is used against us, and how it can be mobilised in women's interests. I return to a discussion of 'category politics' in unions in chapter eight, arguing that Australian unions provide a clear example of such politics in action.

This study uses the category 'woman' with the objective of analysing and exposing the ways in which women are negatively positioned within the discourses of traditional unionism. This exposure is undertaken to clarify feminists' objectives (which are certainly plural) in these institutions and to more clearly assess their potential for women. In my use of the category 'women' I do not imply any essential biological or innate characteristics to 'women' but use it, following Pateman, to "draw out the way in which the meaning of 'men' and 'women' has helped structure major social institutions" (1988:17). This study is one of many potential studies meeting Eveline's request for more empirical work which detail men's advantage (Eveline 1994a:41).



The categories 'women' (and 'men') are essential to this work; they are categories which have a life in the language and action of unions, sometimes used by women in work to improve women's position, often used by men to separate women within a discourse of 'women member' as weaker, less reliable, requiring protection, within a larger discourse of 'woman worker' and 'woman'. An understanding of these constructions is part of my project here. In unions, just as Bacchi argues in her study of affirmative action " 'women' already operates as a key political signifier. Hence feminists have little option but to engage in contests over its signification" (Bacchi forthcoming:15).

However, a failure to differentiate within 'women' does symbolic violence to many groups of women: it ignores the specifics of their experience and the ways in which, very likely, their interests are at times in opposition to those of other women, particularly Australian-born, English speaking women and women who are not Aboriginal. This point is well made with respect to the experiences of 'women' in some Canadian unions where some Black unionists see the newly won power of white feminist unionists being used to crowd black unionists out of position. Ronnie Leah quotes unionist June Veacock:

women who have struggled with women's issues seem to think that if we start addressing racism in a serious way, then we will be moving away from the traditional women's issues, that this will dilute or overshadow the struggle for women...Black women are recognizing that we have a struggle within the women's movement (Leah 1993:168)

Leah goes on to quote another Canadian unionist, Yvonne Bobb:

White women "should know, because they have been victimized..[Yet] they are doing exactly the same thing to Black women." (Leah 1993: 169).

These women suggest that white women examine their own exclusionary practices and racism. Their experiences suggest that differences, along the lines of 'race' and colour amongst feminist activists in unions are real, and must be considered. They fracture the notion of any simple, unified, feminist objective in unionism. Cockburn makes similar arguments with respect to differently-abled women and the equal opportunities and feminist agendas in England (1991), while Suzanne Franzway and Margaret Hallock point out that recognition of sexual difference and of homophobia are very important areas of struggle

between women in unions in Australia and the US (Franzway 1997 forthcoming, Hallock 1997 forthcoming). These differences are significant and important.

There is no doubt that the use of large categories of 'women' and 'men' collapses many differences, making my study - at best - a partial one: it is not a study of all women. It is confined to the study of women who work for a wage and are now, or potentially, members of unions. In this way, it is principally a study of waged women who might once have been referred to as 'working class women'. Such a category continues to conceal great diversity, however, including as it does women with lifetime tenure in highly paid, flexible jobs alongside women who are casual, part-time and poorly paid; women who are bosses over large numbers of other women and women who are tightly controlled by others. Just as the traditional male discourse of unionism has 'othered' women and directly and indirectly constructed male advantage out of women's disadvantage, the use of the undifferentiated category 'women' conceals the specific experiences of many.

Some of the differences within this sub-group of waged women are explored in some detail in what follows (for example, age, industry and occupation, parental status, income, size of workplace). Significant others (for example Aboriginality and ethnicity) are not specifically studied and this represents an important limitation.

A considerable body of Australian research has shown that the experiences of union members who were born outside Australia, or are children of those born outside Australia, or who speak languages other than English, are different from those of English speaking unionists of Anglo descent (Quinlan 1983, Nicolaou 1991) and women in this group have specifically different experiences (Gale 1990, 1993, Bertone and Griffin 1992). Aboriginal women also have, along with Aboriginal men, quite specific experiences of unionism that are not studied here (McMurchy 1983; Frances, Scates and McGrath 1994).

My use of the category 'women' is not to deny very significant differences between the women included in the study and differences in the ways they view their worlds, nor to imply that their primary identity is as 'women'. Indeed, part of my purpose is to demonstrate that by viewing union members as 'women' first, unionists and workers second, or a long way behind - even out of the picture - those who inhabit union structures mistake the 'gender' problem for unions as a 'women's' problem.

### 2.3 Research Methodology

The research process I have adopted is one of action research: that is research "in which action and evaluation proceed simultaneously" (Reinharz 1992:180). The research activities took shape in a process which actively involved a number of women activists, unions and the peak council of those unions. It both *caused* events, and *responded* to them. And I, as researcher and activist, have both observed, and been an actor, in these events.

The research began with the collection of data about women's and men's representation in unions in one Australian state, based on a belief that by revealing the gross over-representation of men, unions would be motivated to act. This part of the project also collected information about union action to increase women's participation, reflecting a view that through a comparative analysis of the incidence of these actions and, hopefully, a demonstration of their effectiveness, unions would be motivated to act. The results of this work showed many things, but most importantly suggested that women are unlikely to wield power in unions unless their share of workplace activism increases: men dominated the workplace level of union representation almost everywhere and as the main conduit to union influence, this presents a real barrier to women's presence in unions. As long as male power holders in unions can point to women's under-representation at the first 'apprenticeship' level of union representation, they can hide behind it in explaining their hold on union power. So the next stage in the research involved a large study of union activism in unions, with a focus on the barriers to activism, women and men's views of these barriers, and their remedies, and a comparative study of women's and men's activism. This study reveals the male norms which underpin conventional union organisation, their failure to meet women's needs and their positioning of women as 'the problem'.

The sequential steps of the research represent the unfolding of a series of research questions, and its design reflects my view that improvements in women's voice in unions will contribute to improvements in women's lives - not just in the lives of those women in paid work, but possibly the lives of many Australian women - since unions are *capable* of bringing about significant change to benefit women (though they do not always exercise this capacity).

My purpose in this research was to *cause change of benefit to women*. For me this meant adopting a method with a good chance of *convincing* men who make most decisions in unions, working closely with women activists in unions, and with union officials; reporting to them on the outcomes; publishing the results in several ways to reach union officials, activists and academics<sup>19</sup>; and attending a great number of union meetings and conferences to discuss the outcomes, along with using the results to empower women through a more developed sense of their dis-empowerment, by revealing details of effective strategies, and by fostering their legitimate sense of outrage as a stimulus to action.

#### 2.4 Research Methods or Techniques

I collected a range of empirical data in the process of this research: three sets of data were gathered through written survey questionnaires. The first shows the representation of women and men throughout all representative union structures in South Australian unions; the second sets out the actions taken by unions on behalf of women in the state, while the third relates to the activism of women and men union members in their unions, and their perceived barriers to that activism.

These three sets of data were collected through two written surveys: one of unions in South Australia which I have called *the Survey of Gender Representation in South Australian unions* (which collected data on the representation of women and men and information about union actions for women), and the other of union members in six unions or union divisions which I have called *the Survey of Activism Amongst Union Members* (which collected data about union activism).

The research also draws on two other sources. Firstly I make use of a considerable literature about women, men and unions in a range of countries and, where appropriate, I consider my results in relation to this literature. A review of some of this literature forms part of the ground for a re-anchoring of my perspective about women's fortunes within Australian unions in chapter four. Secondly, as discussed above I draw upon my own experience as an activist in unions, and that of many women I worked with while undertaking this research.

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<sup>19</sup>Results and analysis of the two sets of survey results have been published for union activists (Pocock 1992, 1994) and in academic journals (Pocock 1995a,b).

Before turning to a discussion of the mechanics of these methods, in particular those of the surveys, there are a number of feminist and other criticisms of survey methods which must be addressed.

#### **2.4.1 Empirical Research: Feminist and Other Challenges**

A variety of criticisms of empirical studies exist. Some of these focus on technical problems such as the use of limiting questions, inappropriate samples or unrepresentative responses, and misleading or over-ambitious interpretations of results. Larger philosophical difficulties also exist: surveys do not establish causal relationships, do not always distinguish meaningful aspects of behaviours, do not take account of context, can be deterministic, rigid and uncreative, are empiricist, and cannot measure some things (D. A de Vaus 1991). Several significant feminist criticisms are also made, although a diversity of feminist views exists (Reinharz 1992). Feminist concerns about surveys include their tendency to privilege 'hard facts' in a reflection of patriarchal culture, to give different results depending on the phrasing of questions, to conceal gender effects, to be analysed or used selectively, and to encourage a tendency to oversimplify complex issues. Questionnaires may:

produce a falsely concrete body of data, which distort rather than reflect actors' meanings. Similarly, feminists have argued that the production of atomistic 'facts' and figures fractures people's lives...Further, research practices which utilize either pre-coded or pre-closed categories are often of limited use when trying to understand women's lives (Maynard 1994:11).

A further criticism is also made: that empirical methods like surveys rarely expose the apparatus of the paradigms within which they are conducted:

[existing empirical research methods and norms] have been constructed primarily to produce answers to the kinds of questions an androcentric society has about nature and social life and to prevent scrutiny of the way beliefs that are nearly or completely culture wide in fact cannot be eliminated from the results of research by these norms. (Harding 1991:116).

In light of these criticisms, feminist researchers have turned to qualitative methods, which have "gradually developed into something of an unproblematized orthodoxy" (Maynard

1994:12), falsely attributing the worst features of positivism to all quantitative methods. It is quite possible, however, to adopt quantitative methods while acknowledging that their use involves as much of an "act of social construction as any other kind of research" as Maynard points out (1994:13). Quantitative research which acknowledges the social aspects of its construction, making no claim for a fictional objectivity independent of the location of the researcher, can be a powerful tool of feminist research.

My research suffers from some of the limitations canvassed above. The survey method does not allow a discussion of the qualitative aspects of significant issues. For example, the survey of South Australian unions does not permit analysis of the effectiveness of different types of union actions for women. Such analysis would have permitted a much richer discussion of union action and been of use to policy makers. However, information about efficacy could not have been usefully collected using the survey instrument. A qualitative study of different approaches and initiatives, through work with participants, would be of much greater use here.

The survey of union members also suffered several limitations. Firstly, it is biased in favour of those whose first language is English and those with good literacy; the return rates were lower in sections of union membership where literacy is probably lower. Secondly, the structure of the survey of members severely limited the response that members could make. Respondents could choose from a limited range of 33 options in the case of 'barriers to union activism', and to a much smaller set of options for many other questions.

The range of available responses reflected the findings of previous studies and my personal perceptions of issues, along with those of activists and union officials who were involved in modifying the survey design. This imposed a significant limitation on the study, and to a certain extent replicated existing conceptions of issues and the remedies available. For example, only fairly traditional actions to increase women's involvement in their unions were canvassed in the survey. A more creative menu of possibilities, or an open-ended question in an interview or group situation, would be much more revealing.

Limited space for open-ended responses on eight questions went some way to alleviating this problem, but the nature of discussion about barriers to activism, to give another example, would be greatly enriched by the use of other methods like the analysis of the

transcripts of interviews with women and men members and the use of focus groups where a discussion was possible. Respondents are notoriously reluctant to write at length on open ended questions which are part of a lengthy written, postal questionnaire.

My decision to use survey methods partly reflected my desire (or standpoint) of wishing to positively influence the actions of men and women in unions. I believed that showing the under-representation of women in union structures, and their severely curtailed power in unions, might drive some change. At the very least, it would provide a base point from which further progress - or the lack of it - could be measured. This led to the survey of gender representation in unions.

I also believed that it was possible that unions wrongly theorise the barriers to women's activism in unions, and that testing these theories was useful. The decision to test these implicit theories, about 'female deficit' as against the other possibility of 'union deficit', reflects my feminist standpoint which underlies the research structure. In pursuing this question, I am attempting to meet a criticism of empirical methods as unable to reveal "the cultural filters through which we observe the world around and within us and how [society] institutionalises those filters in ways that leave them invisible to individuals" (Harding 1991: 117). The survey of members was designed to test the reality of one small part of such a cultural filter: that which defines women as being a 'poor fit' in the institutions of public life, while men and their actions are left unproblematic.

The survey method offers a tool which union officials and activists are, I believed, most likely to find convincing, in terms with which they were familiar. Survey research is perhaps one of the research techniques most understood by union officials and activists. In some ways it resembles a union election (where numbers also count), and it is relatively easy to explain to a broad range of audiences. I had access to a wide range of forums to make the numbers - however they emerged - do some political 'work'.

In terms of academic research, the survey method provided an opportunity to test the results of previous work in the field of industrial relations, against a more fully gendered model. Once again, this research method was likely to be convincing to these readers. Survey methods are frequently deployed in this discipline and might therefore be expected to carry weight: Sandra Harding includes in the virtues of feminist empirical methods their

"great strength [in entering and using] widely respected languages and conceptual schemes" (Harding 1991:113). She goes on to point out that

a persuasive argument is definitely the best kind to have! The point of a theory of knowledge is not that it be correct by some unfamiliar standard that most people don't accept but that it be persuasive to reasonable, thoughtful and informed listeners. When conventional natural scientists, social scientists, and philosophers of science are the audience, feminist empiricism frequently is the justificatory strategy that best meets this criterion (Harding 1991:113)

Maynard also points out that "the *political* potential of [quantitative research] must not be underestimated" (1994:13, her emphasis). The probability that this technique would be widely understood in the union movement and carry a strong potential to convince, as I have said above, influenced my decision to adopt this method<sup>20</sup> (quite apart from the fact that, with respect to establishing the representational profile of union officials by sex, such a survey is the only sensible method to use).

Despite the many limitations of survey methodologies, the two surveys have considerable strengths. I have attempted to minimise their limitations by explicitly deploying them from a feminist standpoint, and using them to reflect upon serious gaps and patriarchal perspectives in existing research (which leave women out completely) or to test - and overturn - a range of implicit and explicit assumptions and theories about women and men and their activism in Australian unions.

I agree with Maynard when she says that "the polarization of quantitative versus qualitative [methods] impoverishes research" and concur with the shift to the use of multiple methods and away from a tendency to privilege qualitative methods while viewing quantitative methods as necessarily 'masculinist' (Maynard 1994:14). The key issue for feminist research methods remains for me, the nature of the questions asked, the political purpose to which they are put, and the adequacy of the light they cast on the nature of women's and men's experiences. Competently applied quantitative methods have a useful place amongst the range of feminist research methods, and in this light I make considerable

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<sup>20</sup>As it turns out my implicit belief that new 'facts' would have political effects and change behaviour and beliefs (that is, my 'theory of knowledge/power' (Flax 1992)) has been tested. In retrospect I perhaps over-estimated it as a strategy for feminist change.



use of them alongside my own experience and that of the women and men amongst whom I researched.

#### 2.4.2 Technical Aspects of the Surveys

##### *Phase 1: The Survey of South Australian Unions*

This first phase of the research began with the collection of data about the representation of women and men in South Australian unions affiliated to the United Trades and Labor Council of South Australia (UTLC)<sup>21</sup>. The purpose of this collection was multiple: for the UTLC, it was to build a starting point against which progress for women could be measured and to describe the current situation. For me, it was to do both of these things and to discover whether women were making a genuine in-road onto male terrain in union leadership, and to investigate the nature of that incursion: not only to find out how women and men were distributed in union leadership, but to ask whether the rate of change was slower or faster than elsewhere in the world, whether the growing female presence was token or represented a genuinely greater voice for women in unions, whether a greater role for women was confined to a few unions, or positions, and so on. The results of this analysis appear in chapter five.

The survey also included questions about what unions had done to increase women's involvement in unions. It seems that unions have historically taken a variety of measures to increase women's involvement, but their incidence, efficacy, nature and underlying theories about the barriers to women's involvement have never been systematically evaluated. The survey's collection of data about the nature and incidence of union action for women allows such an analysis in chapter six.

The survey form was designed by the author with the assistance of South Australian union officials and activists, drawing on the Victorian experience (Nightingale 1991) which, in turn drew on previously unsuccessful survey attempts by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). A trial of the survey was held in three unions selected for their

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<sup>21</sup>The University made available a small grant which allowed the employment of a research assistant, Jane Clarke who was seconded from her union for a number of weeks to help extract survey forms from unions.

representative size and nature. The survey was then modified in a number of ways and therefore differs from that used in Victoria<sup>22</sup>. For example, unions were asked to nominate the industries, occupations and sectors (blue/white, public/private)<sup>23</sup> in which they had significant membership, and information about different types of workplace representative positions was collected. More detail was sought on some issues, for example whether women's officers are full-time or not, and comments on the effectiveness of various strategies for women, and so on. Other questions asked in Victoria were dropped from this survey. For example, it seems that information about national union male/female officials was not easily collected in Victoria and proved inadequate for analysis.

The final survey form fell into nine general areas (a copy of the survey form is included at appendix 1):

1. numbers of male and female members
2. union characteristics (industry, public/ private, main occupations covered etc)
3. participation in union management structures by sex (state conferences and committees of management, executives etc)
4. external committee representation by sex (eg ACTU, UTLC, federal councils and conferences)
5. officials by sex (elected/ honorary, full-time/part-time)
6. workplace representatives by sex (shop stewards, health and safety, other committees (eg training, consultative))
7. Initiatives for women members (eg training, women's committee etc)
8. Policies especially affecting women members (eg women's policy, child care)
9. Effects of union amalgamation.

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<sup>22</sup>These modifications reflected outcomes of the trial along with suggestions from women activists on the Women's Standing Committee at the UTLC.

<sup>23</sup>'Blue/white' signifying workers employed in blue collar employment or in white collar jobs; 'public/private' signifying workers employed either in public sector employment or in the private sector.

### Survey Distribution and Collection

The survey was distributed to all South Australian branches of national and federated unions and to state unions based in South Australia which are affiliated to the UTLC (including one union at that time in dispute about the validity of its affiliation). This included 67 unions. Many unions returned the survey quite promptly. For others the process of extracting survey responses was lengthy, labour intensive and, for a number, ended in failure. Some male union officials were clearly reluctant to participate in the survey and did not support doing research about women in their unions. Up to a dozen contacts were made with some unions, personally, in writing and by telephone. Fortunately, this was not necessary in the majority of cases. Survey distribution and collection was undertaken over three months between October 1991 and January 1992.

Some of these difficulties reflect weaknesses in union membership statistics. Some unions do not keep data on membership by gender (let alone on different levels of union representation). Six unions who responded to the survey could not or would not provide this information. Three of these indicated that they would not divulge details of membership even where a guarantee of confidentiality was given. One union secretary stated that his union had other priorities and would not be completing the survey.

Particular efforts were made to achieve a return from two large unions; the Australian Workers Union and the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association. Neither met with success.

### The Validity of Results

Fifty six of the 67 unions returned their survey forms. This means that 84 per cent of all South Australian unions are included in the analysis in chapter five. However, not all unions answered every question. The data was sought by direct written approach to union secretaries. However, some union secretaries passed the forms to the most senior woman officer and in other cases the forms were completed by clerical or administrative staff. It is possible that some respondents have guessed at their answers especially with respect to workplace representation, but generally where the data were not available the relevant spaces

were left blank. Any discrepancies or inconsistencies were followed up with the official who completed the form and in this way a number of data checks were completed.

Estimation of the proportion of South Australian unionists covered by the unions which responded is complicated a little because UTLC affiliation figures understate membership. If we compare survey return membership data with UTLC affiliation numbers then, on average this understatement is of the order of 13 percent. However, based on UTLC membership affiliation figures, respondent unions cover 83 per cent of members. Using actual survey data on membership, the proportion is virtually the same (except in one case where estimates were widely divergent; in this case an average of the UTLC estimate and a recent press report was used). Using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on trade union members in August 1990, the survey covers 85 per cent of union members in the state (ABS cat. no. 6325.0, August 1990:5)

Overall, then the survey covers about the same proportion of *unions* and *union members* in South Australia: around 84 per cent.

The response rate varied for different questions. While most unions could supply data on their policies for women, less could provide information, for example, about numbers of male and female shop stewards. However, the results are considerably better on many questions for the South Australian survey than in Victoria: for example, 69 per cent of all South Australian unions provided data on male and female shop stewards compared to only around one third in Victoria.

### The Representativeness of Survey Results

It seems fair to assume that non-responding unions are less likely to be taking affirmative action or equal opportunity measures than the group who have responded. The results, therefore, may be slightly more positive than the overall reality in South Australia.

This also suggests that on some measures the Victorian results are likely to be more positively biased than South Australian figures given that their response rate was lower than in South Australia. Exactly how much of the difference between Victorian and South Australian figures can be explained by this factor is not known. There are noticeable

discrepancies, however, with the Victorian situation often appearing more favourable for women.

Non-responding unions tend to be smaller, on average, than those who participated in the survey (non-respondents had an average size of 2875 members, based on UTLC affiliation figures, compared to the average size of 3838 for respondents). The group of eleven non-respondents included two large and nine much smaller unions. They are rather more blue collar in nature than the survey group, and have a disproportionate concentration of members in the wholesale and retail trades compared to the survey group. Most are male-dominated with the exception of the three unions in the wholesale and retail trade (two of which are quite small).

In sum, the survey results cover 84 per cent of unions and union members in South Australia and therefore present a reliable picture of the 1992 situation.

#### Publication and Reports to Individual Unions and the Union Response

In early 1992 the results of a survey of South Australian unions were collated and presented to the executive of the UTLC and its full council<sup>24</sup>.

In extension work based on the survey outcomes, individual unions that were able to supply comprehensive data were invited to participate in a subsequent project which developed a report for each union comparing the situation of their union with that of unions with similar coverage (by industry) and the state averages as a whole<sup>25</sup>. These reports ended with an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of women's and men's participation in the union, with suggestions about how these might be addressed. While this extension work does not form a part of this thesis, its outcomes helped frame the next stage of the research.

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<sup>24</sup>With the assistance of Jane Clarke. The results of the survey were then published by the Centre for Labour Studies and the UTLC (Pocock 1992). This report was written for union officials, activists and the broader community and was released at a workplace launch on 31 July 1992.

<sup>25</sup>This extension work was undertaken by the author with research assistance from Kathie Muir, funded by a research grant from the University of Adelaide.

### *Phase 2: The Survey of Union Members*

In most individual unions, men's over-representation began at the first level of union involvement, in the workplace, and generally extended and increased at each subsequent level of union involvement. As I explain in chapters five, six and seven, union responses to these reports were varied, with some explaining the absence of women by lamenting women's lack of interest in unionism, and some explaining that national officers of the union were dealing with these issues, and some already taking a variety of actions to address the problems which they well understood. These responses left many unanswered questions. Were women less interested in unionism than men? A review of the international literature, especially more recent contributions in the US, make this a doubtful proposition as I outline in chapter seven. What should unions do about the perception of women's lower activism? The 'hit and miss' approaches of unions attempting to address women's lower participation were based more upon guess work and assumption, than upon well researched theory. The few pieces of Australian research in the area offered little help - indeed contradictory results - to activists.

The dominant explanation of women's under-representation as lying mostly at the door of women's disadvantage and deficit, prevailed in the majority of unions. Analysis of union action for women substantiated this conception of the problem: chapter six shows that the most common actions by unions for women, fall within this dominant discourse of problematic and inadequate women, with much less attention paid to the problematic of union practice, culture and structure.

The next phase of the research set out to test this dominant discourse against the experience and perceptions of women and men activists. In doing so, the research meets some important gaps in union knowledge about the nature of union action which will be most useful in increasing women's union involvement. It also suggests an inversion of the dominant construction of the 'problem' of women's under-participation, in favour of analysis of male resistance to women and the prejudicial effects of masculine organisational practices on women and the ways in which they advantage men. Some of these are explored in chapter eight.

### The Structure of the Survey of Union Members

In early 1993, each of the thirteen unions for which individual union reports about women's representation in their structures had been prepared, were invited to participate in this next step. Six unions/union divisions elected to do so: the metals, vehicle and technical and supervisory divisions of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, (AMWU), the National Union of Workers (NUW), the clerical division of the Australian Services Union (ASU), and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

A sample of female and male members was randomly selected from the female and male membership of these six unions/divisions. The structure of the survey is set out in table 2.1. 2718 union members (about half of each sex) were randomly selected from the participating unions' membership lists (separate selections were made from each sex in each union). These members represented 7-10 per cent of the membership of each of the participating unions.

**Table 2.1 Structure and Response Rate in Survey of Union Members**

	No. Members		No. Surveyed		No. Returned		% Returned*	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Union 1	3502	3009	318	320	219	197	6.3	6.5
Union 2	867	459	95	35	16	23	1.8	5.0
Union 3	1998	3210	253	259	102	109	5.1	3.4
Union 4	7602	699	278	290	79	87	1.0	12.4
Union 5	1863	112	70	70	35	33	1.9	29.5
Union 6	10170	430	372	358	144	106	1.4	2.5
TOTAL	26002	7919	1386	1332	595	555	2.3	7.0

\* per cent of total membership responding

1150 or 42 per cent of those surveyed responded, or 3.5 per cent of the total membership (2.3 per cent of all men and 7.0 per cent of all women) in the six unions. The number of returns received allow us to be confident that the survey gives a good representation of gender issues in the participating unions and, given the diversity of unions included (by public/private, white/blue, occupation and industry) generally provides a useful indicator for Australian unions more broadly. However, compared to Australian unionists overall, the

survey group is under-representative of young people and of personal service and sales workers, and it over-represents clerks.

The survey form was designed in close consultation with officials and women activists from each of the participating unions/divisions and trialed amongst small groups of participants' members. It was mailed out to the home address of the selected members in August 1993 and followed up with a reminder letter four weeks later. The survey forms were accompanied by return envelopes, and a supporting letter from relevant union secretaries. In addition, articles were published in some union journals.

This survey suffers from some of the limitations canvassed at the opening of this chapter. Its response rate of 42 per cent may mean that the survey group is distorted in significant ways, for example towards literate or especially pro-union members and perhaps against parents and youth. A distortion towards more pro-union views is also possible. However, since this is the group of women and men most likely to become union activists, given the purpose of the survey (to gauge the potential and means of stimulating their activism, along with gender differences), this possible bias is not especially disturbing.

The survey asked 34 questions covering six pages<sup>26</sup>. Eight questions provided for open-ended responses. The most common responses to six of these open questions were coded and form part of the analysis. The answers to a final question which invited general comments on 'any issues raised in this survey' were transcribed onto tape and analysed. The written comments on the survey suggest a strong interest and critique of union methods and culture which might be usefully pursued through face-to-face interviews and discussions with unionists in future research.

### General Features of the Surveyed Group

Men's response rate was slightly higher than women's so that 48 per cent of respondents (or the 'survey group') were women and 52 per cent were men. The majority of respondents had children (61 per cent) and the incidence of children was very similar for men and women. Occupations of the survey group are shown in table 2.2.

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<sup>26</sup>A copy of the survey form appears at Appendix 2.



A third of the sample are clerks. About a quarter of the sample are semi-skilled (plant operators, machine operators, drivers, labourers or process workers) and a quarter are administrators, para-professional professional or managers. Thirteen per cent are trades workers, of which most are men. A third of the group work in workplaces of less than 50 people and a quarter in workplaces of more than 500. 55 per cent of the group are working in the private sector (58 per cent women).

**Table 2.2 Occupations and Sector of Survey Group and Australian Unionists Overall**

Occupation	Women	Men	All	Australia	
	No.	No.	No.	(%)	(%)*
Semi-skilled#	191	103	294	25	30
Clerks	221	155	376	33	15
Trades	7	141	148	13	16
Admin/para-prof/prof/manager	116	166	282	25	29
Salesperson/personal services	22	17	39	3	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>587</b>	<b>1139</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Public sector				45	46
Private sector				55	54
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

# includes plant and machine operators, drivers, labourers and related workers

\* Source ABS cat. no. 6325.0, August 1992:5.

Only 10 per cent of the group were under 25 years (12 per cent women). Women in the survey group tend to be younger than men: 44 per cent of women were under 35 compared to 35 per cent of men. Women in the group generally have less years in the paid workforce and have less seniority as union members. Only a quarter of women had been in paid work for more than 21 years compared to 56 per cent men. Similarly, only 9 per cent women had been a union member (of any union and allowing for broken membership) for more than 21 years, compared to 38 per cent men.

Women also had much lower incomes on average than men: 52 per cent men earned more than \$30,000 compared to only 18 per cent women. Just over a third of the group worked in mixed-sex workplaces (about half men and half women). Forty-three per cent worked mostly with men (26 per cent women) and the remaining 19 per cent worked mostly with women (30 per cent women).

Three quarters of the group believed that all or most in their workplaces are in the union. Only 6 per cent believed that only a few were of their workmates were not in the union and 4 per cent did not know.

### Differences Between the Survey Group and Australian Unionists Overall

How does this profile compare with the situation of the average Australian unionist? The answer to this question affects the relevance of the survey results to the Australian union situation overall.

The survey group was not chosen to be representative of all Australian unionists. Selection was driven by the willingness of unions to participate and the objective of comparing women and men, which required the inclusion of six unions/divisions for whom, where possible, meaningful results by sex would be available. The structure of the surveyed group is therefore different from the Australian union population overall and is not representative in some ways. Key areas of difference are sex, occupation and age. The survey group is, however, close to the overall public/private sector composition of Australian unionists (that is, the proportion who are employed in the public sector, and the proportion employed by private companies and organisations).

Our respondent group includes more women than the overall Australian union population: 48 per cent of our respondents are women compared to 39 per cent Australia wide (ABS cat. no. 6325.0, August 1992). The survey shows important differences between women and men on many issues within the survey - for example on activism, knowledge and union priorities.

Occupationally, the survey group includes close to the Australian share of trades persons, semi-skilled workers and professional, para-professional, managers and administrators (table 2.2). It under-represents the 11 per cent of Australian union members who are salespersons or personal services workers (only 3 per cent of the survey group are in this occupational group). Clerks are over-represented in the survey: 33 per cent compared to 15 per cent Australia-wide.

Our group is older than the age profile of Australian unionists: 16 per cent of all Australian unionists in August 1992 were under 24 years compared to 10 per cent in the

survey group. While the proportion in their middle years (25-34) is about the same, the survey group has more people in the age group 50+ than in the Australian union movement's population overall.

### Deficiencies in the Survey of Union Members

The most serious limitation of the survey is its failure to collect data by first language/language spoken at home. This may have yielded enough results to permit analysis, between English-speaking and non-English speaking groups (NESB) by gender and other characteristics. In framing the survey, I believed that the size of these groups (ie NESB women and men) would be too small to allow a full analysis that distinguished the effects of NESB/non-NESB from those of sex, occupation, industry, family responsibilities, and other factors alongside ethnicity. This decision also reflected my primary preoccupation with gender differences, as explored in the opening section of this chapter.

This separation is vital to distinguishing the effects of NES background on union activism, from the effects of industry, occupation, union, sex and other factors. Without a sample large enough to allow this separation, *any* differences in, say, the activism of NESB and non-NESB members may be attributed to ethnic differences, when in fact they may lie in differences in the industry in which these members work, the union to they belong, or other factors. Untangling these factors through a 'main effects' model of statistical analysis - as I do for women and men as whole sexes to distinguish the gender effects from others - relies on a large enough number of respondents in each 'cell' of analysis: that is, enough NESB and non-NESB workers in each union, industry, occupational, size of workplace and other category.

It is quite unlikely that such sizeable samples would have occurred in the survey returns, given the lower response rate from unions with large populations of NESB members. This would have left ethnicity in view (as a separable category), but without the statistical instrument to permit the separation of the effects of NESB background from the structural features of the working and union lives of these respondents. As I outlined above, I have found it important to separate the 'job' effects from the effects of 'being female' or 'being

male', to avoid attributing to the category 'woman' differences in say activism, which are more properly the result of being in a certain union or type of job. In the same vein, it is important to analyse the category 'non-English speaking background union member' through a sample size which permits the same disentanglement. Without such a breakdown, the danger of such an analysis is that members' 'ethnicity' remains in primary view, divorced from many other explanations, so that wrong conclusions are drawn. The 'ethnicity' of these workers is often used to 'explain' aspects of the actions of these respondents, while other specific, important features of their lives remain out of view. I have argued against the similar inappropriate foregrounding of 'femaleness' in constructing the survey.

It would have taken relatively little effort to collect data on non-English speaking background and attempt the analysis; it may have enriched the discussion of the survey results and yielded important new data on a scale which permitted a full analysis. On the other hand it has removed any temptation to draw inappropriate conclusions from the data about crude, first level differences in union activism with respect to ethnicity, without reference to the outcomes of a main effects analysis.

In similar vein, the survey does not distinguish union members of Aboriginal descent, from others. Given the small number of people of Aboriginal descent in the Australian unionised workforce, and therefore in the potential survey group, the survey would not have yielded enough responses to make a separate analysis of activism amongst these members. Once again, a different non-survey based research method is much better equipped to such a study.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explained the feminist standpoint theory of knowledge which unpins my research, a perspective which asserts knowledge creation as a situated process, so that claims of truth must always be tested against the views they obscure or write out of existence. I locate myself as a situated actor/participant in an action research process. Against the arguments of some postmodernists on the one hand and the weight of industrial relations research practice on the other, I make the categories of 'men' and 'women' central

to analysis. While this creates limitations for my research (collapsing the differences between members of both sexes), it allows a close study of gender in an institutional context.

I have also staked a claim for the application of feminist empirical methods in pursuit of feminist research goals: a method of research that (when applied to questions at the heart of feminisms' concerns, in a way which reveals important characteristics of women's and men's lives, exposing male norms in institutional life) is an important and illuminating research tool which some feminist scholars cast aside or under utilise at the cost of feminist scholarship. Finally I have outlined the technical details of the survey techniques and their application.

The next chapter assesses the limits and possibilities for feminisms' projects in Australian unions, by analysing the current situation and nature of Australian unions, and reflecting on insights arising from feminist theory which assist an assessment of these limits and possibilities.

## Chapter 3

### Limits, Possibilities and Goals for Feminists in Unions in Theory and Practice

This research makes a study of women and men in unions, based on a view that through unions, feminist activism can advance the interests of women and social justice more broadly. This view requires substantiation both in terms of current political realities and feminist theory. In this chapter I foreground my research by establishing its validity as a project with emancipatory prospects, especially for women. At a practical political level several questions arise: how much can women hope for from unions? What kind of political constraints currently circumscribe these possibilities? What positive opportunities exist? These questions must be addressed through an analysis of the current situation of Australian unions. Any contemporary claim for unions as a valid site of feminist activism must recognise that it is being made at a time when Australian unions are in severe decline: as a force for social change their power is weakening.

But more theoretical concerns also exist: how does feminist theory help us conceptualise the possibilities for feminisms'<sup>1</sup> goals through unions, and how does that theory assist in developing strategies to exploit them? Many feminists - especially radical feminists - have long been dubious about the possibilities for women through masculinist organisations like unions (Lake 1986b); others have seen more possibilities (Shute 1994, Cockburn 1991, Briskin and McDermott 1993). In recent years feminist theory has made a firm critique of frameworks which 'add women and stir', in favour of discourses of difference (from men) and female autonomy, which challenge rather than attempt to meet male norms. Alongside these, feminist theory about the sexual contract throws strong doubt upon women's access to political power as long as their public life remains underwritten by private servitude. A consideration of these theoretical issues is part of the assessment of the possibilities for feminisms' goals and useful for framing feminist strategy in unions now. Such an assessment also demands some definition of what these 'goals' might be, especially in light

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<sup>1</sup>Many writers have drawn attention to the diversity of feminists' goals (Caine and Pringle 1995, Curthoys 1994, Yeatman 1993) hence my use of the plural: 'feminisms' goals'.

of recent postmodern critiques of large, universalist, emancipatory goals (whether on the basis of class, gender, race or other criteria).

In making an assessment, then, of the limits and possibilities for feminisms' goals through unions, this chapter falls into three parts: a first part which assesses the contemporary political situation of Australian unions and considers the prospects for women within and through them; a second part where I define my goals in unions and retrieve them from some aspects of a post-modern critique; and a third part which considers the implications of relevant feminist theory for feminist activism in unions.

### **3.1 Australian Unions: How Much Do They Matter?**

Unions are essentially modernist institutions. They grew out of the industrial revolution in England and they reflect and express modernist assumptions about the progressive path of history and 'man's' rationality and his mastery of nature and technology for the common good (Rea 1995). Unionism holds the notion of advance through production and consumption at its heart. It also holds dear particular binaries of power and class (employer always opposed to employee) and specific assumptions about 'work' - its nature, location, and the class relations which surround it. Unionism grew up largely blind to questions about gender: about who did what work on the hospital or factory front, about the recognition of the domestic sphere (let alone who did what here), who was politically active and who was silenced. The movement's history has largely been constructed out of heroic tales of struggle, loss, victory and personal sacrifice to the collective good of workers. In this account 'worker' invariably bears a masculine face. The movement's culture is a celebration of these: a collection of literary, visual, musical and enamelled-badge amulets which commemorate significant events, heroes and organisations (Atkin 1991, Muir 1997 forthcoming).

Little is said in this culture or history about a movement which has on occasion swotted in irritation at those 'others' who have tried to ride on the movement's coat-tails or challenge the white, male hegemony that unions created and defended in the world of paid work. These are the 'others' which inevitably are called into existence whenever a dominant group take control of social and political space.

For all its limitations in current times, however, unionism remains relevant to some aspects of modernism which persist into post-modern times. Capitalism is alive and well in Australia and certain patterns of power and control characterise it as surely as in 1860 England. Many Australians approach work with only their labour to sell, their power much less than that of most of their potential employers, especially in a context of persistent high unemployment and the new conservative promise to reduce the legal protections which have held for most of this century (Pocock 1996b)<sup>2</sup>. Of course these patterns of power work in complex ways, and never always in a single, predetermined direction (Gibson-Graham 1995). One of the few means available to working people, to counter that imbalance of power, is collective organisation and negotiation. Just as employers in early industrial England fought to oppose that organisation, they do so now - mostly by lawful means in Australia, but by brutal oppression and even murder in countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, South Korea, Bangladesh and China. These countries are amongst Australia's trading partners, making the terms under which their workers labour and attempt to organise, of direct relevance to those of Australian workers. Unions may be sectional and represent only portions of those oppressed in their workplace relations, they may have many old-fashioned characteristics which make them inadequate to world we now live in (and encourage some postmodernists to disdain), but in this fundamental feature they have real life: as a possible counter to unfair terms and unsafe work in the paid workplace.

This makes them a site of real interest to working women in Australia and around the world, especially given the rising tide of women who now work for a wage. One of the most striking aspects of the labour market in most industrialised countries in the latter half of this century has been the increase in women's participation in paid work. In 1995 in Australia 53 per cent of women over 15 years now work, compared to 36 per cent in 1966 (ABS cat. no. 6203.0); the rise has been even more steep amongst married women. But this rise in participation has not been fully reflected in the profile of union recruitment so that women remain especially unorganised relative to their working brothers in many places

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<sup>2</sup>The 1996 election of a federal conservative government on a platform of reduced worker rights (including less protection against unfair dismissal, reduced power for an independent industrial commission and a weaker, less relevant award system), combined with a dominance of conservative government at state level since the early nineties, make this threat increasingly real.



Figure 3.1 shows the proportion of Australian workers in unions since 1976. Clearly union density is in sharp decline in Australia, falling from 50 percent in 1976 to 35 per cent in 1994 (ABS cat. no. 6325.0)<sup>3</sup>. Since 1991, after a brief plateau, the rate of unionisation has been in sharp decline in Australia and this decline is steepening rather than moderating: the most recent data suggest that the fall continued steeply over the ten months to June 1995. If the rate of decline we have witnessed between 1992-4 persists, within ten years Australia will arrive at the level of union density currently prevailing in the US (about 15 per cent (Hallock 1997 forthcoming)). Conservative state and federal governments will not have to do anything very radical to ensure this result, beyond holding constant the rate of industry and workforce restructure: as things stand, they need only wait. Such a decline will shift the status of the Australian labour movement from that of central participant in public policy making to one of peripheral 'interest groups', just as has occurred in the US (Hallock 1997 forthcoming, Evatt Foundation 1995).

However, union power and influence cannot be simply 'read off' from union density figures, particularly in Australia where union-bargained national and state awards establish the terms and conditions of about 80 per cent of Australia workers (ABS cat. no. 6315). The award system - in combination with unions' close relationship with state and federal Labor governments - has granted them a public influence for most of this century which is well in excess of their numerical representation. Notwithstanding this, however, the sharp decline in union density indicates that the crisis for Australian unionism is severe.

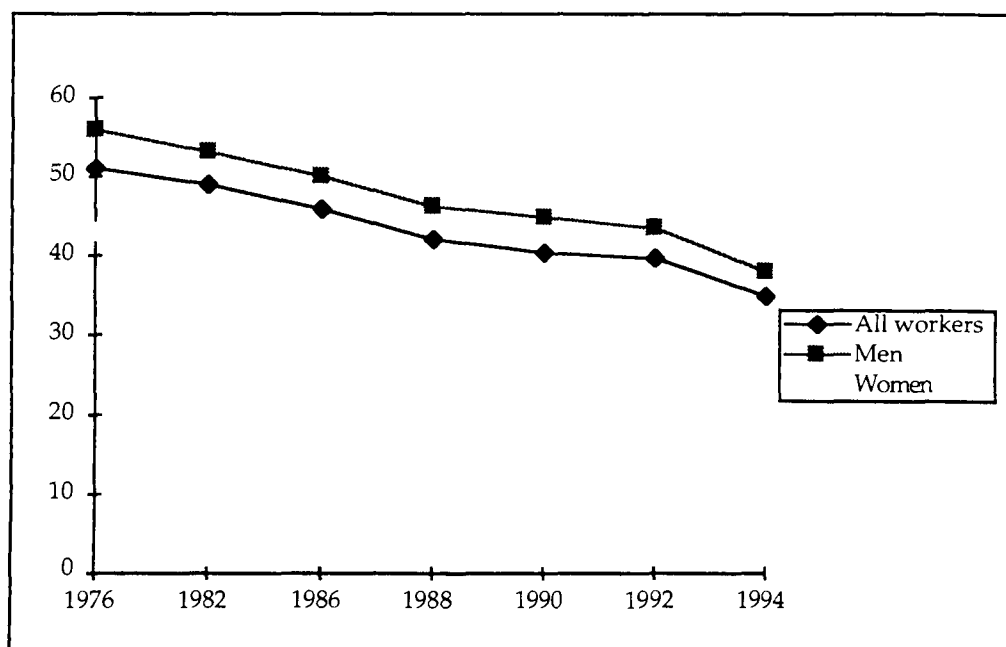
The picture is very similar in many other countries (Visser 1992). These falls in union membership place great stress upon existing union infrastructure and severely constrain the capacity to expand or develop new activities. This international decline has provoked a searching examination of the causes and remedies for such collapse and five explanations are commonly offered: structural shifts in the pattern of employment, anti-union strategies

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<sup>3</sup>There are two sources for union density data in Australia: one based on labour force survey series (ABS cat. no. 6325.0.40.001) which give a lower indicator of union density than that provided by the survey of unions (ABS cat. no. 6323.0.40.001). The difference reflects the fact that the former excludes those who are members in other than their main job, or who are not working in the survey week but are members of unions, those who belong to more than one union, in addition to the possibility that union records are not accurate and/or current. The trend of both sets of data is very similar with the union survey data usually lying 3-5 percentage points above the labour force survey data. Applying the trend evident from the June 1995 survey data to the labour force series suggests that union density in the labour force survey series may be around 31 per cent in early 1996.

adopted by employers, political factors such as hostile government and anti-union legislation, shifts in the social climate towards individualism and away from collective organisation, and inadequate union recruitment efforts (Hyman 1994). In Australia, all of these factors are in evidence over the past decade (Evatt Foundation 1995, Berry and Kitchener 1989, Peetz 1995).

**Figure 3.1 Union Density Australia 1976-94**



Source: ABS cat. no. 6325.0

Peetz's study shows that around half the decline in Australian unionisation can be traced to structural shifts in the patterns of employment: that is more people working in areas of traditionally lower unionisation, and many fewer in workplaces which are unionised (Peetz 1995). This trend has continued in the most recent period: between 1993-5 employment growth was concentrated in areas of low unionisation such as cultural and recreational services (where union density is now only 24 per cent, as table 3.1 shows), property and business services (15), accommodation, cafes and restaurants (20) and the retail trade (23). These sectors are at the top of the employment growth league and the bottom of the unionisation hierarchy, suggesting that structural employment shifts remain an important cause of declining union density (ABS cat. no. 6203.0, November 1995:41).

**Table 3.1 Union density and employment growth by industry, Australia 1994**

Industry	Union Density 1994			Employment growth Nov 93-Nov 95 (per cent)
	Men	Women (per cent)	Total	
Agriculture, forestry, fishing	12.9	10.9	12.4	1.5
Mining	49.0	6.1	44.5	-8.5
Manufacturing	44.3	30.7	40.8	3.2
Electricity, gas and water	69.0	30.7	40.8	-8.5
Construction	37.4	9.3	34.1	7.9
Wholesale trade	17.5	7.7	14.6	1.2
Retail trade	19.1	27.0	23.3	9.0
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	19.3	19.3	19.3	13.2
Transport and storage	58.3	30.0	51.9	5.5
Communication services	70.4	55.2	65.6	14.5
Finance and insurance	40.0	44.1	42.4	-0.1
Property and business services	18.7	10.1	14.6	21.2
Government administration, defence	61.9	44.3	54.7	4.4
Education	58.1	55.0	56.1	6.1
Health and Community services	36.2	37.2	37.0	12.7
Cultural and recreational services	25.3	22.4	23.8	17.3
Personal and other services	50.5	20.4	36.3	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>37.9</b>	<b>31.3</b>	<b>35.0</b>	

Sources: ABS cat. no. 6325.0, 6323.0, 6203.0

Meeting this shift with more effective union recruitment amongst young people, casual and part-time workers and women who are joining the workforce in these sectors, is one of the greatest tasks now facing unions.

The political climate is also of significance in Australia as recent massive losses in union membership in the conservative state of Victoria attest: union membership fell by 98,900 between 1992 and 1994, explaining an enormous 44 per cent of the total national fall in union members in that period. This decline reflects cuts in public sector employment, privatisation, attacks on the closed shop and the shift to individual contracts. However, while structural changes in employment and hostile conservative governments at state level have played important roles in recent union declines, and more individualistic social values and a lower propensity to join unions may exist amongst workers in growing industries, there can be no turning away from the fact that unions have failed to recruit in the growing areas of employment. It is here that the gender effect is most pronounced. While most of the total decline in unionisation between 1992 and 1994 has been amongst men (with

308,000 fewer male members compared with 68,300 women) much of the employment growth has occurred amongst women and young people, and it is these groups which are especially under-unionised (as table 3.1 shows).

Within the shrinking group of workers in unions, women's share has increased from 35 per cent in 1986 to 40 per cent in 1994. Union density amongst women has fallen since the early eighties but by much less than amongst men. Indeed, without the rise in the numbers of women in unions over the past decade the current picture of union density would look much worse.

So how much do unions matter? In view of the continuing vigorous contest over the conditions and rewards for paid work and their social context in Australia, unions continue to represent a significant proportion of women and men in paid work. They matter most directly to the population of individual workers. However the current decline in union density and the conservative attack now underway mean that they may matter much less in a decade's time.

### **3.1.1 The possibilities for women in Australian unions now**

How much do unions matter to Australian women now? Women workers who join unions do so because this is often the only form of protection available to them. They join out of practical necessity. The increasing numbers of women entering paid work make unions a potentially important site of protection with respect to money and social income. While the severity of union density decline must give all women - and men - in unions pause, it may also offer new possibilities perhaps for transformation. Unionists are nothing if not pragmatic. The necessity of recruiting the most under-unionised and growing groups of workers (women and youth) drive a real, if instrumental, interest in women's unionism in the current climate (Shute 1994:178). The pragmatic source of this interest (as opposed to an interest in equity and redressing past discrimination) will not stop feminists from making the most of the space it creates for feminisms' projects. The exact dimensions of this space are incalculable. However, it is useful to consider some of the factors which make for a negative or a positive environment through a brief situational analysis.

The current crisis in Australian unionism grows out of more than a decline in union density: it is also rooted in the nature and traditions of Australian unionism, many of which lie in the path of women, including weak workplace organisation and involvement, 'top down' unionism, and undemocratic habits of leadership, to name only a few (Buchanan 1996). Australian unions have, in many industries, a weak tradition of workplace or membership involvement in unions: they grew up behind a protective wall of awards and industrial tribunals which fostered formal union membership, sometimes at the cost of a conscious union activism amongst members (Howard 1977). The conciliation and arbitration system fostered a form of legalistic unionism in some areas: unionism *for* members, rather than unionism *by* members - a style of unionism which used the commission and other tribunals rather more than it mobilised members (Evatt Foundation 1995). This tendency was exacerbated between 1983 and 1996 as unions and the federal Labor government negotiated successive national Accords with respect to money and social wages in a highly centralised manner; the negotiation of these Accords largely excluded rank and file membership and further de-mobilised workplace unionism (Singleton 1990, Ewer, Hampson, Lloyd, Rainford, Rix and Smith 1991, Stilwell 1986). The ACTU's support for enterprise bargaining in the latter years of the Accord process was - in part - an attempt to remedy the atrophy of workplace union structures (Pocock 1996a), as was its support for an 'organising' model of unionism<sup>4</sup> in the nineteen-nineties (McManus 1996 forthcoming).

Many women in unions - no doubt like many men - have had the experience of being of interest to union officials only in the event of a crisis, say a contested election. Others are well aware that the contribution of their union dues is the most important aspect of their unionism in the eyes of many officials; this is especially the case in unions relying on recruitment through closed shops<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>This shift reflected outcomes of an ACTU delegation to the United States which brought back the message of an 'organising' model of unionism, in place of the more prevalent 'servicing' model (McManus 1997 forthcoming). A literature on this model of unionism has developed in the United States particularly through the Labor Research Review from the Midwest Centre for Labor Research in Chicago. Prolonged agitation and new model organising drives have achieved significant change in the United States with the election of a new leadership of the AFL-CIO in 1995.

<sup>5</sup>Unfortunately this is precisely the form of unionism available to many women who work in, say, service jobs where it is compulsory that they join and where union service and protection is sometimes weak.

The unrepresentative structure of union officialdom in Australia (Bramble 1995), the weakness of a democratic and involving tradition, the weak link between membership and leadership, an industrial agenda defined in male terms, have all worked against an effective voice for women in Australian unions (Elton 1997 forthcoming, Buchanan 1996, Thomson and Pocock 1997 forthcoming). They complicate the project of remaking unions to better represent and involve women today.

Against these negative traits, there are positive features which make Australian unions a potentially more fertile site for women than in many other social movements or countries. These include their size and - relative to many other countries - their culture of egalitarianism, of national union strategic planning, and of concern with the social as well as the money wage, along with the existence of a strong feminist and female presence in Australian unions.

A membership of 2.38 million means that unions remain a significant Australian social formation despite recent declines. Alongside this, Australian unions have a strong capacity to defend the weak and a developed tradition of egalitarianism which encourages them to do so (Evatt Foundation 1995, Ewer et al. 1991). It is important not to overstate any such 'spirit' of egalitarianism or collective 'movement' identity as Burgmann (1993), Lake (1994) and other labour historians have recently pointed out (Irving 1994). Nonetheless the conciliation and arbitration system gives unions the capacity to assist the industrially weak and reflects and reinforces a concern amongst Australian unionists to do so. Over the thirteen years from 1983-1996, this concern and capacity was reflected in successive industrial Accords between federal Labor governments and the ACTU that have included specific wage increases for the low paid, many of whom are women (Philips 1995). This forms a strong contrast with other countries: in the US, for example, a more narrowly economic or 'business' unionism has developed (for a range of reasons, not least capital's ability to fracture the structure of unionism and confine it to the enterprise level) with the effect of much more dispersed wage outcomes and very low pay rates for many. This has led to a very narrow, sectional type of unionism and pursuit of limited goals (particularly money and job control) (Davis 1986 and Moody 1988). The much narrower gap between women's and men's wages in Australia than in many other countries is partly a reflection of

these differences (although it is by no means the full explanation; see for example O'Donnell and Hall 1988, Pocock 1995d).

A strong single, unified national peak council of unions with the capacity to define and pursue national union strategy is also a positive factor for the prospects of transformation: a dis-aggregated union movement, gripped by competitive and factional struggles, and lacking the capacity for movement-wide dialogue and decision is a much more difficult prospect for women to affect. This is because the development and dissemination of policy is much more difficult in a diverse, disorganised and divided set of organisations than where a single channel of discussion exists, and where a culture of collective decision making exists - imperfect as it remains in Australia<sup>6</sup>.

A further positive factor in favour of activism in Australian unions is the now reasonably well-established interest in defining unionists' interests to include not only wages and the conditions of work, but also the broadly defined social wage including social security benefits, the national provision of child care and health care, labour market programs, maternity and parental leave and so on. While money wages often find themselves centre stage, these broader issues have regularly been placed on the national industrial agenda by Australian unions over the past decade and this creates a much more positive basis for women's involvement and transformation of unions than does a more narrowly economic unionism as exists in, for example, the US (Thomson and Pocock 1997 forthcoming).

Finally, the union movement has been a site of feminist activity since the early days of second wave feminism in Australia, leading Hester Eisenstein to contrast the nature of Australian feminism and its sites of activity with that of other industrialised countries like the US (Eisenstein 1991). Women's union caucuses (usually on the left of politics) operate in several states and a core population of women activists has sustained a feminist dialogue in unions and a steady if erratic presence in a wide diversity of unions (Elton 1997 forthcoming). This also augurs for a positive environment for feminisms' goals in unions today.

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<sup>6</sup>Once again, it is important not to overstate unity at peak council level in Australia: very few unions would not at various times have serious differences with ACTU decisions and there have been many critics of the imperfect decision-making structures in the peak council (Hagan 1981). Nonetheless its capacity to involve the great majority of Australian unions in discussion on movement-wide issues such as national wages, training, unemployment, the social wage and - and we shall see - women's representation, is well established.

### 3.1.2 Prospects in Australian Unions: How Much Space for Feminist Success?

There can be no doubt that the feminisation of unions, and their consequent, necessary transformation, frame perhaps a last window of opportunity for Australian labour - and unions in many other places as well (Shute 1994:178). Greater recruitment of women is increasingly seen, at least in some union quarters, as one part of the solution to the crisis. Is a rescue possible? And on what basis will women be part of that rescue?

It is not unusual for women's access to previously male terrain to ease just when that terrain is in decline. Women have had that experience in many occupations and industries and it is not uncommon in political life: for example in patterns of party leadership and parliamentary preselection and other places which have long withstood women's entry but suddenly grant it in the face of electoral defeat<sup>7</sup>.

In light of the rapidly changing strength of Australian unionism it is difficult to convincingly delineate the dimensions of the possibilities for women through unions. While the history and traditions of Australian unions are a strong argument for caution in assessing the possibility of transformation of Australian unions, the importance of unions to more and more women as they take on paid work, along with some of the positive characteristics of Australian unions I have canvassed above, are strong arguments for feminist engagement in unions. The decline in density is both a threat and an opportunity for women: women may be an important part of union survival so that new opportunities now exist for women and feminist objectives in unions. In evaluating possibilities for successful activism through unions, feminist activists must also consider prospects available through other routes. Over the past decade, for example, the decline in public spending and the rise of non-interventionist market ideologies in the state, have closed off - or at least severely diminished - the state as a channel for feminist activism. Alongside poor economic conditions, fiscal constraints, the loss of political courage by Labor politicians and their loss

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<sup>7</sup>Not surprisingly, women are suspicious when they are vigorously encouraged into leadership of state Labor governments just as the bankers foreclose (as occurred in two Australian states in the nineteen-eighties), or into the presidency of a union peak council like the ACTU just as density declines, or into active unionism just when the end of Australian unionism is foreshadowed.



of government itself, it has always been the case in Australia that the possibilities for women have been conditioned by the demands and constraints imposed by organised labour. Given the narrowing of other routes to feminist change, and the growing feminisation of work and the working poor, Australian unions remain an important site for feminisms' transformative and emancipatory goals - both to hold the line and to push beyond the status quo. A stronger feminist presence within unions, with a sharper critique of unions' limitations, remains a vitally important pathway to significant positive change for many women.

### 3.2 Defining Feminisms' Goals in Unions

What are feminist activists aiming for when they work within unions? What goals do we hold in view, in a period when assumptions about large, self-evident, emancipatory goals are increasingly under critical examination, both in political life and within academic study in the social sciences. It is clearly problematic to speak of singular, shared feminist 'goals' in view of the postmodern and feminist challenge to modernist emancipatory projects which speak uncritically of their goals, as if they are shared and independent of history. Anna Yeatman points to the damage done in the name of such goals in the past, including damage by left political movements when the working class has often 'stood in for' all oppressed groups within a general struggle for human freedom (Yeatman 1995:30). This has smothered the development and expression of feminism, post-colonial diversity and issues of racism and ethnic difference, amongst others, so that great violence has been done to these 'othered' groups in the process of reaching for some emancipatory 'universals'.

In exploring the 'othering' process which accompanies the statement of ahistoric universals Yeatman takes feminism as a case: feminists have exposed the exclusion of women in discourses of (male)citizenship, but now must deal with their own 'othering' practices and consequences. In Yeatman's words:

Feminism is now exposed in its own internal differences and ruptures just as the elaboration of a feminist consciousness within race and ethnic communities has exposed their lines of fracture. In both cases, the ideal of a unified movement is revealed as a fiction (1995:53).

Some take this analysis further, drawing upon Foucault's ideas, to reject any humanist ideals, and refusing to speak on behalf of any 'oppressed subjectivity' thus contesting the basis of feminism itself (as discussed by Johnson 1988:184; 1995)<sup>8</sup>.

Where does this leave emancipatory movements like feminism, and in particular the goals of feminists working in organisations based in workers' movements? Yeatman argues that we can retrieve emancipatory goals from a poststructural critique through a "critically reflexive awareness" with respect to emancipatory politics (1995:56) and that this critique does not mean a descent into "a nihilistic relativism and anomie" (1994:10). She gives priority to the study of the 'genealogy'<sup>9</sup> of concepts like 'oppression' (along with Fraser and Nicholson 1990) and argues that the 'others' that they inevitably create, must be conceded and explored. She points out that proponents of emancipatory projects rarely undertake "critical reflection on the key categories which frame and organise their consciousness: categories such as emancipation, domination, and oppression" and that such universals have to be defined and made historically specific (1995:43).

In claiming feminisms' political mandates, Pauline Johnson argues, against some elements of post-structuralism, that feminism appropriately asserts emancipatory goals (in her case: "a practical, essentially socialistic, demand for a changed social life fully committed to the realisation of the humanistic principles of equity, democracy and social justice" (1988:180). In this way Johnson claims that feminism is "itself a part of the call for the completion of the project of modernity and it cannot simply decide to opt out without appearing as fundamentally incoherent political phenomenon" (1988:181). Johnson has taken these themes further more recently and argues that feminism must not give up its rational critique of an unfair society and that it must be aware of the fact that it will continue to make unavoidable intersubjective judgements; however its projects must be understood as diverse, and as historically contingent, rather than singular and universal (1995:18).

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<sup>8</sup>Lyotard for example rejects "critical social theory which employs general categories like gender, race and class" (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990:24).

<sup>9</sup>A term used by Foucault (1984) quoted in Yeatman (1995:43).

### 3.2.1 Power and Feminisms' Goals

In similar vein Nancy Hartsock has asked why is it that, just when women find their voices and "demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" (Hartsock 1990:163). She disputes Foucault's notion of power (capillary-like and comprised of multiple threads running in many directions (Foucault 1980)) and points out that if power follows no systematic contours and is everywhere, then it is also "ultimately nowhere" (Hartsock 1990:170). How then is it contested? On what basis do feminists (or unionists) engage? What are they aiming for? In Hartsock's view the recognition of power relations along the lines of class, race and gender is not only essential and valid, but constitutes a call to political action. Contrary to Foucault, she argues "a theory of power for women, for the oppressed, is not one that leads to a turning away from engagement but rather one that is a call for change and participation in altering power relations", at the same time, in full recognition of the need for the retrieval of the 'different' experiences smothered by modernist universals (Hartsock 1990:172).

However, some aspects of the postmodern critique of pre-existing theories of power are of use to feminist research and theory. Foucault, for example, draws our attention to the localised nature of different types of power, to the existence of power as a creative force (rather than one that is simply repressive), to the complex nature of *resistances* to power, and to the many *techniques* through which power is exercised (Foucault 1979, 1980). He recommends that power is usefully studied upwards, and as an economy or "net-like organisation" where individuals "circulate between its threads..always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (1980:98). The history of feminist activism in Australian unions (which I refer to in the next chapter), and contemporary events, illustrate the complex nature of power relations in Australian workplaces and unions, the many and diverse ways in which women have resisted and at times exercised power, and the complex force-fields of power that feminists have had to navigate within unions (particularly with respect to the interlocking class and gender patterns of power). As Hartsock suggests, however, this analysis does not cast aside the notion of systematic patterns of power with respect to class and gender, in favour of a tangled net: it holds that

these exist (along with others) as important and discernable phenomenon of this century and the last, at least.

With Hartsock (1990), Yeatman (1995) and Johnson (1995) I argue that feminism can draw upon the greater awareness of the marginalising and excluding practices of the discourses of emancipation, while at the same time claiming that oppressive patterns and power relations are readily discernible in the fabric of our society along the lines of gender, class, disability, sexuality, 'race' and ethnicity. Gender and class are not the only contours of such patterns but they are ones (not 'the' ones) with significance for women (especially those in unions). To name them is to invite - even require - their political resistance through the work of feminists. In this way feminists can assert (or retrieve) the notion of emancipatory goals from the grip of some strains of poststructuralism, while admitting much greater complexity to their specification.

### **3.2.2 Feminisms Goals in Unions: Diverse, Historically Contingent**

Certainly unions provide an excellent example of the 'othering' practices of an emancipatory movement: throughout the history of the international labour movement male unionists have on many occasions and with systematic effect (if not always intention) worked to defend themselves against employers' exploitation by sacrificing the interests of women, youth, immigrant and Black workers. At many points, these unionists have employed a discourse of solidarity to silence these 'others' and their complaints about the actions of their brothers.

The assertion of any universal, timeless feminist goals within unions through the imposition of 'solidarities' framed in the name of feminism is similarly undermined by women's diverse experiences of oppression: these differences throw into question the assertion of feminist goals even in a specific sphere of feminist activity like unions. Feminists' union goals require a careful examination of the inclusions and exclusions implicit within them and the competition they establish between categories of women. These are always historically specific and differences between women about them, and their priority, are likely. A hegemonic 'union feminism', with white, middle-class women in the driving seat, undermines the expression of difference and is a false assertion of women's solidarity in unions.

These theoretical arguments have a practical reality in union activism where a wide diversity of goals exists, and where women are sometimes locked in contest over priorities and action. Goals about women's participation are shared by many women in unions, however, including the struggle to achieve full voice and public participation for women in, and through, unions, on terms which recognise and welcome differences amongst women, and between women and men, and alongside this, the struggle to work through unions for economic and social democracy and justice.

### **3.3 Feminist Theory and the Possibilities for Women Through Unions**

Women activists in unions rarely discuss feminist theory (which Joan Eveline conflates with academic feminism (Eveline 1994b:136)). The gap between feminism in the Australian academy and feminist activism is almost as wide as that between the academic study of industrial relations and union activism. The lack of connectivity between the two sets of worlds is both remarkable and costly - for all spheres. When women union activists meet they are much more likely to discuss industrial issues, union events, the latest (mis)behaviours of their brothers, and strategies to further the interests of women members or officials, than feminist theory; this is true of women's caucuses in unions, meetings across unions, and explicitly left/feminist women's caucuses within or across unions. This lack of space for considering the contours of practical activism and its implicit theorisation, reflects the pace and pressure of union work (for most activists and especially women) along with a general anti-theoretical and anti-intellectual tendency which is widespread in Australian unionism<sup>10</sup>. This lack of space for linking theory and activism carries a cost for women activists. Barbara Caine recently wrote of the inability of women "to function as legitimating figures for each other" and lamented the lack of "a functioning feminist tradition" (1995:3,13). The absence of both a functioning sense of history and theory amongst women and feminist union activists affects our stance and our strategies. In

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<sup>10</sup>Even in venues where theory and research are under direct discussion and Australian women union activists appear in significant numbers - like the five Women and Labour Conferences - there has been little debate amongst practicing activists about the nature of their contemporary activism, their feminism, and the theories which implicitly inform their practice. An exception exists in the debate, mainly between Anne Curthoys and Rosemary Pringle, in 1988 around the meanings of socialist-feminism (discussed below); most of the protagonists in this debate were employed full-time in academic positions (though this does not make them non-practicing activists of course).

chapter four I show, for example, some of the many ways in which male unionists and their organisations have opposed the interests of women and - read and remembered - this history encourages a critical stance amongst contemporary women activists in unions, with an awareness of the long, repetitive struggle already undertaken by women in Australian unions, and of the tactics which have been tried and found effective or wanting. Knowledge of this history and the theorisation of these experiences encourages - amongst other things - vigorous assertion of women's rights to separate organising and rejection of the 'middle-class' tag often pejoratively used to silence feminist unionists.

Different feminist theories give rise to different ranges of liberatory possibilities within unionism, ranging from the equality goals implicit within liberal feminism, to transformative possibilities held, most commonly, by socialist-feminists (especially between the mid-seventies and the mid-eighties) and in the following section I set out a map of these and position my own perspective within it.

The goals of any group of women working *within* unions even at any one time are usually many, different, and sometimes conflictual. They also vary significantly from country to country and historically. For example, even within Australia, women from different unions have at times taken different views about the situation and union response to the work of prostitutes; immigrant women often express concerns about issues and groups of workers that are different from those of women from unions covering workers in tertiary education institutions; women from right wing unions view the family and union policy on the family in ways which conflict in many cases with those from left or centre unions; women who hold a socialist feminist viewpoint may disagree with liberal feminists; unmarried women have sometimes viewed their married sisters as opponents (Whitehead 1995), and women with children have sometimes asserted priorities in different order to women who are not parents.

Amidst this diversity it is possible to delineate four types of women activists in unions and I will briefly consider these in turn: those radical feminists who see simply no possibilities for women through 'men's' organisations; non-feminists who work there out of pragmatism; liberal feminists; and socialist feminists.

Radical feminists have been the group amongst feminists most critical of the compromises and limitations of feminist work in male organisations like unions. An example of this viewpoint is provided by Anne Forrest in Canada who sees only bleakness within unions, and no possibility of successful intervention by women, in women's interests: "From the standpoint of women, trade unions are just one more tool of patriarchy." (1993: 336 )<sup>11</sup>. This is a large claim, not limited by geography or history<sup>12</sup>. Many Australian radical feminists have agreed with her and turned their attention instead to autonomous women's organisation, to women's services, to teaching and research, and to other projects. They see no goals in unions which are worth the effort.

However, this totalising perspective robs history and geography of enormous variation; it treats all unions as one, and appears to remove agency from women. 'Patriarchy' is invoked as systemic basis of power in a globalising narrative within all unions which, by implication, disempowers women, denying many opportunities for intervention and destabilisation - opportunities which women activists in unions actually take up daily. The growing numbers of women in paid work, and in union membership, create many such opportunities. Further, withdrawal from the union-based contest over the terms of women's employment leaves many women without an important possible arm of defence. It is in this light and in pursuit of a broad range of opportunities that other women - non-feminist unionists and their feminist sisters - more optimistically, look.

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<sup>11</sup>Forrest substantiates her assessment of the possibilities for women unions through a summary of unions' most severe transgressions:

The multiple ways in which collective bargaining has been used to ignore or marginalize the needs of women are part of the legacy of trade unions that is 'missing' from the textbooks...[I]ssues of craft autonomy and 'dual' unionism, the designation of 'men's' and 'women's' jobs, discriminatory pay schemes, truncated seniority structures, and the like - mechanisms devised by unions to protect male privilege - form no part of the story of unionism that is passed on ...Exclusion and segregation continue to be the norm in unions and unionized workplaces and women who attempt to break through into men's privileged space are frequently punished. Derided, insulted, occasionally assaulted, women in a 'man's' workplace are immediately sexualized and treated as 'fair game'. For women, sexual harassment is not an aberration but a constant, a means by which men - managers and workers alike - police the dividing line between men's and women's worlds.' (1993:332)

Her argument is that job segregation is a reflection of male power: that unions, working in complicity with employers, are part of the male power structure and actively defend male privilege (Forrest 1993:336). A significant case exists.

<sup>12</sup>Of course many Canadian women disagree with Forrest (see for example Judy Darcy's foreword in Briskin and McDermott 1993: ix).

Many women working in unions are well described as practical pragmatists, with a view that they have no choice but to engage in unions to improve their lot in paid work. The goals for such women are to improve the lot of themselves and other workers through their unionism, and they join or engage with unions is a practical requirement. They see work through this channel as simply necessary. And of course for many, this involvement brings many pleasures.

Alongside these, a large number of women working in unions identify as feminists. While some are socialist in orientation, most are not. Their feminism is held dear, in close competition at times, with their unionism. Indeed it is through their connection with women that many are organised in their unions and beyond them - through women's caucuses and informal friendships, events and relationships. For many of these women, traditional unionism is an uncomfortable compromise with some discomforts which Sugiman accurately captures with respect to feminist activism in Canadian unions<sup>13</sup>:

Feminism and unionism co-exist uneasily in the labour movement. For working-class women, the union represents a viable vehicle for achieving social change. It is an important reference point and resource. Feminist unionists have promoted a greater inclusiveness of the union membership and they have expanded labour's agenda. However, women have had to wage their struggles within a masculine context. They have therefore tried to combine conventional union principles with ideas about women's rights in a way that makes sense to them and is acceptable and legitimate to working-class men. In short, these women have developed a feminist unionism - a type of unionism that has been shaped by relations between men and women, as well as between employers and workers. (1993:184)

It is probably true to say of this group of women that they take their opportunities wherever they see them; now in a union election, now in shaping an industrial campaign, now in a recruitment strategy or in work to maximise the benefits which can be wrung from a wages system. Diverse initiatives, shaped by local current circumstances are the daily

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<sup>13</sup>Though her second sentence would seem to suggest, against Australian experience at least, that working class women were not feminists and perhaps that unionism offered middle class women 'less'.



work of feminist unionists, amongst whom it is useful to distinguish the theoretical positions of liberal feminist and socialist feminists

Many of the important achievements of feminism from the time of Mary Wollstonecraft rest on the success for women who worked from a liberal feminist framework, including in the union movement. Much of the current agenda for women in unions reflects a liberal feminist perspective<sup>14</sup>. With its emphasis upon rights, individual capacities and rationality, liberal feminism focuses upon 'women' and the individual effort of women to achieve equality within society and its institutions through the removal of discriminatory barriers.

However, this charter is too narrow when applied to the world of unionism. It is based on theories of equality and sameness, which have been exposed as problematic in the way it limits goals and contains or distorts possibilities (Gross 1986). It does not usually take on a transformative stance with respect to institutions and society: its sights are set upon entry, progression, fair representation alongside men, and - at least in most traditional forms - liberal feminism has failed to address structural and material factors which severely constrain most women. A platform of rights and equal pay, equal opportunity, anti-discrimination and anti-sexual harassment legislation can only go so far in meeting women's situation. It relies on the individual's assertion of her rights and ignores the many structural, economic and legal reasons which stand in the way of successful assertion of those rights.

Liberal feminist goals in unions include those focused upon removing discriminatory obstacles to women's position in unions (for example, rules which work against women's

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<sup>14</sup>Current ACTU policy on women affirms commitment to existing policies like the Working Women's Charter and suggests the following priorities:

1. Women's right to work
2. Equal pay for work of equal value
3. Improvements in conditions for workers with family responsibilities
4. Improvements in child care provision
5. Equal opportunity, affirmative action and freedom from sexual harassment
6. Better representation of women in unions (ACTU Working Women's Policy 1991, revised in 1995 with the same categories intact).

The Women's Standing Committee of the UTLC of South Australia put these more generally in March 1995 when it revised its two goals to the promotion of union policy and practice which encourage and support women's membership of and leadership in unions and to action within and through the trade union movement to improve the position of working women (Women's Standing Committee, Minutes of Meeting 16th March 1995:1).

These charters and policies suggests that - at a general and minimum level - the official forums of Australian union organisations in a contemporary setting, share the (liberal feminist) aims of access to paid work, improvements in the industrial working conditions of women ( for example equal pay), improvements in the conditions which 'enable' paid work for women/parents and appropriate inclusion and representation in unions.

election, membership or voice), obstacles to achieving equality of position, or barriers to *equal* working conditions and treatment of women workers with men. Equality goals in unions, in the current situation, lock women into an unproductive and restrictive sameness discourse which privileges male norms and practices. While many of the goals of liberal feminism are important to improving women's workplace situation, they are far from sufficient, and in some cases - as in the case of the goal of equal pay for equal work - they undermine the momentum of initiatives, organisation and arguments in favour of more significant and necessary changes. On the other hand liberal feminist goals, and their basis in a discourse of same treatment and removal of discrimination, are easier to win public, union and state support for, compared to the complexity and cost involved in activities where difference is acknowledged and affirmative action is implied.

For many women activists, the liberal agenda is not sufficient. The growing prominence of issues related to domestic work and care for dependents illustrates a tendency for women union activists, in practice in Australia in the 1990s, to work increasingly from an acknowledgment of differences between women and men, and to argue that the current terms of political/union engagement advantage men (Eveline 1994:24). This tendency has strengthened since the mid-eighties.

The limitations of the 'rights' framework of liberal feminism have often been argued by socialist and radical feminists and are also illustrated by theoretical developments which expose the sexual contract underpinning the social contract of Western democracies (as well as the central citizenship goals implied in socialism).

Significant numbers of feminist activists in unions have held and hold other, larger goals including those of socialism. Beyond inclusion, they have sought and seek transformation, holding hopes that activism in unions will bring democratisation and provide a channel through which other social conditions - such as private ownership of the means of production - can be challenged. While for some socialist feminists<sup>15</sup>, this title has meant

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<sup>15</sup>Marxist and socialist theories about the potential revolutionary capacities of the labour movement have been the subject of much debate. Marx saw this potential in some circumstances, while Lenin was much more pessimistic and perceived unions under capitalism as necessarily economic and incorporated within capitalism in the absence of a revolutionary party. These debates and their contemporary equivalents, which are not irrelevant to discussion of the prospects for feminist goals through unions, are beyond the scope of this thesis. It is fair to say, however, that Lenin's more pessimistic diagnosis has proved the most common reality, with unions in Australia (including the left) increasingly

little more than the "foregrounding" of issues of class (Pringle 1988b), others have held hopes for the feminist transformation of unions well beyond the narrow horizons of 'inclusion' and fair social and money wages - to unions as a base for challenges to patriarchal *and* capitalist relations. Some have seen, with Marxists, a strategic role for unions as vehicles for changing the ownership of the means of production through worker revolt<sup>16</sup>. Other socialist-feminists have seen, more pragmatically, that unions hold certain standing and influence with the state, or can exercise power through the withdrawal of workers' labour, and so can exercise political power to improve conditions of women (and other) workers.

While the precise meaning of being a socialist feminist is unsettled, women working from this standpoint place priority upon analysis of, and resistance to, capitalism. While efforts to theorise the relationship between capitalism and patriarchal relations have foundered upon what Pringle characterises as an over-earnest attempt to "theorise the social totality" (1995:202), they give significant priority to the features of capitalism which affect women's situation, both in paid work but also outside it, in the shaping of the public/private split<sup>17</sup>. Socialist feminists can be distinguished from Marxist feminists who might argue that capitalism caused the separation of home and work, and the devaluation of home/private sphere. However, socialist feminists like Heidi Hartmann point out that this analysis gives no clues as to why women should fill one set of places and men the other: patriarchy is necessary to complete the picture (Hartmann 1981).

Socialist feminism brought relations between men and women in production and social reproduction into principal focus and posited from the mid-seventies especially, that the

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drawn into a corporatist union discourse (and practice) which is less and less critical of the terms of capitalism and more and more attuned to 'building better models' of such a system (see for example ACTU/TDC Australia Reconstructed 1987).

<sup>16</sup>Ralph Miliband explicates one version:

[L]abour movements are indispensable for the purpose [of radical transformation]. Here again, the argument is not that labour movements in advanced capitalist countries will necessarily play this transformative role. Nor is it to accord some kind of arbitrarily 'privileged' place to labour movements, out of metaphysical belief in the 'mission' of the working class. The argument is that without labour movements organized as political forces, no fundamental challenge to the existing social order can ever be mounted. For organized labour does have a *greater potential strength, cohesion, and capacity* to act as a transformative force than any other force in society (1991:109, my emphasis)

<sup>17</sup>In this usage of public/private I mean the split between the private domestic world and the public world of paid work and orthodox politics.

liberation of women was intimately bound up with worker's liberation from waged labour. Capitalist and patriarchal relations<sup>18</sup> were entwined, reinforcing and propagating each other. While some socialist feminists argued that women could only be liberated with the end of capitalism, many saw this as a necessary but far from sufficient condition. Feminist theory has moved well beyond the inadequate - indeed sex-blind - theoretical categories of Marxism and any supposition (with Lenin and Engels) that women's liberation lay simply in their entry to the public labour force (Cockburn 1991:22). Clearly the explanation for the current shape of patriarchal relations lies elsewhere than merely in capitalism, and analysis of the non-waged private sphere must be admitted to any analysis of women's situation and patriarchal structures in ways which Marxism cannot accommodate.

Socialist feminists have always had arguments with socialists<sup>19</sup> over the 'true bases' of oppression (class versus gender) and their 'ranking', with Marxists and many socialists holding a firm view that 'women's questions' are second to those of the liberation of the proletariat. This struggle for theoretical primacy has never been satisfactorily resolved (Pringle 1995, Tong 1989). Pringle argues that there is perhaps no need to have a theory of the material bases of capitalism or patriarchal relations: it is enough to look at smaller questions/situations and their possibilities. However, socialist feminist theory is helpful to the study of gender in unions because it brings employers' strategies for profit maximisation, wage minimisation and against worker resistance, into view. It also allows us to examine the ways in which the spheres of paid work and the domestic world intersect and reinforce each other. As Cockburn describes:

The struggle for women's equality as workers in the paid workforce therefore has had to take the form of a double resistance. On the one hand women have had to struggle against the terms of engagement between employer and employed...It has, in other words, had to be a *socialist* struggle, alongside working men, using similar resources

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<sup>18</sup>Rosemary Pringle argues for the overthrow of rigid rhetorical nouns like 'patriarchy' with their "overarching 'systems' or 'logics' of oppression" in favour of the examination of local power dynamics: to look instead at "concrete instances of gender domination and its interrelation with class, ethnicity, sexuality, politics and culture - all analysed in the context of their historical development" (1995:202-210). In view of Pringle's critique of the deterministic character of the term 'patriarchy' I adopt the phrase 'patriarchal relations'.

<sup>19</sup>From the early days of the Russian revolution and before. Lenin criticised Clara Zetkin's temerity in discussing sexual matters with women while true socialists and communists battled for the survival of the 1917 revolution (Tong 1989:173).

of organized labour in the workplace and in society. On the other hand it has necessarily had to be a feminist struggle against the imposition of male sex-right by both employer and male colleagues (1991:24).

In Australia, socialist feminists have been the group amongst feminists with greatest interest in work through unions. They were especially in evidence in this work between the mid-seventies and mid-eighties; more recently an explicit socialist-feminism has been in decline and the precise meanings of socialist feminism have been debated<sup>20</sup>.

A useful example of the productive application of a socialist feminist viewpoint is provided by Cynthia Cockburn's studies of masculinity at work through unionism. Despite the patterns she systematically chronicles, where male workers and their organisations reinforce women's disadvantage, she continues to argue for the transformation of the union agenda and structure to overcome the legacy of craft unionism's exclusionary tactics (1985:245). She argues for a new unionism which places better training and jobs for women high on its agenda, which redefines the notion of 'working class' to include women, and recognises and responds to women's needs:

The need, then, is for a turn around in trade union organization to change what union membership means to women; and a change in trade union strategies to bring about a thorough-going transformation of work itself (1985:248).

Cockburn argues for autonomous organisation amongst women as a necessary ingredient for a full women's voice, and takes up this theme in 1991 when separate organising and a strong women's presence in union leadership show the way to new forms of union success (1991).

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<sup>20</sup>The reasons for that decline are illustrated, in part, by the debate between Rosemary Pringle and Anne Curthoys in their exchange within the pages of *Australian Feminist Studies* in 1988 over the goals and limitations of socialist feminism. Curthoys argued that the 'socialism' in socialist feminist is underworked and needs revitalisation to become more than a minor modifier of feminism: feminists need to rethink the idea of socialism and strengthen their critique of social democracy. She argues further that socialist feminists should "transform rather than discard the socialist tradition" (1988:23). Against this, Pringle points out that socialist feminists never satisfactorily reconciled the two 'bases' of oppression, and that socialism for many years dominated feminism in theory and practice: why should feminists now do the theoretical housework involved in revitalising socialism when they have moved so far in advance of it? She rejects the assumption that "gender relations have anything to do with the 'mode of production' - their connection has to be established and this is simply one question to raise and not always the most urgent" (1988b:28).

If socialist feminism is interpreted as placing weight upon examination of and resistance to women's position under capitalism then it is very useful to the work of women in unions, since it offers a framework of analysis for criticising and understanding capitalism and its many negative effects upon women. (while not advocating socialism as a system). I favour this approach which applies the tools of socialist analysis with respect to the world of capitalism, particularly to an understanding of unionism.

### **3.3.1 Feminist Theory: From 'Inclusion' to Autonomy - to Male Advantage and Resistance**

Many of the key themes reflected in the different feminist frameworks outlined above, are reflected in shifts in feminist theory over recent decades. Elizabeth Gross has described the evolution of feminist theory about oppression as moving from a discourse of inclusion to one of autonomy and female difference. In its 'inclusive' phase "instead of being ignored by and excluded from theory, women were to be included as possible objects of investigation." (Gross 1986:190). In time, feminist theory has moved on to critique the male norms which a theory of inclusion holds in place:

today feminist theory is involved in both an *anti-sexist* project, which involves challenging and deconstructing phallogentric discourses; and in a positive project of constructing and developing alternative models, methods procedures, discourses etc. (Gross 1986:195).

Theory and research about women in unions provides a good example of these successive theoretical approaches at work: the anti-sexist project here is to critically examine the discourses which position women as less than 'proper' unionists, as creatures which must adapt to the male norms, as the 'disadvantaged' or as outsiders to be excluded where they 'threaten' men. These are rife in the history of unionism and also in much contemporary research about women in unions. The masculine point of view has been implicitly dominant in these organisations and the study of them, but presented as if 'sexually neutral', to use Gross's phrase (1986:195).

But feminist theory's task goes beyond anti-sexist critical deconstruction, to one of asserting different paradigms and new bases of knowledge and - as a theory which is also a

strategy - "it aims to render patriarchal systems, methods and presumptions unable to function, unable to retain their dominance and power" (Gross:197). According to Gross, the tasks of feminist theory are analysing masculine discourses, recognising what these leave out, analysing the effects of these gaps, and developing knowledge and representations of knowledge which supersede imperfect, incomplete or simply wrong, masculine discourses. In undertaking these tasks, feminist theory has established the importance of theories of difference (of women from men and between women) and this has had important implications for feminist activism as it has exposed the 'sameness' requirement which underlies the concept of 'women's disadvantage' (Bacchi 1990).

### 3.3.2 Male Advantage: A Critical Strategic Inversion

Joan Eveline's contribution to feminist theory takes this analysis further by arguing for a 'strategic inversion' which places the analytical spotlight on *male advantage* rather than women's disadvantage. The 'women's disadvantage' discourse leaves male advantage in the background so that it remains "primarily normalised, and tacitly familiar" (Eveline 1994b:134). Eveline builds upon Daphne Patai's argument for the usefulness of strategic inversions which put 'men' in place of 'women' to expose the dominant/subservient relations which are implicit in many accounts of social relations (Eveline 1994b:148). The focus on women's disadvantage has meant the loss of an important rhetorical/political device and an inadequate analysis of male power:

the everyday spectrum of privileges that accrue to men are taken as unremarkable...Hence not only the ways in which men are implicated in sustaining that sexual ordering is obfuscated; the material advantages, and the dynamics by which they are accorded, also remain unspoken (Eveline 1994b: 130).

She argues for the addition of a new trope, male advantage, to the lexicon of feminist rhetoric and theory, alongside the tropes of 'disadvantage', 'equality' and 'difference'. Disrupting male norms through the analysis and naming of male advantage adds an important tool to the box of feminist theory and strategies, and may "take us further toward redeploing some of the goods - material and ideal, thought and thing - to which the phrase refers" (1994b:129). Eveline argues for the creation of a new "rhetorical stress point"

which names male advantage, making it a site of struggle and she calls for more empirical research to detail it (1994b:148).

Cynthia Cockburn is one who takes on the study of male advantage in her study of equal opportunity in the United Kingdom. In this work she describes how men resist and resent women's 'incursions' into their space and power, how they band together - across employment hierarchies - to protect their shared male sex-right, and how the domestic gender settlement constrains women's public participation. She takes as one of her cases a large public sector union and here her research documents male resistance to women and redressing women's disadvantage (Cockburn 1991: 112). Cockburn shows how men oppose women's presence in the union through the hours of employment, the style of unionism, the existence of heroic archetypes, the active positioning of women as lesser union performers than men and 'women's issues' as marginal, and through outright antagonism and misogyny:

There is active resistance by men. They generate *institutional* impediments to stall women's advance in organizations. At a *cultural* level, they foster solidarity between men and sexualize, threaten, marginalize, control and divide women. (Cockburn 1991:215).

This conclusion - which includes unions, perhaps especially applies to them - does not stop Cockburn from seeing unions as capable of enormous transformative capacity:

political parties and trade unions are of all organizations those most open to organized pressure by large numbers of active women members...In theory there is considerable, as yet scarcely tested, scope for trade unions to transform themselves in the interests of their female, black and lowest-paid members. Once transformed, their influence for sex and race equality in employing organizations could be great (Cockburn 1991:229).

Cockburn's research about gender and work organisation, and about men's resistance to equal opportunity in the United Kingdom, including within unions, provides an important example of a fully realised gender study which gives real insight about male behaviour and its implications for feminisms' agendas. What is more, it is one of the few studies which shows male resistance and advantage based on empirical study. If men are advantaged it



stands to reason that they will fight to protect that advantage. This struggle to retain and defend male advantage is conveniently concealed in the discourse of 'women's disadvantage'. It is revealed in the study of male advantage and its corollary, male resistance. I argue in this study that men are greatly advantaged in and through Australian unions, and that this advantage is protected through a range of male resistance strategies. Understanding these and correctly seeing their theoretical importance must call into life feminist strategies to meet them.

### 3.3.3 Male Sex-Right and the Terms of Political Engagement

Alongside the concepts of equality, difference, male advantage and male resistance, feminist sexual contract theory throws considerable light upon the nature of male unionism and its possibilities/limitations. In the sexual contract, Carole Pateman has revealed a contract which (along with the slave contract and the rule of white over black), is implicit in the social contract (1988). The social contract is a political fiction which confers upon the individual the right of citizenship in exchange for the rule of civil law<sup>21</sup>. In this modern social contract, through which political life is constructed, the 'individual' is male, and implicit in the social contract is a sexual contract establishing male sex-right: "a patriarchal social order" (Pateman 1988:1). Women's subjugation in the private sphere underwrites men's freedom in the public sphere: "What it means to be an 'individual', a maker of contracts and civilly free, is revealed by the subjection of women within the private sphere" (Pateman 1988:11). Through the sexual contract men gain sexual access to women's bodies and to "right of command" over the use of women's bodies. The 'family' wage, paid to men with the effect of formalising women's dependent status at home and 'right' to lesser wages, is a clear illustration of how male sex-right and the sexual contract reach into the world of work and unionism<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup>In her work Pateman acknowledges that some of her arguments were prompted by the work of radical feminists, though she is one of those who criticises the set of labels (radicals, liberals and socialists) as always making feminism "secondary, a supplement to other doctrines" (1988:x).

<sup>22</sup>Along with many of their intellectual opponents, Marx and Engels 'forgot' the sexual contract and their notions of 'citizenship' are as blind to the sexual contract as other political discourses (Pateman 1988:136).

Pateman points out that while women's subjugation is based in the domestic sphere, its effects are not confined to it: prostitution and surrogacy are examples of the public expression of women's subjugation, as are the wages system and the sex segmentation of the public labour market. Women cannot become equal in the workplace when the material conditions of the sexual contract create "a patriarchal division of labour, not only in the conjugal home between the (house)wife and her husband, but in the workplaces of civil society" (Pateman 1988:135):

Even as workers, women are subordinated to men in a different way than men are subordinated to other men. Women have not been incorporated into the patriarchal structure of capitalist employment as 'workers'; they have been incorporated as *women*; and how can it be otherwise when women are not, and cannot be, men? The sexual contract is an integral part of civil society and the employment contract; sexual domination structures the workplace as well as the conjugal home. To be sure, men are also subordinates as workers - but to see the worker as no more than a wage slave fails to capture a vital dimension of his position in civil society; he is that curiosity, an *unfree master* (Pateman 1988:142)

In Pateman's account, as men became 'workers' in the public sphere, few were willing to "relinquish their patriarchal right" to a servant at home (Pateman 1988:136). Public 'work' for men was underwritten by private labour by women at home which was not called work.

Cynthia Cockburn has set out how the sexual contract is at work in unionism to constrain women's involvement, particularly through the operation of the domestic gender 'settlement': women's responsibility for children and the domestic prevents their union activism (Cockburn 1991). Sexual contract theory suggests that, just as the sexual contract underwrites the employment contract (where workers are men and women are women, and the difference disadvantages women), it also underwrites *the terms of political engagement*. This means that women's presence in unions or in any organisational or representative political structure, reflective of the social/sexual contract and designed for citizen 'man', will not suit women. Women's activism, their power, their representation is always affected by the sexual contract.

As we see in chapter four in Australia, men actively constructed their workplace advantage upon women's disadvantage and exclusion; their admission or 'protection' was usually admissible only when male advantage was bolstered by doing so.

This has important implications for the theoretical possibilities and strategy for women in unions. As Pateman says men's identity is constructed through paid work and unions are "fraternal territory" (Pateman 1988:141), mapped out and constructed on the terms of the sexual contract. The sexual division of labour between the public and private spheres and the shape and terms of unionism - as in other political organisations - crippled and constricted women's terms of political engagement while advantaging men. The dimensions of this advantage/disadvantage, as we shall see are well illustrated on the turf of Australian unions. Sexual contract theory makes evident the nature of the fundamental transformation of political practice which is necessary in Australian unions.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In sum, Australian unions make a useful site amongst others for feminist activism. While constrained by a range of factors, real possibilities exist. Some of the diverse goals of feminism can be assisted through union activism. I reject the abstentionism of radical feminists with respect to unions: while not all feminists will (or should!) do this work, it has important potentials although they vary historically and geographically. Liberal feminist goals are of very limited current use as a framework for feminist activism in unions. On the other hand, sexual contract theory, and the exposure of the fraternal nature of the social contract as conferring citizenship upon men while subjugating women, point to a strong case for the use of the theoretical device of 'patriarchy' (or patriarchal patterns) to understand the limitations of unionism for women. Socialist feminism offers useful complementary theoretical insights for feminists in their union work, bringing the dynamics and effects of capitalism and workplace relations between employer and employed into view.

The assertion of unions as a useful site of feminist work does not imply an argument for their privileging over other sites, nor for the theoretical privileging of 'class' or the public world of work. It cannot be convincingly argued that the exploitation of the working class is

'the' major base of oppression, thus elevating the role of unions in the leadership of movements against oppressions. While an 'hierarchy' of oppressions (gender versus class versus 'race' and so on) was much argued in the seventies and eighties, we are perhaps liberated from the pursuit of any holistic *theory* of the 'bases' of oppression and their interlocking mechanisms, by recent developments in feminist and poststructural critiques of theory and new definitions of power (Pringle, for example, dismisses the misplaced search for "overarching systems or 'logics' of oppression" 1995:210).

My positing of systemic patterns of class and gender oppression in contemporary Australian society suggests emancipatory goals: at least the diminution of such oppression. These goals for women in unions, however, cannot be claimed as primary, and so crowd out the claims of liberation from, say, racial oppression. They sit alongside other feminist, emancipatory goals, both *within* and *without* the world of unions and paid work. They cannot be claimed as any kind of strategically significant motor, or high ground of oppression, as say Marxism claimed for the working class (or some feminists claimed for 'women'); to do so precludes a range of other goals which many women would and do support and work towards.

For me these goals require a changed social life which, to borrow from Pauline Johnson, "realises the humanistic principles of equity, democracy and social justice". This is not a goal of mere "equality with men" (Johnson 1988:180); such a goal, which does not transform the conditions of the sexual contract, is not emancipatory for women. Instead I take up developments in feminist theory which argue for consideration of 'difference from men', for an autonomy from male standards, and argue for analysis of male advantage and its lively twin, male resistance.

While local studies of the dynamics of gender and unionism are invaluable (see Cockburn 1991; Frances 1993; Metcalfe 1988; Gibson-Graham 1995) there is also a place for larger systemic assessments; of women's and men's place in organisations, of the patterns of participation in those of organisations, and of the response in organisations to gender issues. It is to such a systemic analysis that I turn in the remainder of this thesis.

Activism in unions is usefully analysed in terms which keep in simultaneous view contests over the terms of work (between employer and worker) and contests over

patriarchal patterns of dominance of women by men and 'their' organisations. In Cockburn's phrase: working women must continue to fight a double struggle "now against the boss, now against the brothers" (Cockburn 1991:25). Some of the elements of that historic 'double struggle' in Australia are canvassed in the next chapter, revealing the complex and changing intersections of class and gender.

## Chapter 4

### Fractured Solidarity:

#### Some Historical Examples of Gender Politics in Australian Unions

##### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses some historical examples of gender politics in Australian unions. This discussion is undertaken to provide a perspective from which to view contemporary unions and their strategies and organisation<sup>1</sup>. It does not draw on original source material, nor does it constitute even a summary of a history of women in Australian unions. It does not extend the bounds of our historical knowledge of women and men in unions; instead I am weighing some examples of union action where women figure, or where the exclusions of women have been studied<sup>2</sup>.

Several themes recur through this material and it is to these we turn at the conclusion of the chapter. The evidence of male obstruction to women's effective presence in unions is striking, along with the absence of sustained solidarity between the sexes within unions in pursuit of advantages specifically for women who remain amongst the most low paid and exploited workers.

While the history of women's activism in the labour movement is full of light and shade, of compromise and concession, I have argued in the previous chapter that it is neither useful nor possible to dismiss 'unions' or the 'labour movement' as the historical enemy of 'feminism' or women: not useful because strategic opportunities have existed and been

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<sup>1</sup>Historical writing about women in Australian unions has generally occurred around specific events, institutions and within quite specific time spans; no comprehensive historical feminist survey exists. The predominance of men writing in the field of labour studies and labour history means that in most of this literature men and their actions and organisations remain in central (or exclusive) focus, with little regard to the involvement of, or even effects upon, women and little regard for the mechanics of masculinity (Lake 1986c).

<sup>2</sup>Ample opportunity exists for further detailed study of the relationships between women and unions in specific historical settings and industries; Frances' 1993 book (for example pages 116-129) provides an important Australian example of the illuminating value of such detailed study, as does Cockburn's work in Britain. While considerable work has been undertaken, particularly by women, in recent decades, and while some gaps are beginning to be addressed, many remain (Frances and Scates 1991). Some labour historians have criticised labour historians for their preoccupation with institutions of the labour movement (like unions) and the sphere of paid work at the cost of the broader social and especially domestic spheres. While this tendency is clear, the gendered history of Australian unions is far from exhaustively studied.

exploited; not possible because women are, and have long been, in unions and are always affected by what unions do, and frequently have resisted or attempted to reshape union action and organisation. However, even this brief survey of some features of Australian unions' history illustrates the need for a clear vision of the past relationship of 'union' with women (and men).

The effort to understand this experience is essential: missing the large, systemic patterns which are suggested by this reading of history debilitates contemporary strategic effort and analysis. At the same time, detailed institutional, historically specific studies (like those of Laura Bennett and others) suggest that a deep understanding of the political, social and economic aspects of any situation are essential, and certainly take us well beyond any simple assertion of 'patriarchy' in explaining the gendering of the Australian labour market and movement.

A reading of labour history with gender in view suggests that feminists must approach Australian unions with great scepticism: they have been convincingly convicted as collaborating vehicles of oppression for women in many historical instances. Four of these are explored below: firstly the ways in which unionism expressed, protected and constructed masculinity; secondly male unionists' frequent scepticism about, and opposition to, women's rights to paid work and union membership; thirdly, the vexed issue of the family wage and equal pay; and finally unions' collaboration in the establishment of a sex-segmented labour market - one of the most extreme in the western world (OECD 1984) - and their resistance to the proper valuation of women's skills and work.

## 4.2 Identities: Gender, Masculinity and Unionism

Feminists have long speculated upon the role of unions as active agents for the construction of male advantage and male identities<sup>3</sup>: masculine identities are implicitly evident in many early practices and institutions of worker resistance whether through unionism or socialism (Campbell 1984, Lake 1986b, Damousi 1994). The role of unions in the construction of masculinities in the early industrial age is illustrated in Engels' classic accounts of

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<sup>3</sup>Bob Connell (1995) draws our attention to the diversity of masculine identities; while these certainly vary, it is their *masculinity* - in which they share some characteristics in relation to women - that I am holding in prime focus.

industrialisation where he writes that "I have shown in a hundred ways in the foregoing pages, and could have shown in a hundred others, that, in our present society, [the working man] can save his manhood only in hatred and rebellion against the bourgeoisie" (Engels 1969:239). Engels saw industrialisation as emasculating men: resistance through unions - and socialism - was a road back to virility.

Marx was also alert to the social function which socialist organisation performed for men in building their brotherhood:

When communist workmen associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need - the need for society - and what appears as a means becomes an end. You can observe this practical process in its most splendid results whenever you see French socialist workers together. Company, association, and conversation, which again has society as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies (Marx *1844 Manuscripts*, quoted in Baxandall 1976:270).

Women had little place in such a brotherhood and its constructions of masculine identities. Marilyn Lake argues that "the labour movement was also a men's movement that arose in response to particular historical grievances...The labour movement arose out of men's experience of work and met men's needs; it was a response to men's degradation as men as well as their exploitation as workers" (Lake 1986a:137). Barbara Taylor in her study of Owenism in England speaks of 'sexual crisis' amongst men as they fought for their interests against women and the lesser skilled: "Competition and antagonism between men and women in the sphere of waged work often translated into disrupted patterns of patriarchal authority in the domestic sphere" as men fought women's competition in the labour market and in their unions (Taylor 1983:94).

In Australia, Marilyn Lake asks whether the process of immigration to Australia for men was in itself a mission "to rescue their manhood" and she takes William Lane as a useful illustrative case of the links between masculinity, socialism and unionism in early Australian radical movements in the late nineteenth century (1986b:54). She argues that Lane saw capitalist productive relations as robbing men of their manhood so that unionism (the



socialist's school) was manly, and socialism itself even more so: "Until such time as socialism was achieved, men could assert their manhood through trade unionism. Unionism was manly." (Lake 1986a:141)<sup>4</sup>. Lake has argued that the unspoken masculinity of the myth of an 'Australian character' - and his comrade, the good unionist mate - conceals many other stories of women's experience<sup>5</sup>.

In introducing a set of studies about the formation of masculinities in three different work/domestic situations, Cockburn describes how "The mutuality of the urban working men gave them fraternity. Fraternity however gave them also the organised power to marginalise women at work and the cultural dynamism to subdue them at home." (Cockburn 1989:163). Unionism in many different settings became a vehicle of dominance: "The power relations of labour extend down through the working class - artisan, semi-skilled man, casual hand, unemployed - so that men are in struggle with men to maintain an order of privilege in which some win but all are deformed." (Cockburn 1989:161). Women generally form some of the lower rungs of this ladder and unionism has been one of the chief historical mechanisms by which it has been policed.

David Atkins' research about unionism and gender amongst Australian meatworkers in the 1950s in Victoria gives explicit support to these perspectives. Through material gleaned from union journals, the arguments presented by unionists at arbitration hearings, and other sources, Atkin demonstrates the links between unionism and masculinity:

masculinity was connected to unionism...manhood intertwined with class solidarity.

In post war Australia trade unions utilised men's gender identities to engender support

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<sup>4</sup>This reading of William Lane's socialism (and radicalism in the era more generally) is disputed by others like Bruce Scates, who argues that another reading of Lane's fiction, in the context of Lane's overall writing and political work, is possible: one where Lane's socialism did not exclude a fuller humanity for women, beyond motherhood and conventional sexual divisions of labour (Scates 1990). Scates does, however, agree with Lake's view that the Australian labour movement "became a man's movement in every sense of the word" (Scates 1991:121).

<sup>5</sup>This has led John Docker to decry the replacement of the old tales of a singular "Australian identity" (like that fostered by Russell Ward (1956)) with a new "Feminist Legend" - just as historicist as the one it critiques and "crude and reductive" in construction (Docker 1993: 26, 1991). Docker does not, however, repudiate Lake's central point of interest here: her characterisation of the labour movement in these formative years as "a men's movement" (Lake 1986c:6). And, in fact, Lake admits diverse and conflictual elements with a dominating masculinist context, contrasting William Lane's support for women's rights and freedom from domestic slavery, with other men's enthusiasm for - amongst other things - a misogynist larrikinism and the exploitation of women (Lake 1986c:14).

and empower men's class and gender interests. This distinctive masculine culture was organised around the unifying experience of paid work based on constant struggles with employers and the celebration of the union man. Mateship was fostered by unions to encourage men to remain loyal to each other, to see themselves as part of a greater brotherhood of man (Atkin 1991:15).

His work shows the material resistance men made, on the whole, to women's presence in 'their' industry, unions, jobs and skills. Union cartoons of the 1950s showed the explicit equation of masculinity with unionism, and the construction of women which is the reverse side of this coin: women as sex object, dependent, competitor; rarely women as worker, co-oppressed, comrade<sup>6</sup>.

Lake and Atkin argue that this equation of independence with masculinity transposed into a 'masculinity-equals-family-supporter' discourse in the early twentieth century, neatly complementing the family wage strategies then pursued (Lake 1986b:62, Aitkin 1991).

Based on her history of women and identity in Australia between 1788 and 1975, Dixon was moved to ask "whether there is some curious anthropological male-bonding quality 'imprinted' into trade unionism through the circumstances of its origins in the nineteenth century" (1976:35). She goes on to write of the toxic effects of the Australian male ethos of mateship (Dixon 1976:81) and agrees with Lake's suggestion (made much later) that unionism provided some fillip for men's 'psychological needs' in the early part of this century<sup>7</sup>.

Cynthia Cockburn takes up this theme in her studies of work organisation and skill in recent decades in England. Her work with respect to the printing industry in England in 1983 provides a portrait of how printing unions "continued to be male clubs and their

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<sup>6</sup>Alongside the discourses of union/masculinity and woman/competitor are those of male homosociability, homosexuality and homophobia which Murray Couch's work in Broken Hill reveals: unionism in this case has served as both a bulwark against the incursion of married women (as in the case of the Barrier Industrial Council's struggle against married women's employment in the mining town) and against the public expression of male homosexuality (Couch 1995).

<sup>7</sup>In 1975, while writing of the Australian union movement's 'historical contempt' for women, Dixon placed some hope in the signs of change she discerned amongst younger and older working class men: "So to any of my readers who, like me, are labour movement women, my message would be - it's over to us. Right on!" (1976:39).

procedures and customs, language and ideology, to be the cultural and political expression of manhood as much as of labourism" (Cockburn 1983: 34)<sup>8</sup>.

The marking out of labouring work - work with the hands or on machines - as the proper province of unions, immediately places much of women's work (and potential unionism) beyond the reach of masculine unionism. Clearly, even paid domestic service, paid care of elders, the sick or children, prostitution, retailing, nursing, and the areas of 'white collar' work which expanded over this century and where many women worked - clerical work, administration, teaching and public service - were marked as beyond 'real unionism' through most of Australian unionism's first half century (Turner 1976, Patmore 1991). These fields were not masculine, therefore not part of (masculine) unionism<sup>9</sup>. Much union organisation which occurred in these areas was done by women. In this context a feminine presence on the masculine terrain of unionism represented an assault upon masculine identity and patterns of male sociability. Women tiptoed around male egos and were often very aware of how, in their organising and their unionism, they must take care not to wake the beast of offended masculine pride and identity, so evident in the fabric of unionism and union leadership (D'Aprano 1995, Grimshaw 1993).

The specific locations of union work are also relevant here. From the earliest years of unionism, pubs have been a principal site of organisation with the clear effect of excluding women, well into the present day. Dorothy Thompson observes of Chartism in the 1830s and 1840s "As the numbers of active Chartists declined, and few localities were able to maintain their own premises, the beer-shop offered an obvious meeting-place", possibly, she notes, accentuating the withdrawal of women from politics at that time, including many women who were active in early union formations and the many forms of resistance to early industrialisation. Women were certainly aware of the effect this had on their involvement: the Women's Rights Association of Sheffield complained to fellow Chartists in the 1840s that women's support for Chartism would not occur "while men continue to advocate or

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<sup>8</sup>Her work also shows a detailed picture of the various ways in which groups of male workers subscribed to the notion of the family wage, and worked hard to maintain notions of their 'skill' against those of others (see below).

<sup>9</sup>Nor, for the large part, its academic discussion.

meet in pot-houses, spending their money, and debarring us from a share in their political freedom" (Thompson 1976:136).

The pub has been an important historical site of Australian unionism, and its use has carried important consequences for women. Hey's study of pub culture in Britain for example, explores some of the ways in which masculinity is constituted, and provide insights about unionism (a kind of 'pub' in itself, and certainly an organisational form which has traditionally made great use of them): "the pub is used to reinforce the cult of masculinity, women are used to maintain solidarity" (Brake 1980: 150 quoted in Hey 1986:63).

Accounts of women's experiences in early and more recent Australian unionism form a strong contrast to the *bonhomie*, the sense of belonging which men knew and enjoyed. Instead women speak of the experience that their personal and 'felt' concerns, and their various identities, were not legitimated in their social and political experiences of unionism. For example, Zelda D'Aprano observed of her many years of political activism:

It is interesting to note that in all my struggles in the trade union movement I never once *saw myself as a woman*. I never brought up any issues about women's problems, I never saw my own pain or problems as political or having any place within the trade union movement. Even the question of child care, and yet when my child was young I was so desperately affected by the lack of child care. Eventually, of course, getting involved in the women's liberation struggle, I became more aware of what mattered to *us* and then I realized that men of all political parties, all religions, were the same when it came to women. It didn't matter. All their structures were of the same type. The wheeling and dealing and the fight to get to power and holding onto the power - this is why women couldn't slot into any of these organizations. It was just impossible because of the people that we are, the conditioning that we have had.(Interview with Zelda D'Aprano 1981, quoted in McMurchy 1983:151, my italics).

D'Aprano had to wait until the women's liberation movement of the nineteen seventies for full acceptance in a political home, a recognition of her own pain, and for a sense of 'us'.

Meredith Burgmann provides evidence of the longevity of masculine identity constructed through work and unionism in her study of the Builders Labourers' Federation: she argues that their physical work, strength and the dangers to their bodies provide one means "by which these men measure their superiority over women" (Burgmann 1980:455). While the NSW branch of the union took some of the first significant industrial action in defence of women's rights to work in male-dominated jobs, sections of the branch's union leadership sometimes found women's activism problematic: some men resented competition from women to speak and resented women who saw themselves as industrial equals, rather than weak workers to be protected. Women were much more acceptable as grateful or rescued clients than as equals, making unionism together (Burgmann 1980:473). In a recent account of experiences organising young women in Australia, Sally McManus finds contemporary examples of this 'male rescuing' model of unionism and its patronising positioning of women (McManus 1997 forthcoming).

That unionism provided an important buttress - indeed sometimes foundation - for working class masculinity is clear. This buttressing role is reinforced in many more recent examples as we shall see. Its proper analysis is an important key to a full understanding of the challenge women make on entering men's union territory. That this entry, challenging male advantage, should provoke hostility and resistance is not surprising given the psychologically charged nature of the identities and relationships it disrupts. Of course the diversity of perspectives and actions amongst men, particularly in different times and in relation to different material circumstances, means that the nature of gender politics varies considerably and different masculinist discourses can be mapped (Deacon 1993:58).

### **4.3 Women as Enemy: Exclusion from Work and Union Membership**

Women's biological and cultural association with childbirth and child rearing, along with domestic work and care of other dependents, has meant that they have had, and generally continue to have, a weaker foothold in the paid labour market, and cannot contest with their employers the terms of their employment in the same ways as men<sup>10</sup>. Cockburn has argued

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<sup>10</sup>Research in Australia show that women continue to bear the overwhelming burden of domestic work and care of dependents (Bittman 1991, ABS 1992).

that male unionists' interest in this sexual division of labour is implicit in support for the family wage and clearly advantages working men:

While a sexual division of labour at home and at work may or may not have advantages for capital, it can *always* be shown to benefit men as a sex. (Cockburn 1985:230, emphasis in original).

The split between the domestic and paid work spheres has similarly underwritten the terms of workplace power and union representation in Australian history. Raelene Frances, for example, describes the complex net of factors that affect women:

Their lower participation rates meant they were in a weaker positions to bargain for high wages and the recognition of skills than were male workers. Their lower wage rates in turn provoked exclusionary tactics from male workers (supported by some women) in defence of higher male wage rates which were often used to support women as unpaid labourers in the home. These tactics were reinforced by the state through protective legislation and the decisions of wage fixing tribunals, as well as through educational services which channelled workers into different occupations according to sex. The sexual segmentation of the paid workforce then reinforced the sexual division of labour in the home as women, restricted to low-paid work, were unable to challenge men's position as family 'breadwinner' (Frances 1993:9).

Many union strategies were built around this last effect. Groups of lower paid workers were often viewed as a 'problem', with exclusion a principle weapon used against them. Women's exclusion from paid work and from unions is evident from many accounts of the Australian male union movement's historical antagonism to the interests and even the presence of women. In 1975 Edna Ryan and Anne Conlon chronicled for the first time many aspects of that exclusion, as has the research of Miriam Dixson (1976), Beverley Kingston (1975), studies included in the 1975 'special' 'Women at Work' issue of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (Curthoys et al. 1975) and more recently the work of Raelene Frances (1993).

The practice of exclusion has been a cornerstone of formal unionism (perhaps *the* cornerstone of dominant union discourses). The basis of 'union' is membership - *belonging* - and every fence built to include, simultaneously excludes. While unionists have worked

hard to draw into membership those who can 'legitimately' belong, there have been elaborate rules, practices and even laws to define the lines of inclusion and exclusion. So the notion of inclusion - and its twin, exclusion - are the basis of unionism. The dominant meaning of 'Unity' in unionism has been unity amongst those within a narrow fence line: those who shared a certain ethnic heritage, occupation, level of skill, colour, and/or sex<sup>11</sup>. The legacy of craft unionism is especially significant here, where definitions of skill and the basis of labour market power for 'skilled' workers, lay in limiting the number of potential competitors in any labour market.

This exclusion from the paid formal labour market has often been secured through exclusion from union membership or through legal prohibition of certain types of working arrangements and specific groups of workers, and mechanisms such as apprenticeship ratios which limited entry to 'skilled' trades. Such exclusion has often been worked behind the smokescreen of 'protective' regulation, with the connivance of the state<sup>12</sup> (Wikander 1995a, Kessler-Harris et al. 1995, Wikander 1995b, Howe 1995).

In many of these examples, male unions and unionists have worked in league with employers, or with middle class and ruling class moralists who wish to impose upon 'others' (women, children, immigrants), certain moral visions that frequently have been paternalistic, sexist and/or racist. Many recent illustrations exist: for example weight lifting limitations on women, written literacy tests for selection of workers, campaigns against outworkers in the clothing industry: unions have cooperated in the establishment or continuation of these in several settings. For example, the Clothing Union in Australia long viewed exploited outworkers in the industry (mostly women) as "scabs who undercut factory workers' rates and cost them jobs": as the enemy (Gleeson 1995:12). They worked with factory owners *against* these workers and their 'employers' to drive them out of the

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<sup>11</sup>Other meanings have also existed; at times, amongst some speakers, the meaning of 'unity' has been larger: all who held a union membership card; and at other times, more broadly still: all those who laboured for a wage or who were part of households dependent upon one. Labour historians have also pointed to the complexity of the history of racism in Australian unions: for example, while many unions were opposed to the entry to Australia (or its workforce or unions) of Chinese, some saw the unionism of Maori or Aboriginal workers as a duty (Frances, Scates and McGrath 1994). Frances et al. speak of the contingent and changing nature of racism in unions (Frances et al. 1994:202).

<sup>12</sup>The state has been of particular importance in Australian labour movement strategies (Howe 1995, Howard 1977).

industry. At national meetings of the clothing workers union in the mid-1980s this approach was vigorously debated, with the consequence that these workers began to be viewed as "legitimate workers in need of protection" (Anna Booth, quoted in Gleeson 1995:12). The union now actively seeks to recruit these workers and to improve - through community campaigns, consumer boycotts and state intervention - their conditions of work.

In many examples, men locked women out of their early unions in Australia. Worker solidarity - at least within the organised labour movement - was largely an Anglo and masculine affair until well into this century. From the beginning of white settlement, many Australian women worked for money in occupations like agricultural labour, domestic service, 'dressmaking', and prostitution. Many Aboriginal women worked similarly - not for money in many cases - but for 'keep' in exchange for pastoral or domestic work and/or sexual favours (McMurchy 1983:29, McGrath 1987, Frances et al. 1994). From the late 1800s women made up about a third of the paid workforce (Ryan and Conlon 1989:65). However, for unionists (and the arbitration machinery which early Australian unionists helped to establish - see below) it was desirable to deny their existence, minimise their foothold and exclude them from spheres of male work where they might compete with men. These strategies reflected (and reinforced) women's weakness in workplace bargaining.

The roots of early unionism in Australia lie in the skilled male trades of stone masonry, building and engineering. As Ryan and Conlon put it: "Unions were on the whole narrow and exclusive bodies with high entrance fees designed to restrict the numbers in the trade" (1989:69). The early labour unions followed the establishment of the craft unions and they were established amongst, and by, lesser skilled men in the shearing, maritime and pastoral industries, once again, masculine clubs. One of the aims of these early men's unions was very specific: to maintain 'racial' and gender purity: women and Chinese were regularly excluded from unions well into the twentieth century (Turner 1976, Patmore 1991). Women were excluded from unions covering typographical workers, confectioners, tailors, and workers in post and telegraphs, the public service, teaching and others (Patmore 1991, Ryan and Conlon 1989). As a result many women's unions were formed, including amongst tailoresses, waitresses, barmaids, laundresses and domestic workers (briefly unionised with limited success (McMurchy 1983:62)). Many of these women's unions were short lived,



crushed by the effects of the 1890s depression or the machinations of the arbitration system in the early part of the century (their demise supported in many cases by male unions). By contrast, women's exclusion from men's unions was long lived: indeed the metal workers union only allowed women members from the mid-1940s, while Norm Gallagher, the federal secretary of the Builders Labourers, in 1965 instructed the NSW secretary that "under no circumstances were we to join women into the union" (Burgmann 1980:457). In many cases, such exclusion from union membership amounted to exclusion from the industry.

The history of the mining industry provides an important example, illustrating how British practices of unionism and exclusion were imported uncritically into Australia, and showing how the practices of union exclusion were a tangled web of the actions and interests of employers, moralistic commentators and the state - almost all men (Lewis and Rose 1995, Metcalfe 1988). Women's (and children's) employment in underground coal mines was widespread and considered natural between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain (Metcalfe 1988:176). Women and children usually worked in family groups (generally in lesser skilled work on lower pay and alongside, of course, responsibility for domestic work). However, women's and children's employment in underground mines became illegal in 1842, preceding the formation of significant mining unions. However, it was the unions who later *enforced* the law. Women were then left to undertake surface work and were eventually excluded even from this from the 1880s through the combined effects of "malignant neglect and mechanisation" (Metcalfe 1988:177). Middle class and ruling class moralists opposed women's employment in mines even above ground in this period because it offended their view of womanhood; male mining unions made the crucial difference in opposing women, excluding them from union membership and driving them out of the industry.

Metcalfe attributes this gender schism to the male miners deliberate strategies of exclusion and skill manipulation. Mining unions limited the potential workforce size (by excluding women) and drove women out because the work they did was called unskilled, thus undermining the pay of the men they worked alongside. These strategic choices turned women into the union's enemy:

By excluding women from unions, male miners turned them into obstacles to the unions' monopolisation of the labour market and therefore into threats to the unions' survival. Although generations of women had worked with male mineworkers without question, unionisation added serial rivalry to the gulf between them (Metcalf 1988:178).

A further consequence of this exclusion was Australian women's increasing confinement to feminised areas of paid work. In these areas, where so many women worked, men's organisations often admitted women to only some branches of their trade or only some parts of the single occupation: segregation was endemic even within occupations (Frances 1993).

Union exclusion of women encouraged the formation of women's unions in many occupations and locations but their fortunes were mixed. The famous first Australian women's union was the Victorian Tailoresses' Union which was formed because the existing Tailors union allowed only tradesmen and journeymen to join and women did not hold either occupation. The women's union led a significant strike of tailoresses in 1882 when 500 women at Beath Schiess and Co. struck in response to a pay cut<sup>13</sup>.

Despite some successes (and probably many that are unrecorded) the formation of separate women's unions proved problematic. Some arbitration courts, for example, in New South Wales would register only one union in any trade, and men's unions were invariably registered first. This meant that even when existing unions had rules excluding women members, it was impossible to establish another registered union. Male unions used this advantage to contain women's unions in some cases: leaders in women's unions who criticised the industrial campaigns of men, or saw damage for women in men's strategies, could be disciplined by Trades Hall (in the control of men - as they remain largely still) or

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<sup>13</sup>The dispute marked an important shift in union relations in Australia: the unionists responded to the company's cut with a catalogue of their own demands (from which the term 'log' derives) and subsequently won it; the Victorian Trades Hall Council embraced a new role as dispute coordinator, and campaigns against sweated labour received a significant boost. Many other tailoresses joined the strike and the union's membership grew rapidly. However, the union had faded away by 1890 and was later absorbed into the male union and disappeared (Brooks 1983). The strike also drew public attention to sweated conditions and gave impetus to factory reform and the shorter hours movement. Benefits of the lengthy strike were not secured for women workers in the long run, however, as outworking and imported products continued to undercut factory based wages and work (Brooks 1983:37)

action through arbitration machinery<sup>14</sup>. In other cases where women were admitted to union membership, unions showed very little interest in women beyond collecting their dues.

Some exceptions existed. For a brief period in its history, for example, the Australian Workers Union (with its coverage of 'unskilled' workers), under the influence of socialists, actively sought to recruit women. The union appointed women organisers and its rules recognised the common interests of all workers "no matter what their occupation or sex" (McMurchy, Oliver and Thornlay 1983:39). In later times, the influence of socialists and radicals was not always positive for women. For example the 'unity' moves flowing from the 'One Big Union' strategy between 1914 and 1921 (with the associated movement for 'closer unionism' which affected even more conservative unions where women's membership tended to be concentrated), "had detrimental effects for women's sections":

Sectionalism was not condoned. In 1921, for example, the Shop Assistants' Union terminated the appointment of their 'lady' organiser, Mrs Wilson Forbes. When female organisation was raised again, the President spoke of *the threat to unity posed by the sectionalism of women's branches*. Similarly, the formerly vocal Women's Postal and Telegraph Association, the Female Confectioners Union and [Victorian Clerks Union] Women's section were dissolved in the interests of unity. (Nolan 1991:119, my emphasis)

The 'unity' embraced in these examples was a very selective one: invoked to prevent separate women's organising, and at other times working to exclude women completely.

It is not until the 1970s that we can find a male-dominated Australian union taking action to remove barriers to women's employment in some male-dominated industries:

Because the Builders Labourers' is the only exclusively male manual union ever to promote seriously the right of women to work in the industry, there is no previous experience or literature available for the purposes of comparison. All that a quick survey of women's experiences in Australian unions reveals is oppression and neglect,

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<sup>14</sup>Melanie Raymond describes one such brush by Sara Lewis, first secretary of the Female Hotel, Club, Restaurant and Caterers' Union (FCU), with the Victorian Trades Hall Executive in 1912. Lewis was characterised as a 'troublemaker' by the male union leaders: "The THC Executive showed little interest in her concerns in this matter and in its customary form of rebuke towards Lewis, it instructed her to 'fall in line with the suggestions of the men's union...in the interests of unionism' " (Raymond 1986:49).

and, even in female industries, a preponderance of male leaders and spokesmen. (Burgmann 1980:454).

Many women were well aware of the hazards men's interests and unionism posed to their interests as Raelene Frances' history of the clothing, printing and boot trades shows. As a result of their experiences with male unions, unionised women in the Victorian printing trades in the 1920s were justifiably sceptical about union amalgamation stimulated by discussion of the 'One Big Union': "their experience of the fraternity of male unionists made them wary of formal amalgamation" (Frances 1993:120). Their concerns about amalgamation were born out: they were under-represented throughout newly amalgamated structures, lost their women delegates to Trades Hall and their male amalgamation partners energetically plotted against them<sup>15</sup>. All too often women lost their voice as they were absorbed into larger, often male-dominated unions. Very specific protections, negotiated well in advance of amalgamation from a position of relative strength, were essential if this was to be avoided: the South Australian Institute of Teachers provides one interesting example (Whitehead 1995).

The costs of exclusion from many forms of paid work and/or unionism through the tactics of early men's unions were heavy for women. This is not to argue, however, that these union tactics are the *primary* cause of women's limited access to work (or the associated problems of an occupationally sex-segmented labour market and the sexual division of paid and unpaid labour), or that men invariably sought to disadvantage women. The causes of women's workplace disadvantage are complex and include the sexual division of labour, the traditional domestic, child bearing and child rearing roles of women, the benefits employers gained from the maintenance of a pool of low-paid women workers and from fractured worker solidarity, and the social discourses of 'womanhood' and respectability. A growing body of feminist research about the institutions and organisations of Australian working life, along with developments in feminist theory (see previous chapter), suggest that single causes of such historically (and geographically and occupationally) specific phenomenon (for example, that men always oppression women)

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<sup>15</sup>For example, on amalgamation the male bookbinders nominated an 'attractive' woman organiser against the 'solid personality' of the incumbent woman, in the hope that the former would be quickly married off and the position could be taken over by a man. However the women voters backed the incumbent (Frances 1993:122).

deny the complexity of such situations along with the possibility of the agency of women and their organisations in contesting workplace relations. Ahistorical explanations about the causes (or the web of causes) of these phenomena are not sustainable since women were able to resist exclusion in some cases, and men and some men's unions resisted women's exclusion in others.

However, while men did not always set out with the objective of disadvantaging women, in many situations this was a consequence of their actions. Unions did not scruple to protect men's jobs and their wages against the threat of lower paid groups especially women, Aboriginal workers and young people. In this sense they were active collaborators against women, in actions with mostly male employers, social commentators, arbitrators and government.

Beyond collaboration, many unions - certainly in the early years of Australian unionism and for many unions well into the 1940s - had little difficulty *initiating* action to exclude women from membership (and therefore effectively from some classes of work). Many unions in particular opposed the employment of married women, especially in times of high unemployment as in the 1890s, the 1930s and again even as late as the 1980s when in working class communities like Newcastle, public calls for married women to leave their jobs to make room for men and youth were not only common but were made by unions<sup>16</sup>. The story of equal pay in the next section provides further evidence of the systematic negative effect of unions controlled by men, on many women.

#### **4.4 The Family Wage, (Un)Equal Pay and Arbitration**

Australia's wage fixing system for at least the first half of this century was shaped around the notion of the family wage, entrenched through conciliation and arbitration state machinery, and this has left a long shadow over Australian women's pay. The 1890s depression destroyed many unions, and the severe industrial strife which accompanied it stimulated the establishment of the Wages Boards and conciliation and arbitration machinery

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<sup>16</sup>The marriage bar was not removed in the Commonwealth Public Service and in sectors like banking until 1966 (McMurchy 1983:40). In the 1980s in Newcastle I worked with married women making complaints under anti-discrimination law in this context, when they had been retrenched or put on 'short time' by union action.'

in the opening decade of this century. This new role for the state, meant that unionism was increasingly part of a regulated web with many important consequences for women<sup>17</sup>.

Male unionists worked within Australia's arbitration system to embed the concept of the family wage, thus co-operating in establishing a wage fixing discourse in Australia where women were characterised as dependent, their work unskilled and their worth only a proportion of men's. In 1907 Justice Higgins brought down the famous Harvester judgement which required the H.V. McKay Company to pay a 'living wage' to its workers in order that it receive exemption from an excise tariff. Higgins decided that "fair and reasonable remuneration" must mean a standard appropriate to the "normal needs of the average employee regarded as a human being living in a civilised community". He decided a wage of 7s a day was enough to keep a worker and his family - man, dependent wife and three children - in 'frugal comfort'. This was not far from the average wage paid by many employers at this time. This entrenched the family wage notion in Australia's wage fixing system. This straight jacket was not formally cast off until 1972: indeed as late as 1971 the ACTU Congress again endorsed the concept of the 'family wage' (McMurchy et al. 1983: 3). The establishment of the family wage left no room for equal pay and the machinery of arbitration was used by male unions to create 'men's' and 'women's' jobs and to *codify* workplace practices and inequities which disadvantaged women (Whelan 1979).

However, the arbitration system, while deeply segmenting the workforce on the basis of sex (see next section), also brought benefits for less powerful workers including many women<sup>18</sup>. While there has been little sign of much narrowing in recent years<sup>19</sup>, it is certainly true that the gender pay gap is much wider in many countries, a difference often attributed to Australia's centralised, arbitral wage fixing system and the award framework, along with higher levels of unionisation (Gregory and Daly 1991, Whitehouse 1990, O'Donnell and Hall 1988, Pocock 1995d).

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<sup>17</sup>The history and legacy of arbitration machinery in Australia are some of the most studied aspects of Australian industrial life and labour history. Macintyre and Mitchell, 1989, offer one of the most interesting recent collections in the area, including a survey of relevant feminist scholarship by Diane Kirkby (1989).

<sup>18</sup>Ann Curthoys has pointed out that feminists have failed to adequately recognise the narrowing of the gender pay gap in Australia and have remained focused upon that gap which remains (1988c:132).

<sup>19</sup>The gender pay gap amongst ordinary earnings of full-time workers has hovered around 84 per cent for the past decade in Australia (Magarey and Edwards 1995:273).

The family wage was seen by working people at the beginning of this century as a worthy goal: it recognised workers' rights to a living wage, regardless of the economic circumstances of their employer. Occupational and industry awards established minimum standards (for pay and conditions) which may not otherwise have been achieved in the market place by these workers through individual bargaining. In addition, a ratchet effect, whereby the industrially strong won increases which eventually flowed to less organised and economically weaker workers, brought benefits for women.

The family wage and its consequences for women have been much discussed in Australian labour literature particularly by feminists, and the legacy of the family wage is clearly evident in today's wage fixing system with its gendered inequities<sup>20</sup>. The notion of a living wage was quite radical in its time: it was a wage payable regardless of the relative bargaining power of individual groups of workers, and regardless of the health of a particular industry or firm. It took account of living costs (of the arbitrarily defined 'family') and implied that workers should not be pitted individually against employers: that contest, Higgins declared, was unequal. However the decision institutionalised 'family' in wage regulation. Curthoys (1988c) and Humphries (1977) have argued that protecting the breadwinner was not necessarily a bad thing and that many women in families with a male breadwinner benefited. Higgins was himself a strong believer in the family and believed that every working man had a right to aspire to a family. Of course implicit in Higgins' conception were the notions that working women never had dependents, while men always did; neither assumption held in a great number of households (Ryan and Conlon 1989).

The notion of the family or living wage was not generally questioned by unionists. Indeed it was welcomed since it moved away from capacity to pay, was higher than the prevailing rates in some states, and it effectively created a minimum wage. But while poorer, lower skilled male workers benefited by the decision, it was at the expense of that other poorly paid or unpaid segment of the workforce: many women, especially single women and particularly those with dependents.

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<sup>20</sup> Ryan and Conlon (1989, first published in 1975) provide one of the earliest analyses. Aspects of their analysis have been challenged subsequently: see Kirkby 1989 and Nolan 1991.

Higgins' decision reflected his own class background and the 'respectable' prejudices of the day (that only unrespectable women worked outside the home); he did not think that women should work for a wage. Women were 'frail' creatures and he argued that women had no dependents except in very exceptional cases, and "the minimum concept cannot be based on exceptional cases" (Ryan and Conlon 1989:95). He was not alone: many judges, workers, and unionists agreed with him, while some feminists of the time opposed his family wage<sup>21</sup>.

The family wage concept took root in the Australian wage fixing system leaving a problematic legacy for women. Higgins cemented its worse aspects in the 1912 Fruit pickers case, where he determined that work done *only* by women should be distinguished from that done by men, with women's rates set much lower at about 55 per cent of the male rate<sup>22</sup>. Women working *alongside* men in the same jobs were awarded equal pay with them so that gender was effectively taken out of competition in mixed-sex jobs, while women who worked as packers and wrappers where men did not work, were kept on much lower 'women's' rates.

The dominant trade union discourse about equal pay up to the 1950s at least (always invoked in its most narrow conception: equal pay for equal work and therefore irrelevant to the majority of women in feminised work) was principally rooted in protection of men's jobs and pay. Most unions were concerned to keep women out of their jobs, and wherever they threatened, men energetically backed equal pay. Union support for equal pay was in most cases self/sex interested: in mixed sex occupations women should be paid the male rate - not because women deserved it, or because it was fair, but because otherwise women would take men's jobs (Ryan and Conlon 1989). Male unionists and their advocates assumed that by raising the pay of women, employers would be encouraged to shift their preferences back to men once a wage incentive in favour of women was removed, and they were often right. This meant of course that not all women supported equal pay, in the legitimate fear that it would cost them their jobs.

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<sup>21</sup>Mary Gilmore wrote to him and protested and he politely responded (Rickard 1984:177).

<sup>22</sup> In female work the basic wage component was a fraction of the male basic wage, "sufficient to meet the 'normal needs of a single woman supporting herself by her own exertions' " (Isaac 1988:413).





Exceptions to this dominant discourse<sup>23</sup> were found amongst some men, especially from more female-dominated unions (for example in the clothing and clerical areas from which early equal pay cases were mounted) (Howe 1995). In 1937, at a conference on equal pay attended by 53 organisations including unions and feminist organisations, the Council for Action on Equal Pay (CAEP) was formed. In a submission to that meeting the male NSW secretary of the clerks union made a "lucid, militant and staunchly feminist speech" in support of equal pay for the sexes (Johnson 1986:132). A feminist discourse of equal pay for the sexes was evident amongst some women's organisations, most notably the CAEP under the leadership of Muriel Heagney who took particular care to distinguish between the weaker (equal pay for equal work) and stronger (equal pay for the sexes) claims and to build union support for the latter<sup>24</sup>. With her base in the unions, Heagney represented a feminist/union discourse, which unfortunately did not triumph despite 50 years of dedicated, mostly voluntary activism<sup>25</sup>.

The early years of World War II illustrate the contest between the dominant union discourse of pragmatism and male protection, and the feminist discourses of equity and justice (although Curthoys draws our attention to differences between unions according to their political orientation (1988c). Under Heagney's influence, the ACTU conference of 1941 supported the CAEP's formulation of equal pay demands to the delight of the equal pay campaigners, who in the context of war time labour shortages and special federal government powers, saw victory in sight. They were sadly disappointed by the back down by the ACTU Executive in 1942 which supported a much more limited version of equal pay, reflecting the dominant union leadership from male skilled unions at the ACTU. These unions suddenly joined the equal pay (for equal work) bandwagon as women entered their industries briefly during the war.

The ACTU Executive went on to negotiate with the government and the Women's Employment Board was established, essentially an emergency tribunal which dealt with

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<sup>23</sup>This categorisation of equal pay discourses (union, feminist, union/feminist) is used by Johnson (1986).

<sup>24</sup>The CAEP functioned between 1937 and 1948 as a "single issue affiliate body", led by Muriel Heagney (Johnson 1986:132).

<sup>25</sup>Heagney made an important contribution to the equal pay and right to work debates, with - amongst other writings - her 1935 book Are Women Taking Men's Jobs?

women's entry to men's jobs by lifting women's pay (Bremner 1982, Lamour 1985). Heagney, with her more radical demands, was carefully locked out of these developments and the official union movement effectively de-recognised her, resorting to formal requests for union credentials when she attended meetings. Heagney's disappointment was shared by many women:

Feminist provisions had been entirely dispensed with and equal pay was endorsed only in its most limited application. The policy was put forward as a solution to an immediately pressing problem, rather than as the social and economic right of all women workers. Heagney summed up the state of the fight for equal pay in March 1942 when she observed that 'the problem of equal pay for the sexes has not been solved...and obstacles unhappily are being created daily by the ACTU Emergency Committee and its officers in a manner that is surprising, discouraging and, in fact, devastating to all our hopes' (Johnson 1986: 141. The quote is from Heagney's report to the Equal Pay Conference, 16 March 1942).

The pay rises which occurred as a result of the war and the Women's Employment Board fell well short of equal pay and offered little to women in feminised jobs<sup>26</sup>.

Muriel Heagney's work illustrates the complexity of struggle for women's pay from within and with unions (Bremner 1982). Heagney was able to *influence* unions to support equal cases through the arbitration commission, but her influence was disappointingly circumscribed, leading her to make the comment confidentially late in those campaigns:

Frankly I have given up hope of achieving anything worthwhile immediately because here in Australia the Labour Movement and the ACTU executive officers are so terribly reactionary in their views on women workers. One commences about half a mile behind the starting post in a mile race here when women are involved in any issue, and the trade union officials and Labor ministers as a rule are more difficult to deal with than many big employers of labour. (Letter to fellow unionist, quoted in Bremner 1982:292).

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<sup>26</sup>However it should be noted that many women felt that much had been achieved and a split with the feminist groups involved in the CAEP ensued, and by 1948 it had disbanded.

Heagney's base was firmly within the labour movement and Bremner comments that Heagney - for all her positive contributions and success in building the CAEP - was partly hostage to the labour movement: "Her foothold within the labour movement was at once her strength and her weakness" (Bremner 1982:297). Her union base ensured that she had real effect within the unions (though she did not always win the day in practice); however, as long as she remained loyal to unions she was constrained "from using her considerable organisational skills to politicise and mobilise women *against the forces of anti-feminism*" (Bremner 1982:297, my emphasis). The price of her influence was a constraining loyalty to the organisations of male labour; at crucial moments, no such loyalty was returned to her by the majority unions, as her credentials were withdrawn and she was locked out of crucial negotiations in the war years when the unions, within the dominant equal pay discourse, made their settlement.

By the 1950s the female basic wage had risen from 56 percent to 75 per cent of the male rate - mostly through the effects of pay increases for women granted during World War II. But the Higgins 'family wage' principle remained in place. At the end of the war women's wages and male/female relativities were "a mess" (Curthoys 1988c:133) and women's wages ranged from 54 to 90 per cent of the male rate. Curthoys distinguishes three positions with respect to this situation; the Communist-led left wing unions' view that women's wages should be lifted to the male family wage level (a position which was industrially militant and implied a sharp shift in the wages/profit share); a right wing position amongst Catholic Industrial Groups and other non-militant unions that women should not work and equal pay should not be supported (partly reflecting an anti-Communist view); and a range of views amongst women's organisations including both the Communist view and a position in support of equal pay but against the family wage.

The feminist position was at odds with unionists generally, reflecting the views of some feminists who did not see the need for a shift in costs from capital to labour as necessary: instead the redistribution should be from working men to working women.

When left wing influence in the ACTU was at its peak in the late forties, ACTU policy was drafted in line with the Communist position but, with a shift in power back to the right in the 1950s, the position weakened. Left wing unions in the metal industry lost their push

for equal pay in the sheet metal award in 1948 when the Union Secretary, Tom Wright, argued for it on the basis of both justice and male protection (Curthoys 1988c:136). This loss led Wright and others to a pessimistic view about argument before the Commission, and to advocate industrial campaigning instead. However, this did not occur in a sustained way and in 1950 the court reaffirmed the family wage. At this point equal pay activists turned their attention to the state spheres and four states had legislated for equal pay before the federal commission, finally, in 1969 supported equal pay for equal work (affecting about 20 per cent of women (Curthoys 1988c:140), and then in 1972 granted equal pay for work of equal value. In the 1969 case the ACTU advocate, Bob Hawke (later Prime Minister), made his argument on the basis of justice and the economic need for women's labour; at last the union movement "explicitly rejected the argument that women be give equal pay to protect men's jobs" (Curthoys 1988c:137).

Improvements in economic conditions and labour shortages had finally created the space for male unionists to give up the family 'needs based' argument and alleviated their fear of female competition in their work. Instead they argued in favour of justice. The growing presence of women in paid work, and the buoyant labour market underwrote this shift. By 1972, significant social changes, the growth in the women's movement and a more socially progressive government combined to permit contemplation of equal pay for work of equal value<sup>27</sup>. More often than not, the majority of the union movement proved a long term obstacle to the achievement of this goal - one of critical importance to women unionists and women - except when male advantage was threatened, when they became active allies.

#### **4.4.1 Sex, Class and Equal Pay**

The play of sex and class are clearly visible in this equal pay narrative. Employers exploited the existence of lower, more compressed pay rates for women<sup>28</sup> until they could no longer overpower feminised unions in the market place or convince the arbitration commission and the community to continue to support unequal pay. Unions responded to employer tactics

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<sup>27</sup>Though the real inequities continue in the wages system despite this formal shift.

<sup>28</sup>Women's rates were more compressed than men's because their skills and jobs were not differentiated, undermining their arguments for a broader range of pay rates in feminised occupations.

by working - where *necessary* - to increase women's pay to defend men's jobs and wages against competition from lower paid women. Working men's strategic options were limited in this traditional masculine class struggle. However the tactics of men in their unions had the effect of working against the interests of many women by lowering their pay, limiting their employment possibilities and segmenting the labour market. While many men and women defended the family wage as a means of increasing general household income, the system locked women's pay in at a low level and meant great poverty for single women, many of whom had dependents. Most importantly, as we discuss in the following section, this history entrenched sex-segregation of jobs to an extraordinary degree.

Equal pay<sup>29</sup> for women was not won, in general, through a sense of 'solidarity' between men and women in the labour movement, or on the basis of justice. It was largely won because it became in men's interests to boost women's pay to protect men's employment and - most importantly - because social circumstances changed, an autonomous women's movement gathered momentum, and economic circumstances improved so that employer resistance weakened and men could support equal pay for women without putting their family wage at risk.

This assessment does not rest upon any simplistic thesis of masculine conspiracy: that "[p]atriarchal ideology united male unionists and employers in a 'male compact' against women" as critiqued by Melanie Nolan (Curthoys 1988c, Nolan 1991:101 *passim*)<sup>30</sup>. Analysis of the coincidental negative effects of male union strategy and employer tactics upon women, does not imply a conscious or even unconscious cross-class 'male compact' as Nolan caricatures some feminist analysis (Nolan 1991:101). But the outcomes of the interlocking strategies of men with their employers, mediated by the arbitration machinery

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<sup>29</sup>At least that form of equal pay implied in the 1972 decision, which remains some distance from the elimination of gender pay differentials.

<sup>30</sup>Nolan builds upon Laura Bennett's work which, through detailed consideration of the operation of arbitration tribunals in their full economic, social and industrial contexts, "argues that institutional constraints and wider, complex, political and economic developments were more important than simplistic cultural determinism in explaining women's poor position in the arbitration process" (Nolan 1991:102). Nolan argues that in this case "class is the axis of conflict, not gender" (1991:121). However, it generally cannot be argued that, and not even with respect to this case I think, that gender differences were not relevant, or were totally displaced by class.

with its practices of codifying workplace outcomes<sup>31</sup>, had a negative systematic effects on women's pay, conditions and access to work, alongside significant positive effects<sup>32</sup>. Most important amongst these positive effects is the narrower gender wage differential in Australia compared to other countries. The award system, establishing industry-wide standards for wages and conditions, has left a very positive legacy for those in poorly organised industries and occupations including many in which women work<sup>33</sup>.

The undoubted complexities of class, changing economic, social and political formations and circumstances, shifting political alliances and strengths, divisions between women, the diversity within and between unions, and the complex interaction of all of these forces greatly complicate the analysis of women's pay. For example, some men supported equal pay for women as a principle, while many women were alarmed that it might cost them their jobs, and at times, as Nolan illustrates, employers made tactical concessions on equal pay to undermine union/worker solidarity. What is more, holding gender as part of the explanation for union tactics, is not to suggest that equal pay was easily at hand for unionists: that it was only *want of campaigning* that stood in its way. Such a view is not supportable: the forces of the employing class assembled against equal pay were substantial.

However, male unions fairly consistently have adopted actions, throughout the history of the Australian wages system, which advantaged men and disadvantaged women - for whatever tactical reason<sup>34</sup>. Equal pay is one such clear case. These tactical reasons certainly varied and at times ran to a 'class' assessment, on behalf of men *and* women: that increasing the family or basic (male) wage was judged likely to bring the greatest benefit for all. Regardless of this reasoning, however, the effects were often negative for women. Secondly, the fight for equal pay was led by women, especially women close to or in

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<sup>31</sup>See Dominca Whelan (1979) for a discussion of the role of the commission. J.E. Isaac's argument for the commission's role as facilitator, rather than prime mover is also convincing (Isaacs 1988).

<sup>32</sup>For example, Higgins' adoption of wage rates and the establishment of awards recognising the need for a living wage rather than firm or industry profitability; there are also some examples of generous rates for women probationers where they had previously worked for nothing and, in some cases, higher arbitrated minimums for women than previously existed (Nolan 1991:102).

<sup>33</sup>A legacy which is now under strong attack by federal and state conservative governments (Pocock 1995d, 1996a).

<sup>34</sup>An assessment of outcomes under more recent way regimes, including the Accord, award restructuring and 'regulated' enterprise bargaining, suggests that women's interests continue to be overwhelmed by those of skilled men (Thomson and Pocock 1997 forthcoming).

unions, who used whatever opportunities presented to make ground (world war, male self interest and so on)<sup>35</sup>. However, these women were often disregarded or held in suspicion by unions and their leaders; no reliable union commitment to equal pay could be assumed by women - even those like Muriel Heagney, with a deep loyalty to organised labour, whose 'class' credentials could not be questioned. Their loyalty was far from a reciprocal affair.

Thirdly the interests of men were the primary objective of wage fixing practice: benefits for women - while real in the case of the establishment of awards - were incidental to action taken to protect and assist men; rarely were women's interests *distinguished* from those of men and pursued directly - let alone where they might conflict with those of men<sup>36</sup>. Fourthly, this reading of equal pay history shows that equity and justice arguments (which feminists have often mounted) have rarely won the day for women: Australia's wage fixing machinery, with a facilitative industrial commission<sup>37</sup>, has been built largely around market place conditions, not logical and principled argument. Economic circumstances conditioned what was won for working women (and men) and its timing.

Finally autonomous women's organisation, women's leadership and a feminist perspective have been essential to progress on equal pay for most women, especially the great majority working in feminised areas. This organisation has often pursued an agenda at odds with that of more liberal feminists and their organisations and has brought both handicaps and advantages: the handicaps of 'solidarity' and unity and the containment of critique, and the advantage of direct influence upon union action at least in some circumstances.

The equal pay narrative illustrates the nature of labouring men's occasional *forced, strategic concession* to labouring women - a concession of the type which has often been a feature of men's accommodation of women in the workplace and in unions in Australia.

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<sup>35</sup>That this was a fight by women for women is echoed in other countries: Debra Lewis writes of the Canadian experience that "virtually every gain women have made in terms of the equal pay issue has been accomplished by unionized women, whether through collective bargaining or through utilizing union support to take advantage of the legislative provisions that do exist" (Lewis 1988:50).

<sup>36</sup>This practice continues today: the late-1980s, union supported shift to enterprise-based wage bargaining was clearly against the interests of groups with weak labour market power like women. Gender wage differentials predictably widened as a result (Pocock 1995d).

<sup>37</sup>See J.E. Isaac 1988 for a discussion of this facilitative role, including with respect to equal pay.

#### 4.5 Men's Jobs, Women's Jobs: the Sex-segregated Labour Market

The formal separation within awards of men's and women's jobs has been another important consequence of Australia's arbitration system. This separation usually worked to men's advantage in that their wages were invariably higher than women's and their jobs were protected from low wage competition from women<sup>38</sup>. Unions worked hard in most industries to help shape a gendered job classification system with the active assistance of judges and office holders in the (almost exclusively male) arbitration courts, and generally with the active cooperation of employers. Women's weaker workplace power, linked to their domestic loads and the sexual division of labour, and the masculine charter adopted by male unions, ensured their secondary status as the system evolved.

In a study of the only other similar arbitration system in the world in New Zealand, Robertson observes that between 1894 and 1920: "the pattern of awards was divided between those in which provisions favouring unions are evident and women workers are excluded or restricted, and awards in which provisions favouring employers are evident and there is little or no regulation of the employment of women" (Robertson 1991:41). He argues that neither employer nor union strategy dominated, and the Court played the role of referee. The key outcome for women was "a systematising, structuring and sustaining of the segmentation of the labour force which served variously the interests of male workers and employers" (ibid.:41).

Raelene Frances' (1993) descriptions of the changing segregation of work and definitions of skill in the clothing and printing industries between 1880 and 1939 provide important cases in the Australian setting, paralleling the work of Robertson in New Zealand, and Cockburn (1983,1985) and Walby (1988) in England. Frances makes a close examination of the relationships between arbitration machinery, unions and women's fortunes in the printing, clothing and footwear industries. This work shows that over-deterministic frameworks which attribute segregation outcomes to, say, sexism alone, underestimate the historical specificity of the evolution of sex-segregation, and miss the great complexity in any given situation. However, gender *matters* in all the situations she examines.

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<sup>38</sup>Awards specified, for example, men's rates and women's rates for many similar jobs, throughout many industries.



Frances describes how male-dominated unions were complicit in the confinement of women to 'semi-skilled' or 'unskilled' work and worked diligently to segment the workplace on the basis of sex, protecting men's work and their pay rates. In the printing industry, for example, union men resorted to direct union action where employers or the state did not do the job for them. For example, the Victorian Factories Office enthusiastically policed sex segregation in the industry in the early years of the century. State structures of this kind were often populated by ex-union officials with all the appropriate fraternal values intact. Where the state failed them, union rules were often constructed to do the work instead. For example, in the printing case when a Wages Board in 1920 rejected the union's claim for equal pay for the jobs of rotary cutting and scoring, the union stated that any woman who took one of these jobs was 'disloyal' to the union and would be 'dealt with accordingly' (Frances 1993:124).

David Atkin's study of strategy by the meatworkers' union (AMIEU) from the late 1940s to the 1960s reveals relevant and changing union tactics (1991). At first meatworkers and their unions simply opposed women's entry to 'their' industry and jobs. When this opposition could no longer prevail, they adopted the simultaneous strategies of seeking equal pay where women worked alongside men, and tightly confining women's work. This last tactic provides a clear example of the segmenting effects of male union tactics: union witnesses argued before commissioners that women should not be permitted to do some whole jobs, that some cleaning duties were too 'bloody or unsavoury' for women, and that in some jobs women should be confined to using scissors, rather than knives like men.

Winning a 'skill' hierarchy for their work was crucial to higher pay for these men:

A career path was important for men because it promised secure paid employment while they moved up a hierarchical ladder. For working class men and their unions the best way to demonstrate that a particular occupation was worthy of career status was to establish that skill accumulation was in evidence and an apprenticeship scheme required. (Atkin 1991:126).

The use of deskilling new technologies and the entry of women threatened men's skill arguments and practices, so that the union "attempted to bar women by defining the skills required for the killing and processing of meat as masculine prerogatives"(Atkin 1991:127).

In exercising these skills, women challenged their link to masculinity: "the empowering image that the meat industry was a 'man's' trade which required special masculine qualities was under threat" (Atkin 1991:127). The tactic of segregating jobs was, therefore, both part of the fabric of constructed masculinity in the workplace, and essential to the protection of male advantage. As a consequence, opposition to women became part of the union's fabric and a central determinant of union tactics and strategy: "gender was as relevant as class in determining union priorities" in the meat slaughtering industry (Atkin 1991:127).

A similar story has been detailed with respect to the definitions of skill and complex award classifications in the Australian confectionary industry (Kelly and Forbath 1992). This account illustrates how the confectionary award was manipulated by male-dominated unions and arbitration decisions to undervalue women's skills and jobs, and keep work segmented by sex, even as jobs changed through new technology.

Feminist analysis of the arbitration commission and its outcomes for women are comprehensively summarised by Diane Kirkby (1989). She traces the shift in explanations for women's workplace situation from a heavy reliance upon 'sexist attitudes' and the economism of "capitalism's need for a reserve army of labour" to more emphasis upon the construction of skill and the role of unions and the arbitration commission (1989:338). Kirkby summarised Laura Bennett's important contribution to our understanding of these phenomena:

[Bennett] argues that the Court deviated little from existing market rates in awarding women's wages because of pressures exogenous to the legal processes of arbitration: that craft unions actively constructed definitions of skill in a way advantageous to them; that the Court's wage-fixing principles (under which work only acquired skilled status *vis-a-vis* other work which could be designated unskilled) generated a conflict between adult male workers and other workers which made it necessary for them to identify industrially weaker workers (i.e. women) as unskilled; that women's work was characterized as unskilled because it lacked the characteristics necessary for the requisite craft organization; and that the strategies employed by male unionists were endorsed and legitimized by the industrial tribunals (Kirkby 1989:340).

Bennett's work around the issues of skill describes the role of the arbitration commission and its brother bodies. With the able assistance of unions (bargaining to maximise their sectional interests in any given situation) and in the context of economic and technical circumstances and employer objective, the Commission made decisions which actively constructed skill, manipulated classifications and prevented meaningful equal pay:

[T]he Court adopted practices which empowered male workers and accepted male workers' and male employers' arguments in relation to women (Kirkby 1989:341).

These examples show that, alongside the confinement of women workers to a narrow range of jobs, and their exclusion from unionism, 'skill' evolved in the Australian setting much as it had in England: "saturated with sexual bias" (Phillips and Taylor 1986). Women's jobs became defined as 'unskilled' even where they were not, or they were employed in areas where the jobs were fractured and the skills practiced were narrow and repetitive. Speed in completing tasks was considered irrelevant to accepted constructions of skill (Frances 1993:181). Being fast and nimble was feminine and innate and as such not a criteria related to higher pay, unlike strength, force, danger, or contact with dirt or blood.

The role of gender in the construction of skill has been extensively catalogued and theorised in other countries<sup>39</sup>. In Australia men largely took control of notions of skill, building upon their British heritage, capturing them for occupations such as carpenter, stonemason, and fitter. The tactics of bargaining around skill have served some men very well, building advantage against the interest of those they excluded: 'unskilled' and 'semi' workers, immigrants and women. In Australia the arbitration commission and the award system were effective midwives - if not progenitors - to these processes. In sum, Australian working men and their organisations made active use of gender differences and the relative weakness of women in the paid workforce, to construct and police the segregation of work and skill on the basis of sex. These were also shaped by the objectives and strategies of employers who could manipulate the sexual segregation of work in the interests of profit. An unholy, if unconscious, brotherhood worked to construct male advantage and confine women's employment possibilities in many settings.

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<sup>39</sup>By, amongst others, Phillips and Taylor 1980/81; Cockburn 1983, 1985; in Australia by Bennett 1984, Frances 1993; Pocock 1988.

## **4.6 Conclusion: Women and Men - Sceptical Partners in Unionism**

Several aspects of these historical examples are striking. Firstly, there is much more evidence of male obstruction than assistance to women's effective presence in unions - most certainly to their leadership. Through manipulation of union rules and elections, the cannibalising of women's unions through amalgamation, simple opposition to their formation and continuity, and many other means, men secured control of most unions. Even amongst female-dominated memberships, men worked hard to control leadership and keep it in men's hands. This often meant that industrial campaigns were undertaken in the interests of male advantage, while the interests of the majority of female members either languished or were directly undermined.

### **4.6.1 Justice Versus Pragmatism: The Practice of Strategic Concession**

Secondly, men's approach to women unionists and workers ranges from opposition to pragmatic support; sustained solidarity between the sexes within unions and the workplace, on the basis of a gender inclusive justice, is rare. Many unions reluctantly admitted women as members while others saw women's unionisation as a necessary evil - necessary more to male protection than women's in some cases. Outcomes which positively affected (at least some) women - such as winning the establishment of the award system and the notion of a living wage - were often outcomes incidental to men's unions main purpose: the protection of skilled men's wages and jobs. Certainly the long struggle for equal pay is testament to the inability of men's organisations, as a group (though individual men, individual unions and some left-wing political organisations disagreed at times) to take action which would place women's advantage in front of their own: despite the ambivalences and imperfections of the family wage, the majority of unions could not countenance giving it up in the process of achieving equal pay, until their male advantage was economically secure, *and* it appeared that broader social and political forces made it an inevitability. Many advances for women in the world of work appear as strategic concessions won from a pragmatic brotherhood, which conceded very little of its working class male advantage without a struggle.

### 4.6.2 From Sameness to Difference

The traditional discourses of Australian unionism established the habits, characteristics and rewards of public working life in a masculine image, around male habits, characteristics and rewards. The business of early unionism was largely that of defending working class male advantage *and* weaving the fabric of a working class masculine pride and identity. In this discourse, women's entry and presence was usually on the basis of sameness-to-men in many settings. Equal pay, for example, was argued on the basis of 'same work, same pay'; this kept the legacy of a century of working men's advantage, along with any perceptions or consequences of women's difference from men, out of view. Historically, arguments about discrimination were couched in terms of removing barriers to equal treatment, rather than addressing structural barriers or challenging naturalised masculine norms. This often constrained women's ability to fully articulate industrial concerns which reflected their social and biological differences from men - in relation to pregnancy, breastfeeding, parenting, running households and caring for dependents, and others. The struggle for entry to paid work and unionism alongside men, sharply restricted the admission of difference.

This experience is shared with women in other labour movements. Pamela Sugiman, for example, chronicles a changing tactical position amongst women in the Canadian Union of Auto Workers (UAW): the pursuit of employment contracts giving women 'equal opportunity' and eliminating blatant discrimination in auto plants was accommodated in a discourse of sameness which male unionists and traditional union women embraced. Some soon found this inadequate, and worked for a feminist unionism which allowed women to argue their difference:

Female auto workers moved carefully and somewhat ambivalently between conventional womanhood, patriarchal unionism, and a working-class feminism or feminist unionism (Sugiman 1993:181).

Sugiman concludes of this experience:

Feminism and unionism co-exist uneasily in the labour movement. For workingclass women, the union represents a viable vehicle for achieving social change. It is an important reference point and resource. Feminist unionists have promoted a greater inclusiveness of the union membership and they have expanded labour's agenda.

However, women have had to wage their struggles within a masculine context. They have therefore tried to combine conventional union principles with ideas about women's rights in a way that makes sense to them and is *acceptable and legitimate to working class men*. In short, these women have developed a feminist unionism - a type of unionism that has been shaped by relations between men and women, as well as between employers and workers. (Sugiman 1993:184, my emphasis)

Increasingly, feminists in unions in Australia have, like women in Canada, risked their legitimacy in the eyes of unionists wedded to narrow conceptions of equality/sameness, and moved to adopt a union discourse which admits difference, a move which is essential in any social movement where women are fully admitted, and organisations and agendas are subsequently remade to reflect their difference from men (Thomson and Pocock 1997 forthcoming).

#### **4.6.3 Autonomy and Separatist Organisation**

This review of some Australian historical material also shows how autonomous women's organisations, within and outside the formal structures of the union movement, have been vitally important to improvements for women: the Council of Action for Equal Pay is one of the clearest examples. In almost all cases where improvements for women were secured, organisation *amongst women* occurred; leadership by women has also been prominent in significant wins for women. The importance of women's autonomous organising -whether within unions or reaching beyond them, leadership by women and alliances with women outside unions, are amply demonstrated in this account.

The ambivalences in feminist/union relations are evident at many turns. Feminists like Muriel Heagney provided well researched and convincing cases about the justice of women's claims in pursuit of their brothers' support, but they won only some men by this means - usually men in female-dominated unions. The bigger brothers, with their bases within peak councils and large unions, could not be relied on as class allies when women comprised the section of the class for whom improvements were sought. They wasted no time in using the traditional bureaucratic union instruments of control - such as the withdrawal of credentials - when union-feminist agitators interfered in their agenda.

#### 4.6.4 The Clash of Class and Gender: Women's (Un)reliable Class Politics

Throughout these historical examples a very particular and sectional discourse of solidarity is at work. 'Women's issues' (and especially feminist activism) are often posed against working class 'solidarity', strategically weakening the advocacy of women and throwing into question their working class credentials. Conscious public identity as members of the working class, and adoption of a collective home of working class brotherhood, are part of the armour and glue of union solidarity. Since the early days of unionism, to question someone's working class credentials has been to question their unionism and infer their difference and unreliability.

Many working women have not historically been easily admitted as members of the working class by men: they sometimes worked as domestic servants in middle class or ruling class houses, shops or other facilities; they were concentrated in jobs outside factories - still menial and low paid - but not recognised by many male unionists as 'real work', like that of factories, mines and building sites. Alongside this some women, cut loose from the middle or ruling class families into which they were born or married, were forced to try to earn a living. For these reasons, women were often viewed as suspect, in terms of their class origins. This suspicion is revived and re-stimulated whenever women unionists take action or organise *as women*<sup>40</sup>: their identity as women is posed against their identity as workers, as legitimate members of the working class. This suspicion has a contemporary equivalence in the way that many blue collar workers view wage earners in white collar jobs or the public service - the majority of whom are women.

Women unionists' alliances, then, with women outside the formal union movement - in feminist organisations or the bureaucracy for example - compound this suspicion<sup>41</sup>. Such cross-class alliances characterised the suffrage and equal pay movements at some points, along with more recent struggles for anti-discrimination and affirmative action law.

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<sup>40</sup>This suspicion is alive in Sugiman's study of the UAW in Canada, as it is in many other accounts (Briskin and McDermott 1993, Cobble 1993a).

<sup>41</sup>As they did in many other movements, like those amongst Marxists and socialists, where feminism was/is frequently characterised as a bourgeois indulgence (Damousi 1994:88).

The suspicious treatment of these alliances contrasts with the many cross-class strategic alliances of men's unions with employers and the state against the interests of other workers. The history of male unionism is replete with examples of such alliances with employers, the state and moralists to exclude women, protect the family wage, boost men's wages and protect the definition and rewards of their skill. Many other union/employer/state alliances have been undertaken to protect fractions of capital from local or international competition or to shape industry policy in the interests of particular unions (see ACTU/TDC 1987 for an example). These alliances are ironic in light of the vehement critique of the suspect class origins of feminists and the alliances they make - at times - through their cross-class sisterhood.

'Class' is often invoked against 'gender' in working class political movements, and this characterisation is old. When Sara Lewis secretary of the Female Hotel, Club, Restaurant and Caterers' Employees' Union (FCU) was in 1910 involved in a non-Labor Party equal pay rally she was strongly advised to withdraw her union's support: "The Political Labor Council (PLC) urged her that 'the objects sought would be best secured by effort within the labour movement rather than by associating with people out of sympathy with the Labor Party' " (Raymond 1986:51)<sup>42</sup>. Similarly in 1920 when Louisa Cross, secretary of the Women Book Binders Union complained to the men's union about the anti-worker agreements made by male union colleague Burke, the President of the male union replied "that the women were pursuing some feminist cause rather than a 'working class issue' "<sup>43</sup>. Class 'unreliability' is a criticism often made of women union activists, suggesting that class loyalties must always count more 'in the final analysis' and that any weight upon an issue affecting women particularly - even, narrowly, waged women - made one's class politics unreliable.

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<sup>42</sup>In this case, Lewis was not intimidated and publicly defended her involvement in the rally. She wrote that "This attitude of domination is greatly to be regretted as it will not tend to impress women workers who have been foolish enough to wait for something to be done for them and now realise that they must do it for themselves...in a perfectly illogical manner the THC seek to show women that they are entirely dependent by seeking to crush any independence shown by them." (Labor Call 28 August 1913, quoted in Raymond 1986:51)

<sup>43</sup>"Cross was quick to reply that she saw no necessary distinction between the two, but rather that she had always done her best to further the interests of 'working women'. She contrasted her position to that of Burke who, as Wages Board delegate, 'had never given us any assistance' " (Frances 1993:120).



Autonomous women's organisation was considered an important breach of class solidarity and the discourses of unity in traditional male unionism served as an important containment device to prevent or ostracise those who moved to organise as women<sup>44</sup>. Fortunately, as in the above examples show, attempts at such containment did not always succeed.

Aspects of the debate over women's union auxiliaries are an important example. While membership of these auxiliaries (in the rail and mining industries in particular in Australia) was through family associations of women (ie wife or daughter of union member), and while male unions often resisted or sought control of the auxiliaries, they frequently did not achieve it<sup>45</sup>. However, the independence of auxiliaries - when it was evident - was often a source of male criticism that "inappropriate class associations" were being made<sup>46</sup>. Many women nonetheless had a clear vision of how separate organisation and action were not divisive but essential to their cause.

Further, in relation to women's variable support for their spouses' industrial action, Gibson argues that the explanations for this in Australian coal mining in recent decades, lies in their two political economies: that of the *workplace* (where husbands were located and the general rules of Marxist expropriation and exploitation apply) and that of the *home*, where a sexual economy exists with its own rules of expropriation, control and oppression (Gibson 1992)<sup>47</sup>. Explanations for women's intermittent and unreliable support for their husbands'

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<sup>44</sup>These discourses were also dominant in left political organisations like the Communist Party of Australia as Joyce Stephens (1976:10 *passim*) and Joy Damousi (1994) show.

<sup>45</sup>This issue has been debated by historians and sociologists. Claire Williams has argued that auxiliaries were 'ultimately' patriarchal co-options of female political energy (1981:123). Against this, Metcalfe argues that the picture is more complex and that male resistance to auxiliaries does not fit with a 'patriarchal cooption' explanation. In other settings, Joyce Stephens provides specific examples of women's resistance to male control: Alice Holloway travelled to Spain and the Soviet Union in 1939 funded by her ARU auxiliary and the ARU state council subsequently asked auxiliaries to consult with the union in future on such trips. Holloway made a spirited defence and the request was "unanimously 'expunged' from the council's minutes. There were other incidents which show that auxiliary women were often more than tools of the union." (Stephens 1976:60).

<sup>46</sup>For example when the Helensburgh Mining auxiliary complained about high union charges for their use of union facilities, they were told "to put an end to this uncalled for paper publicity running the miners down. They get plenty of this at the present time from the bosses and the capitalist press" (Common Cause 8 May 1943 quoted in Metcalfe 1988:186).

<sup>47</sup>Gibson argues that, just as men's surplus value is expropriated and controlled by their capitalist employers, women's domestic labour is similarly controlled and exploited by their partners, so that Marxist categories of analysis are appropriate and necessary to an understanding of the public and private spheres (Gibson 1992).

industrial actions lie in adequate consideration of the political economies of both spheres, rather than assuming that women's changing support for their partner's industrial troubles lies in women's illogicality or unreliability. When the domestic economy is pulled into the picture and their responsibility for household maintenance and spending, along with the welfare of children and other dependents is revealed, then their actions look rational and consistent (rather than 'femininely' inexplicable). This analysis throws into question the attempt to explain women's industrial (un)reliability (or, their 'class politics') in terms of the one-dimensional, public industrial sphere. In similar vein, analysis of working women and their commitments to the causes of the working class and on occasion to unions, are made suspect and seemingly unreliable in some settings by the failure to consider the explanatory power of relations in the domestic sphere.

The rhetorical device of positioning women unionists/workers and feminists, as middle class or of dubious reliability - as not really 'of us' - has played an important historical and contemporary role in retaining unionism as a site for the consolidation of working class masculinity against the feminist/female assault of 'enemy' class forces. Jessie Street provides an example of a woman, born and married outside the working class, who took on the twin causes of feminism and labour but refused to sacrifice the former to the later, and thus maintained a critical voice (Wright 1975, Radi 1990). Her critique of the labour movement<sup>48</sup> and eventual resignation from the Labor Party, made her an unreliable class ally in the eyes of unions, despite a lifelong commitment to their cause. Such 'defections', born of the contradictions between feminism and brotherly unionism, fed the suspicions of traditional unionism, and complicate and sometimes constrain the contemporary feminist critique of unionists today.

#### **4.6.5 A Deathly Embrace: Women, Organisation and Bureaucracy**

The shift of workplace and political resistance to formal organisations, while it may be an inevitable accompaniment to political maturity, has worked against women from the earliest

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<sup>48</sup>Street campaigned for women's rights in Australia throughout the forties and fifties, championing the poor and working women in particular. She became critical of organised labour's unreliability with respect to working women and came to see that unions "jealously guarded men's priority" (Street: 247, quoted in Wright 1975:64). Later in her life she became much less optimistic about what could be achieved through a 'welding' of labour and feminist causes since they were "so overtly divided amongst themselves" (Wright 1975.:67).

days of unionism. Dorothy Thompson makes the point that women were active alongside men in radical working class politics from the early years of the industrial revolution until the 1840s when the struggle shifted from a mass basis to organisational structures. Thompson argues that women were active participants in many of the early incidents of worker resistance in England. However, in the decade from 1838 to 1848 as Chartist and union organisations became more formal in structure "women disappear from working-class politics" (Thompson 1976:134). Thompson argues that the shift to more formal unionism left behind more radical politics, unskilled workers and women, she speculates that this may have been partly a result of "changes in 'women's expectations and in their idea of their place in society" (Thompson 1976:137). Similarly, Meredith Burgmann speaks of the "normally discouraging effect of trade union bureaucracies which reinforce a woman's feeling of powerlessness" (1980:455).

Unions provide one important, perhaps under examined, site of bureaucracy and gender at work. The quick resort of male unionists to the bureaucratic devices of credentialling, the uses of the machinery of arbitration to protect and delineate men's jobs, and of amalgamation to remove women's unions, provide some important evidence of the uses to which bureaucratic systems have been put to good use by men and their organisations. They have, as we shall see, their contemporary echoes.

#### **4.6.6 Conclusion: A Vantage Point of Scepticism**

This chapter has anchored my subsequent analysis of Australian unions in an historical reading of some key themes. This reading suggests a set of complex relations between the interests of working women, on the one hand, and working men and their organisations on the other. While neither sex has always been unified, the latter have often sacrificed or ignored the former, in pursuit of their own advantage. This undercuts any inclination to qualify the excluding strategies of unions with rationales which forgivingly set them, principally, at the door of capital or characterise them as the necessary tactics of class war. While women's paid work experiences are far from free of the effects of employer decisions and the imprint of capitalism, and while patriarchal constructions of 'womanhood' and the public/private dichotomy are not the work of working class men alone, men's unions made

many decisions that, in their *effect*, excluded and exploited women (and others), at best in the paternal hope that the bargain they struck would be better for the 'whole class' or 'whole family'; at worst in the interests of simple Anglo-male advantage.

A weighing of the damage done by dominant union strategy and organisation to women, suggests that a platform of scepticism is perhaps the most historically justified vantage point from which to view the current situation. This is not to suggest that all men deliberately acted against women, or that women did not exercise power and at times make important gains, including sometimes in cooperation with some men. However, the overall pattern in significant instances, suggests that men's interests overrode women's. This conclusion suggests that 'power' in relation to the mechanics of gender in unions, is not usefully conceptualised as 'capillary-like' (Foucault 1980), with no system to it.

A lively scepticism is suggested by an assessment of the action of union organisations predominantly run by men, in the name of 'solidarity' and 'union'. Analysis of the mechanics and fabric of gender in unions must be alert to these inclinations and the complex nature of the gender struggle in unions.

Alongside the psychological consolidation of particular masculine identities<sup>49</sup> through unionism, there were many material advantages that men sought and secured over women through unions - both in the paid and unpaid spheres. Traditional unionisms' discourses of (fractured and very partial) solidarity, made women 'other' - and often 'enemy' - and the practices of unionism gave this othering substance. While the organisations of waged working men did not author capitalism and the public/private dichotomy and its discourses, they fell into league with employers and the state in reinforcing and milking their outcomes to male unions' and working men's best advantage, and women's frequent cost. We can measure some of this legacy in terms of women's continuing distance from decisive power in Australian unions today, to which we now turn.

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<sup>49</sup>These masculinities were particular in terms of their sexuality, national origins, skill, sometimes colour, and so on. The nature of these changing dominant masculinities is worthy of further research.

## Chapter 5

### Power and Control: Numbers and Position<sup>1</sup>

#### 5.1 Introduction

It is not surprising, in light of the historical events canvassed in the previous chapter, that women continue to be under-represented in Australian unions. Like unions throughout the world, Australian unions have always been dominated by men, both in membership and leadership. They share this characteristic with most other Australian institutions, including private companies, the public service and parliaments and, like these, Australian unions are making only slow progress towards a greater role for women in positions of power and authority. But the male-domination of the commanding heights of Australian unions is of particular significance, perhaps, because of the hierarchical nature of unions, the pre-eminence and status of elected officials, and the concentration of power in their hands. Researchers have consistently argued for the importance of women's representation in unions and have put forward views that women union leaders will contribute to greater democracy, to "more innovative approaches to unionism" (Trebilcock 1991) and to new models of leadership (Heery and Kelly 1988, Briskin and McDermott 1993, Cockburn 1991, Sudano 1997 forthcoming, Eaton 1992b). These factors made the holding of positions of critical importance to any discussion of power in unions.

The Australian experience is of interest internationally because, while Australia faces declining union density, the US and many western European labour movements face much lower levels of unionism and their struggle for survival sometimes overwhelms a debate about fair representation. The International Labor Organisation has encouraged research about women in unions and recent studies reveal a consistent picture of under-representation<sup>2</sup>. How much real progress are Australian unions making towards fairer representation by gender? And what distinguishes that progress from international experience?

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<sup>1</sup>The main findings of this chapter and the next were published as "Women in South Australian Unions: What Progress?", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1995 (Pocock 1995a)

<sup>2</sup>See for example Susan Eaton (1992a) and Sue Hastings and Martha Coleman (1992).

Any attempt to answer these questions relies on base line data against which progress can be measured. This data is not available for Australian unions as a whole. Extracting survey returns from busy union offices is a difficult project and efforts to do so nationally have failed: other priorities always exist and in some unions data are not available. A few unions oppose the project itself: they consider it a diversion from 'real' union work and sometimes argue that particular projects on behalf of women are divisive distractions.

Research about the efficacy of work to increase women's power in unions is also hampered by the relatively small number of women union activists with the resources to evaluate their own experience and progress in their unions. While many Australian women engage in work in unions, few have time to write about it and as a result Australian labour studies and industrial relations literature does not adequately reflect the richness of experience which exists in this area in some Australian unions<sup>3</sup>. This research is vitally important to informing the ongoing process of change.

Men are over-represented in Australian unions for many reasons. Chapter four explored the strong sex segregation of work, with women excluded from many occupations and industries and confined to a narrow range of jobs within them, while carrying the main burdens in the domestic sphere. We have seen how the ideas and practices of 'brotherhood' and male solidarity have permeated Australian union history; they continue to affect the structure, culture, methods and operation of unions.

Women's participation in paid work in Australia has increased rapidly since the 1960s with a significant impact on unions: unionisation in white collar, public sector employment has grown rapidly and women's share of union membership has risen significantly. However, women's role in union leadership has lagged well behind and the gap between women's share of membership and share of leadership has widened as unions recruited white collar and public sector women workers to unions that continue to have mostly male officials.

While union density amongst men remains higher (37.9 per cent of male employees and 31.3 per cent of female employees aged 15 to 69 were members of a trade union in August

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<sup>3</sup>There are some exceptions: D'Aprano 1995, Shute 1994, and McManus, Elton, Sudano, and Mann et al. (in Pocock 1997 forthcoming).

1994<sup>4</sup>), the number of women in unions in Australia has increased over the last decade, and that of men has declined.

As outlined in chapter three, the decline in union density in Australia partly explains the union movement's interest in increasing women's involvement in unions. The declining level of unionisation across the Australian workforce has provoked a crisis of relevance and survival amongst unions (Berry and Kitchener 1989, Evatt Foundation 1995). The need to change the masculine face of unionism to attract the growing number of female workers to union membership is obvious to many officials; their support for the recruitment of women is strictly pragmatic. At the same time, others see a pressing need to overcome the past legacy of discrimination and exclusion and see women take their legitimate place as members, leaders and activists.

This chapter outlines the situation of over-representation of men in unions in several industrialised settings, and then sets out the results of earlier research on gender and representation in Australian unions, before presenting the findings of my survey of South Australian unions and a discussion of their implications, and union responses to these results. Unions around the world have responded to women's under-representation in a variety of ways and these are canvassed in the next chapter.

## 5.2 International Context

The issue of women in trade unions has increased in importance over the past decade around the world. Union density amongst women workers is, internationally, lower than amongst men, but in most OECD countries at least, the number of union members has been rising faster amongst women than men, reflecting women's increasing participation in paid work (OECD 1991). However, women's share of union leadership positions is extremely low in comparison to their share of membership. The International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICFTU) notes that in a large majority of union organisations affiliated to the ICFTU "women are still vastly under-represented in decision-making bodies without any special policies to improve this situation" (ICFTU 1991:47). Of 57 ICFTU affiliates (which include the peak union councils in most non-socialist countries) only seven have women's

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<sup>4</sup>ABS cat. no. 6325.0.040.001.

representation on peak boards or committees approaching or higher than the percentage of women members (ICFTU 1991:46)<sup>5</sup>. Women are "virtually invisible" amongst the highest officials in affiliated unions, and only a "small number [of unions] have made serious attempts to examine their structures and modify them in order to improve the representation of women" (ICFTU 1991:48).

A 1992 International Labor Organisation report found that North American women have doubled their union membership over the decades since 1960 (Eaton 1992a). In the US some commentators have seen the recruitment and activism of women as the salvation of the movement (Needleman 1988). However, women's share of union leadership positions remains very small in Canada and the US (Eaton 1992a).

A 1985 study of fifteen national unions and two national union associations in the US covering over four million unionised women, collected data on women's share of national, regional, and local union positions, and programs, departments and budgets committed to women's issues. It concluded that women's entry into union leadership between 1979 and 1984 was "at a snail's pace": it rose from 6.9 per cent of national governing boards in 1979 to 9.7 per cent in 1985, while female union membership increased in the same period from 41 to 45 per cent (Baden 1986:236<sup>6</sup>). Baden concluded that regional, district and state level leadership in the US remained dominated by men although women are slowly becoming better represented at these levels. At the less powerful local level<sup>7</sup>, interviews with labour organisations indicated that women's role was higher though once again systematic data was not available (Baden 1986:238). Baden estimates that the proportion of women national professional staff in unions doubled from 16 per cent in 1979 to around a third in 1985 in the fifteen unions surveyed: unions with public sector coverage account for much of the increase.

In Japan women's share of union leadership remains very small. O'Cleireacain suggests that "[W]omen are invisible throughout the Japanese labor movement, segregated into women's departments that have been created to represent them" (1986:41). According to a

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<sup>5</sup>These were OGB Austria, CLC Canada, FTUC Fiji, FNV Netherlands, NZCTU New Zealand, SGB Switzerland, TUC Great Britain.

<sup>6</sup>National US data on women's share of leadership throughout union structures is very poor. Under Reagan there were no national collections of this kind.

<sup>7</sup>In the US the union 'local' is equivalent to the Australian workplace branch.



Japanese spokeswoman at the ICEF International Conference in 1992, the major Japanese union confederation RENGO and its affiliates are "working aggressively to promote women's participation in all areas to create a society of equal opportunity" (ICEF 1992:45). However, women comprise only 5 per cent of union directors (senior officers). RENGO has adopted an action strategy of increasing this to 8 per cent - still well below women's 40 per cent share of the workforce (O'Cleireacain 1986:45).

In England women's share of union leadership has risen since 1985 especially in larger unions. However, only two of the 73 general secretaries (or 2.7 per cent) were women in 1992. In a study of the ten largest unions (covering three-quarters of the TUC female membership) the Labour Research Department found evidence of some progress between 1991 and 1992: women's share of executive positions increased on six of the ten unions, stayed the same in three and fell in only one (NUPE). Women's share of positions at TUC congress amongst these unions did not fare so well: the number of women delegates fell in six of the ten unions at the 1991 Congress compared to the previous (Labour Research Department 1992: 8). Women's share of national full-time official positions did not rise in any of the ten unions between 1991 and 1992; seven unions saw a decline reflecting the environment of union retrenchment. By 1995/6 five of the ten largest unions were approaching proportional representation by gender on their national executive committees (NECs), four on their TUC delegations, and only one amongst its national officers (Labour Research Department 1995, Mann et al. 1997 forthcoming).

The three largest U.K. public sector unions amalgamated in 1993 (NALGO, NUPE and COHSE); their amalgamation agreement included a commitment to work towards proportional representation for women throughout the new union's structure (UNISON 1994) and this very large union has set in train a range of policy and programs to improve women's (and minorities') voice in the union (Mann et al. 1997 forthcoming). However, the officer positions, even in this union, remain disproportionately male-dominated.

While women's share of union membership is rising throughout Europe this growth is not reflected in a proportional growth in their leadership share. Table 5.1 shows the proportion of women members, delegates to congresses, key committees, leaders of individual unions and in executive (or day to day) leadership in 22 national union

federations in 12 European countries in 1992. With few exceptions women's share of positions on the federations' leading committees is well below their share of membership: below a quarter of their share of membership in five federations, below half in a further ten and close to proportional in only three (such a comparison is not possible in the remaining seven). Only in the Netherlands' FNV is women's share of the key committee (25 per cent) more than their share of membership (21 per cent). None of the 22 union federations listed in table 5.1 is led by a woman.

**Table 5.1 Proportion of Women in Unions, 12 European Countries, 1992**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Delegates to Congress</b>	<b>Positions (per cent women)</b>		
			<b>Members of Leading Committees#</b>	<b>Leaders of Individual Unions</b>	<b>Day to day Leadership of Federation*</b>
<b>Europe</b>					
ETUC	na	16	16	13	29
<b>Germany</b>					
DGB	24	23	13	6	25
<b>France</b>					
CGT	na	20	25	15	36
CGT-FO	na	na	3	3	8
CFDT	30	20	28	15	22
<b>Italy</b>					
CGIL	44	32	25	6	25
CSIL	35	na	3	6	0
UIL	40	NA	8	4	8
<b>Spain</b>					
UGT	18	8	4	7	9
CCOO	21	13	na	10	21
<b>Netherlands</b>					
FNV	21	na	25	24	28
CNV	20	18	8	6	14
<b>Belgium</b>					
CSC	40	12	11	0	13
<b>Greece</b>					
GSEE	25	4	13	6	0
<b>Portugal</b>					
UGT	na	30	21	6	7
CGTP-IN	na	20	20	9	0
<b>Denmark</b>					
LO	48	30	13	10	11
FTF	62	39	41	30	33
<b>Ireland</b>					
ICTU	38	27-33	17	0	33
<b>Luxembourg</b>					
OGB-L	20	12	10	7	0
<b>UK</b>					
TUC	35	20	30	3	8

\* As far as possible at a level equivalent to the TUC general council.

# A very important grouping in most union federations in Europe. Within the TUC the equivalent group is general secretary, plus assistants and deputy and the heads of departments.

Source: Labour Research Department 1992:12

In all 22 federations for which the data is available, the proportion of women in the most powerful leadership posts in individual union affiliates is even lower and in most cases *much* lower, hovering between 0 and 10 per cent in 17 of the 22. Women leading national unions remain a rarity in Europe: in West Germany only one of the 16 unions was led by a woman in 1992, in Denmark 3 out of 29, and union mergers in the UK have led to a fall from five in 1990 to two in 1992 (Dorgan and Grieco 1993). Amongst day to day senior executives of union federations, women's share of positions is also much lower than their share of membership especially in Britain, Luxembourg, Greece and Italy.

The proportion of New Zealand unionists who are women is higher than in Australia (48 per cent in 1992, compared to 39 per cent in Australia) (Sarr 1993). While still under-represented, women have generally secured (at least up to the early nineties a rising proportion of positions so that by 1992, women made up 28 per cent of New Zealand union secretaries, 33 per cent of presidents, 44 per cent of union employees and 33 per cent of the NZCTU executive (Sarr 1993).

### **5.3 Gender and Representation in Australian Trade Unions: Previous Data**

In Australia the ACTU has had policy in support of improvements in women's status at work and in trade unions since its adoption of the Working Women's Charter in 1977. Part four of that charter stated that unions should actively recruit women and encourage their members to stand for office, and consider positive provisions for specific representation of women where necessary "to ensure that union decision making bodies are fully representative" ('Working Women's Charter' in Ford and Plowman 1983:371).

Critics have pointed to the gap between policy and action (Wilkinson 1983:357). However, until recently little data existed about the real level of participation of women in unions, especially in union leadership positions. It is not possible to derive an Australian table like that for Europe above: the data are simply unavailable. This information is vital to improvements in women's situation in unions for five reasons. Firstly, many union leaders do not know how few women are in representative positions in their unions or, more broadly, throughout union structures. They are frequently surprised by the extent and degree of under-representation and its existence in all kinds of union positions. Even in

unions with concerted programs to assist women into active unionism, many are unaware that women remain far from fairly represented. A picture of women's under-representation, shared by all senior decision makers, potentially has some shock value in stimulating change. Of course this information is a necessary, but far from sufficient, condition for effective action.

Secondly, a clear statistical picture helps unions design efficient responses: for example, different measures are required to address under-representation in workplace structures compared with delegations to ACTU Congress. By examining a comprehensive snapshot of under-representation unions can systematically address priorities.

Thirdly, attempts to collect this information expose gaps in data collection in many organisations. A significant number of unions do not, or have not in the past, kept membership data by sex and/or maintained records of workplace representatives or committees or other representative positions by sex. Attempts to collect this data have stimulated better record keeping systems.

Fourthly, measuring future progress relies on an accurate initial reading. The Australian union movement continues to lack a comprehensive national benchmark against which progress can be measured. Until we have such a measure, assessments of the impact of union amalgamation or new industrial laws, for example, on gender representation in union structures remain speculative.

Finally, without a clear picture of women's under-representation, women activists in unions are denied an important argument for greater union action and effort. Exposure of the continuing degree of under-representation in specific unions and across organisations as a whole, creates a strong case for affirmative action measures which cut across the traditional practices of seniority and reliance on weak, ineffective equal opportunity or other policies.

A number of studies have attempted to collect information about women in Australian unions. At the national level amongst federal unions, Jennifer Wilkinson undertook "some preliminary analysis" of a 1981 survey of ACTU affiliates in which 25 unions provided survey returns giving details of their full-time official base by gender (Wilkinson 1983). In 1988 the ACTU attempted to collect information about the situation of women in Australian

unions, but the response rate from unions was too low for sensible analysis. A number of partial state studies have also been undertaken. Considered chronologically, these studies show that a slow shift in gender representation is underway.

In 1976 the Women's Trade Union Commission examined union directories in four states (Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania) and found that less than two per cent of 221 union presidents and less than three per cent of 275 secretaries were women (Women's Trade Union Commission 1976).

Other studies have been fairly small in scope, covering a select group of unions in a region. In 1979 a survey of union officials in a group of eleven blue collar unions in South Australia revealed only one full-time female union official (Martin 1979:36-40). A 1980 Victorian study of women in union leadership positions showed that women were under-represented at all levels of leadership in seventeen Victorian unions, and that women tended to be concentrated in appointed rather than elected positions where they were vulnerable to dismissal and excluded from political power (Community Research Action Centre 1980). That study showed that no women held any of the 28 full-time paid positions in these unions and stated that, nationally, in 1980 less than two per cent of union presidents and less than three per cent of union secretaries were women, consistent with the Women's Trade Union Commission study a few years earlier. Wilkinson's 1981 partial study of ACTU affiliates revealed that in the 25 unions which returned questionnaires women made up 29 per cent of membership and 15 per cent of the 281 full-time positions<sup>8</sup>. These women were concentrated in less powerful positions, especially amongst appointed officers but their number had significantly increased: these 25 unions estimated that ten years before in 1971 women held only three per cent of the then 168 full-time union jobs (Wilkinson 1983:357). In 1985 the ACTU estimated that women held 11-12 per cent of official union positions, mostly in appointed rather than elected jobs (ACTU 1985).

At peak Council level, women appear in small - though increasing - numbers. In 1975, 3.5 per cent of delegates to the ACTU Congress were women; this rose to 7 per cent in 1979 (Wilkinson 1983:358). At the 1987 ACTU Congress women made up 17 per cent of

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<sup>8</sup>This 15 per cent share cannot be assumed to exist across all unions given the low response rate. It is likely to be an over-estimate since more male-dominated unions are less likely to have returned questionnaires.

delegates from unions with 40,000 members or more, compared to 13 per cent in 1983 and 32 per cent of union membership overall (Donaldson 1992:132). Data were not collected for the 1995 Congress, and at the women's caucuses at the Congress women delegates expressed concern at the appearance of a decline in women's representation, perhaps reflecting recent amalgamations.

In contrast with the slow growth in representation amongst unions, the ACTU has made significant progress in recent years, reflecting its willingness to set targets and to create additional seats for women on its key executive bodies. In 1985 the ACTU had one woman on its executive. In 1987 the ACTU Congress expanded the ACTU executive and reserved three additional positions for women. In 1995 women made up 27 per cent of the ACTU Executive and the ACTU rules require progressive increases in the representation of women on executive (and council as a result of amendments to rules at 1995 Congress) to reach 50 per cent by 2000<sup>9</sup>.

Over the past decade most state Trades and Labor Councils around Australia, along with many state-based union branches, have attempted - with varying levels of commitment and success - to increase women's participation in unions. In South Australia the Women's Standing Committee of the United Trades and Labor Council was re-established in 1975 and has been one of the Council's most active committees in the years since. In 1991 the Council established an affirmative action Vice President position for women and in 1994 appointed its first full-time elected Assistant Secretary (Women)<sup>10</sup>. Victorian Trades Hall Council has gradually increased the number of designated positions for women's on executive to reach six in 1995, with a plan to reach 50 per cent by 1999 (Personal communication, Jenny Draddy, Victorian Trades Hall). The Council also has one female Vice President and rotates the Presidency between men and women. In NSW three general positions have been created in addition to the usual Council executive membership of 30; while these are not called women's positions the current understanding is that they will be

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<sup>9</sup>ACTU Congress Documents 1995.

<sup>10</sup>The creation of this position was agreed in the 'Action Plan for Women in South Australian Unions' which arose out of this statistical collection in South Australia and its joint publication by the United Trades and Labor Council of South Australia and the Centre for Labour Studies (Pocock 1992). See discussion of action arising at the close of this chapter.

filled by women, voted in directly from the Council floor (Personal communication, Beryl Ashe, Labor Council of NSW). The Western Australian Trades and Labor Council has three executive positions reserved for women.

At the workplace level the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey showed that, in workplaces with 20 or more employees, women were consistently under-represented amongst workplace delegates. Overall, 29 per cent of delegates were women while women made up 40 per cent of employees in the surveyed workplaces. Under-representation existed in all industries and in both the public and private sectors (Callus et al. 1991:106).

In sum, a comprehensive picture of women's participation at all levels of unions in Australia does not exist. Such information is essential to a process of affirmative action: it provides a base line against which progress can be measured and serves as a stimulus to action in organisations (Muir 1994, Affirmative Action Agency 1990). Without such information, unions cannot assess the effectiveness of their efforts to increase women's participation. While the data available before the mid-eighties is not strictly comparable nor nationally comprehensive, the estimates suggest an increase in women's share of full-time union positions from less than five per cent in 1971 to about 11-12 per cent in 1985 (well below their more than one third of union membership). This amounts to an increase of about half a percentage point per year. Given such a slow rate of change it is not surprising that men continue to be severely over-represented at all levels in unions, especially in more powerful elected positions which represent the key career path for union officials. However progress has been more promising on peak councils where targets have been set and new positions created for women (particularly on the ACTU executive).

The failure to extract comprehensive national information about women's share of positions in the Australian movement has shifted focus to the state level: the Victorian Trades and Labor Council collected this data in 1991 (Nightingale) and I collected similar data in South Australia<sup>11</sup>. This state-level approach has both costs and benefits. While many Australian unions are national in nature (with key decision making power lying at the national level), a sizeable number are federated structures with considerable power lying

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<sup>11</sup> Similar data have more recently been collected in Queensland.

with state secretaries and state committees. The tendency is currently towards centralisation at the national level: it is increasingly important therefore that gender profiles are collected for these levels. However, state statistics can include details of representation both at state and federal levels (for individual states) along with details about workplace representation and Trades and Labor council structures, data which are only held at state level in most unions. Collecting data at federal level may limit the availability of important information about workplace representation or prejudice its accuracy. The more easy availability of state-based data, and its inclusion of both state and workplace structures make it a worthwhile collection, at the cost of an overall picture of women's and men's share of federal official positions.

The 1991 Victorian Trades Hall Council survey of women's representation and progress on action for women members in Victoria, covered 60 per cent of Victoria's unions which, in turn, covered 80 per cent of union members in the state (Nightingale 1991).

The statistics collected and discussed in this chapter are based on my similar survey carried out in early 1992 in South Australia<sup>12</sup>. Together the results for South Australia and Victoria indicate that women's share of leadership positions has increased significantly since the seventies but that the Australian union movement is a long way from fair representation of women. While women's presence in unions is rising, they remain under-represented in the majority of unions in comparison to their share of membership in these unions. Women's presence declines as power increases, in line with international trends, and confirming the findings of earlier studies and the daily experience of women unionists: women are more likely to be found in the least powerful positions, as appointed rather than elected officials, and as honorary rather than full-time, paid officials.

The discussion below concentrates upon the South Australian data collected as part of this research, and draws out comparisons with the Victorian data collected by Nightingale.

#### **5.4 Results of The South Australian Survey: Recruitment and Membership**

I have outlined the high response rate of the survey in South Australia and the validity of its results in chapter two. Fifty six (or 84 per cent of unions surveyed) returned survey forms,

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<sup>12</sup>The methodology used for the survey is set out in chapter two.



covering about 85 per cent of South Australian union members. Women made up 39 per cent of union members in the 56 participating unions in South Australia, which equals their 39 per cent share of membership nationally in August 1992 (ABS cat. no. 6325.0:5). Women made up 42 per cent of all South Australian workers, suggesting that, overall, women are under-recruited to unions by about three percentage points.

A comparison of women's share of membership with their share of employment in different industries, occupations and sectors as reflected in labour force data, suggests that women are especially under-recruited in private sector and blue collar areas, in manufacturing, and in clerical and labouring and related occupations<sup>13</sup>. Women tend - as would be expected - to form a higher proportion of membership in large, public sector, white collar unions.

Women form a lower proportion of members in unions with coverage at the lower levels of the employment hierarchy relative to their share of employment in these occupations (eg clerks and retail workers and, to a lesser extent, labourers and related workers)<sup>14</sup>. It appears that women have been more successfully recruited by unions with significant coverage in the upper levels of the employment hierarchy (eg managers, professionals) but much less so at lower levels: women make up almost three-quarters of all employees in the clerical and retail and personal services occupations, but less than half of members in unions with significant coverage of these occupations.

Smaller unions tend to have a smaller proportion of women members. Table 5.2 shows that women make up around a quarter of members in unions with less than 2000 members, compared to almost half in larger unions. Six very large unions (that is, very large within the South Australian context; these are not very large by national standards) account for half of all women unionists in South Australia. Small numbers of women are found, on average, in the smallest South Australian unions and the proportion is low through to medium size.

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<sup>13</sup>This comparison was made possible by grouping unions into industries, occupations and sectors where they indicated they had significant coverage (more than 20 percent of their members) and comparing women's share of union membership in these areas with their share of employment as indicated by unpublished ABS Labour Force Survey data for South Australia by industry and occupation in 1992.

<sup>14</sup>Of course the absence of the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association from the survey means that the data may underestimate the level of union coverage in the retail sector.

**Table 5.2 Women's Share of Union Membership by Size of union,  
South Australia**

Size of Union	Number Members	Number Unions	Number Women	Total Members	Per cent Women
Very small	0-999	25	2009	8134	24.7
Small	1 000-1 999	9	2 894	14 024	20.6
Medium	2 000-4 999	9	4561	28 046	16.3
Large	5 000-9 999	7	16 465	51 071	32.2
Very large	10 000+	6	53 442	103 681	51.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>56</b>	<b>79 371</b>	<b>204 960</b>	<b>38.7</b>

In sum, women tended to form a higher proportion of membership in larger unions, in unions based in the public sector and in unions with significant coverage in white collar workplaces<sup>15</sup>. Women made up 51 per cent of members in public sector-based unions, and 20 per cent of those in the private sector. In unions which identified themselves as blue collar, women made up 24 per cent of members compared to 53 per cent in white collar unions. These results suggest that recruiting campaigns for women can be usefully be targeted at specific industries and occupations in the private, blue collar sphere<sup>16</sup>. The under-recruitment of women in particular areas also suggests that unions' current recruitment strategies may favour men, and not be appropriately reaching women and persuading them to join. Such campaigns are more likely to meet with a positive response from women where they see that women have a real presence in the union - amongst workplace representatives and officials (Crain 1994). It is to these levels that we now turn.

<sup>15</sup> Respondent unions indicated on the survey form the sector (public/private/mixed) in which most of their membership were employed; 'mixed' was defined as close to fifty per cent. Similarly, respondents indicated how they would classify most of their members: as blue collar, white collar or mixed (close to fifty percent).

<sup>16</sup>In line with other studies of recruitment strategies (Berry and Kitchener 1989, Evatt Foundation 1995).

### 5.5 Workplace Level Representation by Gender in South Australia

Women's presence amongst workplace delegates<sup>17</sup> (including shop stewards) is extremely important to representative unionism and to the prospects for improving women's presence at more senior levels: it is from this pool that many future leaders will be drawn. Some years as a shop steward are seen as an essential prerequisite for many more senior union positions. Workplace representation is often the least rewarded type of union work in terms of money and power, while remaining one of the most difficult and demanding union jobs. The shift towards enterprise bargaining in Australia makes the nature of workplace representation especially important: women's absence or under-representation from these levels of union work has important consequences for the nature and content of bargaining (Bennett 1994). Very few earlier studies have assessed women's workplace representation in Australia<sup>18</sup>. In addition to the position of shop steward, I collected data on other types of workplace representatives (deputy shop stewards, health and safety representatives and their deputies, Equal Employment Opportunity, training and consultative committee representatives).

Almost one third of shop stewards (32 per cent) in the respondent unions were women (see table 5.3)<sup>19</sup>. This leaves a gap of 7 percentage points between women's overall share of membership and their share of shop steward positions<sup>20</sup>. This level of under-representation is not as severe as at the official and decision making levels, as we see below.

This narrower gap might be explained by the nature of the shop steward's job and status: the position of shop steward is perhaps the lowest status, and often the most stressful in the union movement, requiring hard work, considerable personal skills and a commitment to the welfare of fellow workers. It is likely that the data overstate the level of female

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<sup>17</sup>The survey collected data on shop stewards (which go by a variety of names in different unions: workplace representatives, key members etc). I call the traditional most common form of general workplace representatives 'shop stewards', while specialist workplace representative positions are named appropriately. 'Workplace representatives' refer to all these positions together.

<sup>18</sup>For example, gender is not a focus of study in workplace union studies like those of Benson 1991, or Lansbury and Duncan Macdonald 1992.

<sup>19</sup>The outcome for women workplace delegates in South Australia is close to the level in the Victorian study though Victorian results are less reliable since only a third of respondents could supply data, compared to 69 per cent in South Australia.

<sup>20</sup>In what follows I refer to such a gap as a 'gender gap', following Nightingale 1991.

participation as shop stewards because many larger unions with a sizeable female proportion of members have supplied data while some more male-dominated unions cannot or did not.

**Table 5.3 Workplace Representatives, Various Types, by Sex, South Australia and Victoria**

Position	No. Unions Included	No. Men	No. Women	Total	Per cent Women S.A.	Per cent Women Vic.
Shop stewards (1)	46	4 561	2 158	6 719	32.1	34.1
Deputy workplace reps.	6	294	40	334	12.0	
Health and safety reps.	29	1 249	689	1 936	35.6	36.3
Deputy health and safety reps	12	224	74	318	23.3	
EEO committee reps (4)	9	23	49	72	68.1	71.9(2)
Training committee reps	8	144	13	157	8.3	
Consultative committee reps	18	405	114	519	22.0	
Other workplace reps.	3	27	18	45	40.0	
<b>Total workplace reps.</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>6 945</b>	<b>3 155</b>	<b>10 100</b>	<b>31.2</b>	<b>38.0(3)</b>

(1) Sometimes called key members, job representatives and so on.

(2) In Victoria this includes some other types of representatives, but most are EEO representatives (Nightingale 1991:46).

(3) Data on deputy representatives, and training and consultative committee representatives was not collected in Victoria.

(4) EEO: Equal Employment Opportunity

The results show great unevenness between unions. Good representation in a small number of white collar, public sector unions hides very poor results elsewhere. Where women make up a large proportion of members they also make up a larger proportion of shop stewards. Even in these larger unions, however, women are often under-represented relative to their share of membership (see table 5.4). Women's share of shop steward positions was lower than their share of membership in thirty of the forty-two unions - or seventy per cent - where the data were available. Only 12 unions had better than proportional representation of women at workplace delegate level (fourteen unions did not supply data on workplace delegates by sex). Seven of these unions were small (less than 1999 members) and most had very small proportions of women members (less than 10 per cent).

Women are better represented amongst shop stewards in the upper levels of the employment hierarchy as professionals and para-professionals workers and amongst administrative and clerical workers. Particularly wide gaps in women's representation at workplace level occurred in unions with significant membership amongst process workers and labourers or their equivalent (see table 5.4): women's share is about half their membership share. This suggests that women in less powerful workplace positions (outside management and supervisory ranks for example), especially in traditional sites of unionisation, are much more likely to be represented by men. In the traditional strongholds and birthplaces of unionisation the under-representation of women is severe: for example, amongst the sixteen unions with significant membership in manufacturing<sup>21</sup>, women made up 17 per cent of membership but only 9 per cent of shop stewards. In the five unions with significant membership in the electricity, gas and water industry, women made up 36 per cent of membership but only 10 per cent of shop stewards. Similar wide gaps exist in the transport and storage and communication industries. In contrast the gaps are much narrower in the finance, property and business services, public administration and community services areas.

There appears to be little difference in the size of the gender gap between the public and private sector based unions. The gender gap at shop floor level is wider amongst white collar unions overall (where women's membership is so much higher) than amongst blue collar unions.

There are many unions where the proportion of women shop stewards is well below *half* their level of membership. Good outcomes in a small number of white collar, public areas overshadow very poor results in many areas. This is a serious problem in light of the way in which union 'career paths' function. Unless there are growing numbers of women at these levels there is little hope of increasing women's presence at other levels.

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<sup>21</sup>That is, more than 20 per cent of their union membership in this sector.

**Table 5.4 Women's Representation Amongst Membership and Shop Stewards, by Size, Industry and Occupation of Unions**

Characteristic	No. Members	Per cent Women Members	Per cent Women Shop Stewards
<b>Size of Union</b>			
Very Small	1-999	25	20
Small	1 000-1 999	21	22
Medium	2 000-4 999	16	11
Large	5 000-9 999	32	29
Very Large	10 000 +	52	45
<b>Industry</b>			
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting		33	18
Mining		35	0
Manufacturing		17	9
Electricity, gas and water		36	10
Construction		1	0
Wholesale and retail trade		22	9
Transport and storage		23	7
Communication		31	13
Finance, property and business		55	58
Public administration and defence		33	34
Community services		57	43
Recreation, personal and other servicesq		50	17
<b>Occupation</b>			
Managers and administrators		57	55
Professionals		56	50
Para professionals		40	48
Tradespersons		25	26
Clerks		47	43
Salespersons and personal services		42	34
Plant and machine operators and drivers		21	11
Labourers and related workers		32	13

Table 5.3 shows that women are under-represented in most other kinds of workplace representative positions, particularly amongst deputy shop stewards, deputy health and safety, equal employment opportunity, training and consultative representatives and their deputies). Women made up close to proportional representation amongst health and safety representatives, and well above this in the case of Equal Employment Opportunity representatives. In all of these positions, women made up 31 per cent, slightly less than their share of shop steward positions alone. Only 12 per cent of deputy shop stewards were women (only 6 of the 56 respondent unions could supply this data); 37 per cent of health

and safety representatives (29 unions); 22 per cent of consultative committees (18 unions); and a mere 11 per cent of training committees (only 8 unions). While the data on consultative and training committees is from a small number of unions, the low level of women's participation - lower even than amongst current workplace delegate structures - suggests that women's voice in enterprise bargaining is weak and well below a level of fair representation. This is reinforced by research about workplace bargaining structures in Australia under enterprise bargaining (Boreham et al. 1995, DIR 1995).

Only six unions could supply a gender breakdown of figures for deputy shop stewards. This may mean that records are not maintained or that the position does not exist in many unions. The available data indicate, however, that the deputy role is certainly not functioning as a training ground for women at present: women held only 12 per cent of the positions, well below half their level of shop steward positions overall. The figure is more positive amongst health and safety representatives: 37 per cent of these are women in the 29 unions supplying data, approaching proportional representation.

## **5.6 Gender Representation on South Australian Union Decision Making Bodies**

Women's representation on key union decision making bodies in South Australia and Victoria is shown in table 5.5. The results are similar in both states at state council level, but generally women have lower representation in South Australia on executives and in federal positions than in Victoria. Women made up a quarter of members of all the key decision making bodies listed in the table in South Australia. This is considerably lower than their share of workplace positions and 14 percentage points below their share of membership.

### **5.6.1 State Committees**

Women made up 31 per cent of state council/committee members in South Australia, eight percentage points short of proportional representation. Women are under-represented at state council level in most unions for which the data are available: only six unions had proportional representation or better on their principal state committee and three of these

were small unions of professional officers, while a fourth included recently amalgamated male and female-dominated divisions, explaining the relatively high female representation on its committee.

**Table 5.5 Women's Representation on State Union Decision-making Bodies**

<b>Union Structure</b>	<b>No. S.A. Unions Supplying Data</b>	<b>Per cent Women in S.A.</b>	<b>Per cent Women in Victoria*</b>
All State Councils	45	31	28
State Executives	46	10	25
State Conference	11	54	34
Federal Councillors	39	19	29
Federal Executive	45	13	20
Federal Conference	22	23	12
Trades Hall Delegates	52	19	28
Trades Hall Executive		24	14
ACTU Delegates	31	16	N/A

\* Nightingale 1991.

Unions with proportional representation generally had very low numbers of women in their membership making it relatively easy to achieve proportional representation through the presence of only one woman in some cases. Reaching proportional representation in larger, more female-dominated unions in the finance, public administration and community services sectors requires many more women, and gaps between women's share of membership and share of state council positions were considerable in these industries. State councils in unions with significant membership amongst managers and administrators, clerks, para-professionals and professionals were also unrepresentative - much more so than at workplace delegate level. Women from these sectors are much more likely to be workplace delegates than members of key decision making state councils or committees.

### **5.6.2 State Executives**

Only 20 per cent of members of state executives were women leaving a 20 percentage point gender gap between share of membership and share of executive positions. Given the pivotal role that union executives often play in shaping proposals and agendas for the decision of state union committees and councils, women's lower representation on



executives sharply reduces their power. Union executive positions are generally filled by more senior union officials and so women's lower representation is not surprising. The operation of informal seniority rules is likely to make any transition a slow process without the use of targets and specific action to increase women's presence.

### **5.6.3 State Conferences**

Overall 54 per cent of delegates to state conferences were women. This is greater than proportional representation by 15 percentage points. These figures reflect the fact that only 11 unions provided data on state conference numbers and these are dominated by four, large, mostly public sector-based unions where overall women make up 63 per cent of membership. In total 58 per cent of conference numbers for these unions were women.

If the four large white collar, mostly public sector unions (covering teachers, nurses, and federal and state public servants) are set aside, there were six women delegates to state conferences amongst the remaining 139 delegates (4 per cent). Large public sector-based unions where women are concentrated, keep data on conference delegates by sex, and are more likely to have state conferences. Their high level of female membership distorts the overall result on conference participation. It seems that women are considerably under-represented at state conferences outside this sector.

### **5.6.4 Federal Conferences, Councils and Executives**

Turning to women's representation on structures external to the state union, women's representation is generally much lower and declines with the importance of the forum. Only 13 per cent of the 79 South Australian unionists who are part of their union's federal executive are women. The figure is only slightly higher - at 19 per cent - amongst the 117 federal councillors. It is interesting to note that in each of these categories the results in Victoria are considerably better, though they are much worse in the case of federal conference participants. Women make up only 23 per cent of the 70 federal conference participants from South Australia (see table 5.5).

Men therefore have far in excess of their fair share of positions amongst South Australian delegates to federal union conferences, councils and executives. A similar picture emerges

from the Victorian data, (though less extreme than in South Australia) suggesting that the pattern of male-domination evident in state-level workplace and union decision making structures, is even more pronounced at the federal level. This reflects the fact that senior unionists generally occupy many of these elected positions which are often viewed as high status rewards for union service, and many incumbents are keen to retain them. Women's low presence in such positions may also reflect the difficulties some women have in travelling interstate to meetings. Given the importance of federal bodies in many (though not all) unions - to policy making, resource allocation, and administration - the under-representation of women in these forums must be a particular cause for concern. Women's presence is well below half its proportional level.

### **5.6.5 State Trades and Labor Councils and the ACTU**

Despite the creation of some specific affirmative action positions on some state Trades and Labor Council executives, women remain in a minority on these bodies. Women are also significantly under-represented (by 18 percentage points) amongst delegates to the Council in South Australia; the gap is narrower in Victoria where women make up 28 per cent of delegates.

Women are also significantly under-represented on delegations to the ACTU Congress from South Australia: only 16 per cent of delegates were women, leaving a gender gap of 23 percentage points.

### **5.7 Gender and Union Officials**

Full-time, elected union officials are often the key decision makers in unions. They shape union strategies, priorities and methods. They are often more influential than state committees of management because of their full-time, paid nature, and because union decisions are sometimes necessarily made quickly. The union secretary is almost always a pivotal union position.

**Table 5.6 Proportion of Women Officials, South Australia and Victoria**

<b>Position</b>	<b>No. SA Women Officials</b>	<b>Total SA Officials</b>	<b>Per cent Women SA</b>	<b>Per cent Women Victoria*</b>
Secretary and Secretary/Treasurer	4	58	7	17
President	8	55	15	17
Vice-President	17	89	19	30
Assistant Secretary	6	30	20	15
Treasurer	6	20	30	19
<b>Senior Officials#</b>	41	252	16	N/A
Industrial officer	19	46	41	28
Organiser	30	104	29	25
Combined Industrial-Organiser	4	16	23	32
Other type of officer	24	53	45	47
Women's Officer	1	2	100	100
<b>Junior Officials**</b>	77	219	35	N/A
<b>All officials</b>	118	471	25	31

\* Nightingale 1991.

# Includes Secretary, President, Vice President, Assistant Secretary and Treasurer.

\*\* Includes industrial, organiser and specialist staff.

The absence or under-representation of women in these positions has serious consequences for the public face of unionism and its appearance to current and potential members. Women are less likely to join and become active in such an organisation if they perceive it as one primarily run by men, for men (Crain 1994, Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995a and 1995b, Lynch 1986 and Sachs 1988). Table 5.6 sets out women's share of official positions in South Australia and compares them with the Victorian outcomes. Almost half of the respondent South Australian unions had no female officials at the time of the survey: this means that, except for their administrative and clerical staff (90 per cent of whom were women), around half of the unions in South Australia present a masculine face to prospective members, the public and the broader community.

Women were under-represented, relative to their share of membership, in all types of positions with the exception of industrial officer. Further, women's share of positions falls in direct relationship to their level of decisive power. Only 25 per cent of all official

positions were held by women (compared to 31 per cent in Victoria), 14 percentage points below proportional representation.

However, this aggregate outcome conceals women's concentration in junior positions. Thirty-five per cent of those in the more junior positions of industrial, organiser, health and safety and other specialist staff were women, compared to only 16 per cent of the more senior officials of president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and assistant secretary.

Earlier studies showed that the majority of women union officers were appointed rather than elected (Wilkinson 1993) and this pattern persists. Fifty two per cent of all women officials in South Australia were appointed compared to only 23 per cent of men, making the women who hold these positions much less powerful than their more frequently elected brothers. Union secretaries are overwhelmingly male in South Australia: only 4 of 58 union secretaries were women. Results were more positive in Victoria with 17 per cent of union secretaries being women.

Overall, women are less than proportionally represented amongst union officials in three-quarters of the South Australia unions which supplied the necessary data (or 36 out of 48 unions). Women officials are concentrated in a relatively small number of larger unions mostly covering white collar workers in the public and private sectors, and in unions with a high proportion of women members. The picture suggests that most unions in the state are a long way from fair representation of women amongst their officials. Results in Victoria are slightly more positive.

### **5.7.1 The Costs of Male-Domination**

A growing body of international research chronicles the costs of male-dominated union leadership. These costs include less recruitment success (Needleman 1988, Hallock 1997 forthcoming, Crain 1994). They also extend to the terms on which women leaders must lead: in the face of harassment, discrimination, and unrelenting pressure to 'prove' themselves (Heery and Kelly 1988, Stinson and Richmond 1993). The traditional model of unionism barely admits the presence of parenting responsibilities or the possibility of a personal life away from the union (Ledwith et al. 1990, Darcy 1993). The male-domination of union leadership fosters the perception of unionism as the province of men and

discourages women from identifying themselves as legitimate representatives and members (Crain 1994). Further, the traditional masculine style and practice of unionism is hard to challenge - by either women or men - as long as the majority of union leaders are men with long years of schooling in the established ways and means of union work (Shute 1994, Eaton 1992b, Ledwith et al. 1990).

The predominance of male leaders also makes success for women leaders or representatives harder as long as they are minority or lone voices. Discussion of women's success in non-traditional jobs (and that of union official certainly qualifies as non-traditional) has focussed upon the notion of 'critical mass' and the finding that women are more likely to enter and stay in non-traditional jobs where they form a significant, if minority, core of female workers (Spencer and Podmore 1987). Many unions remain far from reaching a critical mass of women representatives/officials who can support each others' advances and survival, as well as foster preferred styles of work, organising and public presentation. A minority presence generally forces some degree of conformity with established practices, and in unions these patterns of work are generally long standing and often coupled with beliefs about solidarity. These traditions are reflected in practices - whether in meeting procedures, language, patterns of union organising, styles of debate or decision making methods - making change hard to achieve, and alienation a common experience of women employed in unions. A growing proportion of women officials will undoubtedly assist more women into union representation and facilitate changes in work organisation and culture which will ensure their long term presence (Dorgan and Grieco 1993).

A comparison with data collected in previous studies suggests that women's share of official positions is increasing, though such a comparison should be treated with some caution given the approximate nature of earlier estimates. Women's share of full-time positions grew from around 3 per cent in 1971 to about 12 per cent in 1985 (ACTU 1985). South Australian and Victorian data now suggest that the share at least in these states is between 25 and 31 per cent. This implies that the pace of change has picked up since the mid-eighties. On average the share grew by just over half a percentage point a year between 1971 and 1985 and then by about two percentage points per year in the seven years since.

Despite this lift in momentum, the entrenched pattern of men's over-representation and women's over-employment in junior, appointed positions remains. Power continues to reside mostly in male hands.

### 5.8 The Impact of Union Amalgamations

International literature raises many concerns about the impact of larger unions and union amalgamation on the representation of women. In New Zealand and in the U.K. amalgamation has been associated with a drop in the number of senior women union leaders (Sarr 1993, Dorgan and Grieco 1993). Others point to the importance of an occupational union base for women's voice in unions, say as clerical workers, who become absorbed and diffused in restructured industry unions and lose that mobilising sense of occupational identity which Cobble describes amongst waitresses in the US (1990). Concerns about the impact of amalgamation are widely shared (Hill 1994, Hastings and Coleman 1992:56).

The recent reshaping of Australian unions through amalgamation is likely to have a significant impact on women's representation in union leadership<sup>22</sup>. The survey indicated, however, a low level of activity to ensure more effective representation of women. Eighty per cent of unions (or 45) in the respondent group were in the process of amalgamation. However, only eleven (or 25 per cent) were adopting measures to improve women's representation in the new union: four were identifying positions specifically for women and two were adopting affirmative action plans as they amalgamated.

Larger unions have taken more action in support of women in South Australia (these actions are discussed in the next chapter) and this may be a source of positive change as the process of amalgamation unfolds. However, discussions with union officials since the survey's completion suggest that the scramble to accommodate the expectations of incumbent officials and those men in the (often unspoken) queue for positions may lock unions into male-domination and increase women's under-representation. In many cases the internal political priority of meeting the demands of existing, mostly male, officials for suitable positions, has over-ridden discussion of women's under-representation. This is especially the case in sectors where a plethora of small unions has previously existed, such

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<sup>22</sup>The number of federal unions in Australia fell from 143 in 1989 to 47 in July 1994 (ACTU 1995).

as manufacturing. Unions with reserved positions for women in their structure have in some cases lost the argument with amalgamation partners for their retention.

### **5.9 The Response of South Australian Unions to the Survey**

I presented the results of this survey to the executive of United Trades and Labor Council and to its full Council in 1992<sup>23</sup>. Discussion of its outcomes led to the adoption of a UTLC Action Strategy for Women in Unions (Pocock 1992; a copy of the plan is included at appendix 3). This plan has thirteen elements including recommendations that individual unions adopt affirmative action programs, a women's officer be appointed, women's participation on the Council's executive and at Council increase, assistance to the state's Working Women's Centre continue, model policies be promoted to unions, the survey be repeated in five years, fair attention be paid to the needs of female unionists in the work of the Council, and training for women be extended. An Assistant Secretary (Women) was elected in early 1994 after much debate and deferral; she now has carriage of much of this work<sup>24</sup>.

Following the survey the number of women on the Council's executive rose from five to seven out of 21, or from a quarter to one third. It has since fallen to six (28 per cent). As a result of the persistent work of women unionists and the results of the South Australian survey, a number of individual unions have established women's committees and employed more women officials. Thirteen unions commissioned individual union reports which analysed the nature of women's under-representation in their structure, compared it with the state averages and with a basket of unions with similar coverage, and recommended strategies which the union might consider. A variety of union response were evident in meetings with officials following the preparation of these reports to officials. These responses fell into three groups. The first approach was to simply to do nothing; the second also did nothing, but blamed women for their under-representation, while a third response was active and strategic.

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<sup>23</sup>With the assistance of Jane Clark who provided research assistance in the collection of the data.

<sup>24</sup>The method of appointment and election of the successful first candidate are discussed in the next chapter.

A first group explained that national officers of the union had the matter in hand: they did not perceive action as necessary at state level; this group took no local responsibility, which amounts to a 'do nothing' position. The second group of union officials explained the absence or under-representation of women on committees or the ranks of shop stewards by asserting women's lack of interest in unionism and their lack of workplace involvement; these were the 'blame women/do nothing' group. They held out little hope of changing the situation and - especially in some female-dominated unions - were not inclined to seek out women or take specific steps to address women's under-representation. A third group were well on the way to implementing changes and were clearly committed to programs, and sought more information about what strategies would be most effective: an 'active and strategic' group.

As a result of these three responses, and the weaknesses in women's representation at the first level of union representation - in the workplace - a next research step was designed and undertaken. All thirteen unions that had commissioned individual union reports, were invited to participate in a survey of their women and men members to investigate the nature of their activism and barriers to it. Seven unions or union divisions participated in the subsequent survey of members which is discussed in chapter seven.

### **5.10 Conclusion: the 'Masculinist Majority' and a 'Feminised Minority'**

Overall, the statistics now available on women's participation in unions in Victoria and South Australia when compared with earlier sources suggest that the number of women union officials has increased significantly since the early seventies and that the pace of change has quickened since the mid-eighties. However these first collections of comprehensive statistics in two states also show that under-representation of women is severe at all levels, relative to women's current share of union membership.

At individual union level, women are under-represented at workplace, decision-making, and union official level in around three-quarters of all unions in South Australia. There is great unevenness between unions, with more positive outcomes in a small number of relatively large unions offsetting to some extent the great under-representation of women in a large number of small, more blue collar areas, especially where women are employed



outside professional and para-professional occupations. Two groups of unions can be distinguished: firstly, a masculinist majority (the three-quarters of unions with large gaps in women members representation in most levels of the union; blue-collar, private sector, smaller unions predominate in this group); secondly, a feminised minority (a small number of sex-balanced or female-dominated unions, generally much larger, white collar, and mixed public/private unions). They include teachers, nurses and public servants. It is useful to distinguish these two groups, since their internal practices, recruitment strategies and methods of work are likely to be very different. In the feminised minority, in view of their much greater critical mass of women activists, there is likely to be much greater possibility for alternative models of unionism, while the traditional discourses of male-dominated unionism remain generally unruptured amongst the masculinist majority.

Senior decision makers in unions are overwhelmingly male: almost half of South Australian unions have no female officials at all. The federal level is especially male-dominated, as are all the more powerful forums of the union movement. Clusters of women officials are developing in some larger unions and making an impact on women's representation on federal bodies and peak councils. As we see in the next chapter it is these unions, the feminised minority, that have undertaken high levels of activity to stimulate and facilitate women's involvement in their unions. The use of designated positions for women has had an important demonstration effect for women and men: in cases where they have been created, a greater share of ordinary positions for women has usually followed. The growth in women's representation at the ACTU executive and on the state Trades and Labor Councils are important examples of this effect.

This positive link is also evident from overseas experience where the use of reserved positions for women and the introduction of rule changes which guarantee proportional representation to women are important and effective measures which are now not uncommon (Trebilcock 1991). These, and a variety of other Australian and internationally applied mechanisms used to counter the under-representation of women, are discussed in the next chapter.

How does the Australian profile of women in unions compare with that in other countries? Under-representation remains endemic throughout union movements

internationally, as we have seen; however, women's share of elected and appointed union official positions has been rising over the past three decades in Sweden, England, Canada, the US and in New Zealand (Curtin and Higgins 1995, Labour Research Department 1994, 1996, White 1993, Eaton 1992a, Sarr 1993) as in Australia. Women's share of various kinds of union positions in Australia appears to be quite close to the Canadian case: women made up 20 per cent of union executive bodies in South Australia and 25 per cent in Victoria in the early 1990s, compared to 25 per cent in Canada; women make up about a quarter of the executive of the major union federation in both countries (White 1993:98-120).

In New Zealand, while remaining under-represented, women appear to have secured a larger hold in their unions than in Australia which is attributed by some to the high level of activism of New Zealand women in unions from the 1970s and the strong occupational base of some feminised unions which have been the backbone of the feminist effort (Hill 1994)<sup>25</sup>.

It would seem that the rate of increase in women's share of representation in Australia is not slower than in these countries, though strict comparisons are foiled by a lack of data. As in Australia, however, there appear to be at least two discernible classes of unions with respect to gender representation. Women are more likely in all countries to be found in larger, public sector, white collar unions - the feminised minority - while many unions are generally untouched by the presence of women in official ranks and remain the masculinised majority. Much of the progress towards fairer representation, inadequate as it has been, has been realised through change within the feminised minority, while the masculinised majority remain largely untouched by changes in gender representation (especially in their power heartlands) and generally impervious to women's presence. The overall under-representation of women at the level of officials remains systematic and ubiquitous in each of these countries, as it is in Australia. What is more, women are especially found in 'specialist' positions, outside the mainstream pathways of power: in Canada for example, women are especially under-represented on union bargaining committees (the common route into elected office) and are more likely to be head office specialists than organisers in the field (White 1993:112-117, Stinson and Richmond 1993:142).

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<sup>25</sup>However the demolition of New Zealand's award system in recent years and the severe drop in unionisation in the private sector have undermined progress in a more general sense.

At the level of peak councils, Australia's ACTU executive and council are at the leading edge of women's representation internationally, reflecting the ACTU's 1993 and 1995 rule amendments which establish affirmative action positions and set targets for women's representation<sup>26</sup>. In Australia, Sweden, England and Canada the increases in women's presence on their major peak council committee are directly attributable to the creation of additional affirmative action places for women (which we discuss further in the next chapter). While the importance of the establishment of affirmative action positions for women has obviously been an important positive step taken by a growing number of national and state level union federations, such measures are much rarer amongst unions themselves.

How does the Australian profile of women in unions compare with other Australian institutions? For all their slow progress, Australian unions are making progress at least comparable - and in some cases faster - than many other Australian organisations. For example, in the private sector only 4 per cent of private company board members and only 1 per cent of executive company directors were women in 1993 (ABS 1993). Seventy-five per cent of Australian companies have no women directors. In the parliamentary sphere, only 16 per cent of the House of Representatives are women in the 1996 federal parliament (up from a low 10 per cent in the last one) (pers. comm. Office of Status of Women, July 1996). Turning to political parties, women now make up just over a quarter of the Australian Labor Party's federal executive, and 17 per cent on the Liberal Party federal executive (personal communication, Liberal and Labor Party national offices, July 1996). The increase in women union officials from perhaps around 3 per cent in 1971 to between 25 and 31 per cent at present, compares favourably to the private sector at least.

The effects of union amalgamation in Australia are - at best - ambiguous: on the positive side, larger unions may be more likely to allocate resources to increase women's participation, but there is little evidence to date of an increase in such programs as unions

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<sup>26</sup>Women made up 27 per cent of the ACTU executive in 1995, 17 per cent of the Canadian Labor Congress executive in 1992 (and 26 per cent of its larger council) (White 1993:103), 28 per cent of the TUC's leading committee in 1992 (Labour Research Department 1992:12) and in the early nineties in Sweden 13 per cent of the executive of the blue collar union federation LO (25 per cent of LO council) and 21 per cent of the executive of the white collar federation TCO (34 per cent of general council) (Curtin and Higgins 1995:10).

batten down the hatches in the face of declining membership and shrinking resources<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand, evidence from some recent Australian amalgamations suggests that the accommodation of existing male officials may be increasing women's under-representation in some unions. A long pipeline of expectant, experienced, junior, male officials and workplace representatives in many unions point to the need for 'queue jumping' systems which give greater priority to fairer representation and to merit over 'time served' and traditional career paths. The significant under-representation of women in workplace structures in most unions as enterprise bargaining increases, gives some urgency to this project, particularly in light of the new conservative government's proposals to shift bargaining to the local, individual level and weaken union involvement in it. Improvements in women's place in Australian unions remain a pressing need if unions are to recruit in growing occupations and industries, many of which remain female-dominated.

Overseas research suggests that the extreme dominance of union leadership by men, perverts and quells women's presence, their difference and serves to maintain dominant traditional masculinist practices of unionism (Briskin 1993, Heery and Kelly 1989, Ledwith et al. 1990, Dorgan and Grieco 1993). The 1977 Working Women's Charter recommended that Australian unions take positive action "where necessary" to ensure that women are specifically represented in union decision making. The South Australian and Victorian statistics suggest that such positive steps are well over due. While progress has been achieved, the small proportion of women decision makers in most unions argues for stronger action: mere policy and positive statement will not suffice. The long overlooked wealth of female experience and leadership potential, and the pressing need to demonstrate to current and prospective members, unions' real capacity to represent women, make stronger action an imperative, particularly in the 'masculinist majority' group of unions.

The position of union official (whether shop steward or president) constitutes a non-traditional occupation for Australian women. In very few locations do women form even close to proportional representation by gender - whether at peak council, in individual unions, or in specific types of union positions - and this has very significant, negative

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<sup>27</sup>The proposals of the federal conservative government to deregulate union membership coverage will provoke competition between unions in some sectors, driving gender issues even lower on the agenda.

effects for women in unions. Amongst unions, however, two types are readily discernible and their problems are likely to be quite different. The consequences of working in non-traditional occupations in the masculinist majority of unions are likely to continue to be severe: minority categories of workers have a constant sense of their difference and must often adopt dominant group characteristics to survive, whether in the form of humour at their own group's expense, or by claiming themselves as members of the dominant group, like recently appointed women organisers in the NSW branch of the Transport Workers Union who identify themselves as "everyday blokes" (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 21 September 1995:5).

Such working conditions are stressful. The gradual increase in women's share of official positions, particularly in the feminised minority group of unions, heralds a shift towards 'critical mass' of women officials, though not in every union by a long way, and not within formal decisive structures in most unions. The slow progress for women to a representative presence suggests that a critical examination of the efforts in unions in the interests of women's activism and presence is long overdue. It is to such an examination that we turn in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Taking Action on Gender Representation in Unions

In this chapter I consider different concepts which implicitly underpin union action/inaction in relation to the gender imbalance in union structures. I then analyse the nature of union action in South Australia and Victoria, consider its relation to these implicit theories, and weigh up the quantum and nature of this effort compared to some other countries.

This weighing suggests three particular controversies: about the functioning of policy as a substitute for action; the importance of affirmative action; and the necessity for separate organising amongst women. Through all of this, the validity of conflicting conceptual frameworks for union action is at stake (female deficit, union deficit, male resistance) and I test these empirically in the next chapter.

#### 6.1 Theorising Women's Under-representation/Men's Over-representation

How have unionists conceptualised the problem of women's absence or under-representation? While unionists rarely make explicit the conceptual basis of such actions, three possible implicit theories exist.

##### 6.1.1 'Women's Deficit'

Firstly, a theory of 'women's deficit', that locates the explanation for women's under-representation in women: in their lack of knowledge, skills, information, experience or confidence; their attachment to home and children; their lack of interest in paid work and unionism; and their anti-unionism 'measured' by their reluctance to join, be active or to take leadership in unions. In her outline of this conceptual framework in the Canadian context, Linda Briskin points out its "problematic strategic message...which not only blames the victim but also assumes that being like men is the solution for women." (Briskin 1993:96<sup>1</sup>). This conceptualisation places the 'femaleness' of this group of members at the forefront, and poses this characteristic as a negative that requires remediation. What is more, this

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<sup>1</sup>Briskin is discussing competing claims in relation to women's separate organising, but her description of 'The Deficit Model' illuminates the approach adopted by some unions in relation to action in relation to women.

conception keeps the masculinity of the existing habits and structures - and their potential to resist women's presence - out of view. Women are highlighted, with their 'deficiencies' the unquestioning target of union action. Masculinity obeys Patai's "rule of irrelevance" (Patai 1983:187). These responses keep a negative focus on women's inadequacy, their assumed anti-unionism and their intractable, immovable 'personal' characteristics. They do not allow the possibility of analysing the problem as one of male *over*-representation, and do nothing in relation to women's under-representation.

This theory, with its many assumptions, suggests several union responses which focus on women: the 'do nothing/blame women' approach, (and its close companion: simply 'do nothing'). As discussed in the previous chapter these 'do nothing' responses were evident amongst South Australian unions when confronted with the data about women's under-representation in their unions.

Another response, still applying the 'women's deficit' theory, takes action in view of women's assumed deficiencies: unions offer training, confidence building, work-experience and other 'special' initiatives designed to hoist women up and out of their inadequacy (measured in relation to an unspoken set of male norms), to take their place alongside men, on men's unruffled terms. This approach 'remediates' women to fit them properly for unionism.

### **6.1.2 'Union Deficit'**

An alternative implicit theory can be hypothesised: one which explains women's under-representation by suggesting that the ways, means and organisation of unions are based on the pre-supposition that only men are unionists, and that these ways, means and habits of organisation are deficient in relation to women, and must be changed. This leads to strategy or action which, for example, changes meeting times and locations, provides child care, takes affirmative action to directly increase women's share of power, establishes internal plans to do the same, and examines union operations with a view to their reform. Theories which 'problematise' the union, as opposed to problematising women, are more likely to lead to separate women's structures which work to articulate ways in which union methods

must change, often through the work of a women's committee, conferences or women's officer.

### 6.1.3 'Male Resistance'

A third theory about action in relation to women's disadvantage might be advanced: that some men whose masculinity and material circumstances are advantaged by unionism and their union positions, can be expected to stand in women's way (and that of other 'new' entrant groups) and might be predicted to hone, refine and flexibly apply a range of devices, actions and discourses to consolidate their power (Collinson and Hearn 1994, Cockburn 1991).

What might strategies founded on the perception of male advantage/male resistance look like in unions? They might include inaction on women's under-representation; the under-resourcing of such actions; encouragement of women to focus on entry to declining positions (in workplaces, unions or on peak councils) while distracting them from focusing on access to power heartlands (like appointed full-time staff positions); practices that highlight women's (hetero)sexuality or their bodies and stress their vulnerability while failing to prevent sexual harassment or discrimination; favouring an unproven 'female deficit' theory and associated actions; fostering splits and competition between women; posing tests of solidarity which pit 'feminism' against 'labour/class'; invoking crises as explanations for inaction about women's over-representation; a failure to recognise the unpaid and domestic sphere; or misogynist language, humour and visual images. All of these serve, like the 'women deficit' theory, to keep masculinity, male privilege and male resistance out of the organisational spotlight.

Unionists who perceived the operation of 'male advantage/male resistance' in their organisations might undertake initiatives to combat it, such as an examination of traditional patterns of leadership accession, adopting new definitions of seniority, fostering separate structures for women, and setting men in motion - as men - to examine masculinist union practices and take responsibility for their reform.

Of course these three possible theories of union action in relation to imbalanced gender representation are not mutually exclusive: in any single union all three could be in play,



exhibited through contradictory actions, or actions which could be interpreted as in support of more than one of these conceptualisations. For example, the appointment of a women's officer can lead to training for women in the 'women's deficit' model, while also leading to the establishment of affirmative action targets ('union deficit'); at the same time that women's officer may be sidelined and under-resourced (in line with the predictions of a 'male resistance' model).

The implicit theoretical underpinnings of union action in this sphere are generally hidden. Alongside this, the outcomes and frequency of union initiatives to involve women and increase their voice have rarely been comprehensively evaluated, either in Australia or overseas, although Anne Trebilcock has summarised some approaches in a few European and US unions (Trebilcock 1991). Without such theorising and analysis, the considerable volume of union action in this sphere is based more upon the guess and judgement of officials and activists, who build their ideas around experience from other settings (like the education system or other public and private organisations), their own experience or ideas they gather from others and from a developing sense of what might work. The implicit assumptions which underpin action are rarely made transparent or examined, let alone tested.

## **6.2 The Australian Data: Action and Policy to Increase Women's**

### **Participation**

As part of my 1992 South Australian survey of unions I included a number of questions about union efforts to increase women's representation. The results show that some unions are implementing a variety of measures to address women's under-representation and that these are making a difference. These results corroborate similar findings in Victoria (Nightingale 1991). However, many unions are doing little and progress is slow. Further, most unions are concentrating on inexpensive actions within a discourse of 'women's deficit'. Initiatives that admit a union deficit are much more rare: generally they problematise women and their deficiencies, much more than they problematise unions, and there are no signs that masculinist union methods and habits are a site of analysis or activity.

The data show that South Australian unions have undertaken a wide variety of actions with respect to women. Of course the mere indication that an activity is undertaken tells us

little about the will with which it is effected, the resources available to it, its frequency or its effectiveness. Experience in Australia with women's committees is a case in point. Women's committees in unions can be informal groups of women members, without access to union resources or formal decision making structures that provide convenient repositories for all matters 'female or family'. On the other hand they can be well resourced, elected committees with direct links into decision making, serviced by union officers and with a clear charter and budget. The survey did not collect information about the support of leadership or the quality or outcomes of initiatives; this information would be most useful to the refinement of strategies.

Despite this limitation the survey provides us with important new information about the extent of union action in the interests of women members. The results suggest that only a handful of the 56 unions who responded (covering 84 per cent of unionists in the state) are taking comprehensive action to assist women. On the other hand around two-thirds of unions - the 'masculinist majority' - have adopted general equal employment and other policies; however, very few have backed these up with union resources and action.

Unions were asked to indicate which, if any, of thirteen actions they had taken and which of four policies they had adopted. The incidence of these actions and policies is set out in table 6.1. The majority of South Australian unions indicated that they are taking *some* action in support of women. However, in the main, they were measures which require minimal action by unions themselves (for example, the distribution of materials produced by the ACTU for women). Only a minority of unions were taking major initiatives such as establishing women's committees, and generally a much smaller proportion than in Victoria.

Three-quarters of unions in the survey group distributed material produced by other agencies. About half published their own information of this nature, and about half sent women to women's trade union training courses. A slightly smaller proportion participated in the Anna Stewart Memorial Project<sup>2</sup> (43 per cent), either by sending one of their own members on the program or hosting a woman from another union.

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<sup>2</sup>In this initiative women union members are brought into their own or another union for a two week period where they 'shadow' union officials and attend some seminars with other participants. The project is run annually in Victoria and South Australia in memory of Anna Stewart, a union official who made a significant contribution for women in Australian unions.

**Table 6.1 Union Action and Policy in South Australia and Victoria in Support of Women's Participation**

	No. unions SA	Per cent Unions		Rating Points
		SA	Victoria(1)	
<b>Action</b>				
Women officer*	1	2	21	20
Women's Committee*	14	25	36	15
Women's courses/seminars*	9	16	28	10
Women's conferences*	5	9	19	10
EO/AA program for members*	15	27	31	10
Child care for meetings*	12	21	61	10
Publish info. for women*	27	48	67	5
Distribute UTLC/Govt./ACTU information for women*	41	73	69	5
Send women to UTLC/ACTU women's courses	26	46	N/A	5
Participate in Anna Stewart Memorial Project (2)	24	43	N/A	5
Take any other specific action for women	10	18	N/A	5
Consult with employers on AA/EO Act	20	36	N/A	10
Have internal union EO/AA program for union employees	15	27	N/A	10
<b>Policy</b>				
Sexual harassment*	34	60.7	49	10
Women's policy	11	19.6	N/A	10
Equal opportunity/AA policy*	36	64.3	61	5
Child care policy	19	33.9	N/A	5

\* These activities were included in the Victorian activity rating scale. All these and the seven additional activities shown in the table were included in the fuller South Australian activity rating scale

(1) Nightingale 1991.

(2) A training/work experience program for women unionists.

Few unions were taking initiatives which require significant resources. Only one quarter of unions had a women's committee and smaller proportions conduct women's courses or seminars (16 per cent), or conduct women's conferences (9 per cent). Only one union had a full-time women's officer, while another had an equal opportunities officer<sup>3</sup>. Only around a

<sup>3</sup>Three years later following many significant amalgamations this situation had hardly changed except that one South Australian union with a women's officer has subsumed these duties into those of other officers and given up the full-time designated position.

quarter of South Australian unions conducted an equal employment opportunity/affirmative action program for members. About the same number conducted such a program within the union for union employees. About a third exercised their legal right, under the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act, 1986, to be involved in the development of affirmative action programs in workplaces with more than 100 employees.

About two-thirds of South Australian unions indicated that they have a policy on equal opportunity/affirmative action and almost the same number indicated that they have a sexual harassment policy.

Only one third have a child care policy and much less have a women's policy or other policy relating to women in particular. Unions are more likely to adopt policy which is general in nature with respect to equal opportunity, and less likely to develop specific policy on issues affecting women.

Action is very uneven between unions. Most unions are doing little and this inaction is reflected in continuing low levels of female membership and leadership. Generally South Australian unions have been slow to commit themselves to policies through action and resources, and only a handful are implementing comprehensive plans to improve women's participation.

Table 6.1 allows a comparison of action in Victoria and South Australia. The level of activity by South Australian unions in almost all areas is much lower than in Victoria, especially in areas like the employment of women's officers and the establishment of women's committees, conferences and training<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, it appears that South Australian unions are stronger on the adoption of policy. This result suggests that larger unions (as exist in New South Wales and Victoria) are more likely to be taking action in support of women members; results are likely to be much less positive amongst smaller union branches as exist in Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia, the ACT and the Northern Territory.

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<sup>4</sup>This may be explained by the larger proportion of unions included in the South Australian survey, perhaps making it a more realistic picture of the situation. However, it is more likely to reflect the fact that South Australian unions are generally considerably smaller than their Victorian equivalents.

It is useful to give some weightings to the various activities and arrive at a score which summarises the extent of activity in each union for the purposes of comparison. Nightingale's study allocated points for 10 activities and policies; these are marked with an asterisk in table 6.1 (Nightingale 1991). That study gave greater weight to the employment of a women's officer (20 points) and a women's committee (15 points) in view of the effort, resources and impact that such efforts generally have in unions. Other activities were allocated five or ten points each in relation to their resource implications. The points allocations are shown in table 6.1.

Following this method, an 'activity score' was calculated for each South Australian union, and unions were grouped according to their scores. Table 6.2 sets out the relative scores of South Australian and Victorian unions based on the ten activities identified by Nightingale. Over half of South Australian unions are taking little or no action to encourage the participation of women: 32 unions (or 57 per cent) scored less than 20 of a possible 100 points, compared to 31 per cent in Victoria. Three quarters of South Australian union respondents scored very low or low, with less than 40 points; five unions scored no points.

In South Australia I collected data on seven additional possible activities (those not marked by an asterisk in table 6.1); their weightings are shown in table 6.1. When these are included in the calculation of activity scores the profile of scores changes only a little.

**Table 6.2 Union Action Scale for Women, South Australia (1992) and Victoria (1991)**

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>No. Unions</b>		<b>Per cent Unions</b>	
		<b>SA</b>	<b>Victoria*</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>Victoria*</b>
Very high	81-100	1	7	2	10
High	61-80	5	7	9	10
Fair	41-60	6	11	11	16
Low	21-40	12	21	21	31
Very Low	0-20	32	21	57	31
	56	67	100	100	

\* Nightingale 1991.

Table 6.3 uses the full range of South Australian activities and shows that unions with high or very high scores tended to be the 'feminised minority' of female-dominated, larger, white collar unions. In South Australia, unions taking more action have a higher level of women's membership and representation in various types of positions. The 27 unions with very low scores of less than 20 points have considerably lower proportions of women members, workplace delegates, state committees and officials. The reverse is true of unions with scores of between 40 and 100 points where their higher level of action is associated with more women representatives. This fact, alongside the Victorian finding that resource intensive initiatives such as women's officers and committees, are associated with considerably higher proportions of women officials, and federal and state representatives, suggests that activities to increase women's share of union positions are associated with a greater role for women within the union. Of course this might mean that the presence of more women in the union causes more action on women's behalf, or the reverse: that more action results in more women in the union.

**Table 6.3: Characteristics of Unions with Different Scores, South Australian Unions, Using SA Action Scale (1)**

Rating	Score	No. Unions	% women members	% women shop stewards	% women state c'tees	% women officials	Ave size
Very high	81-100	2	51	41	36	39	12 813
High	61-80	5	43	26	23	29	13 170
Fair	41-60	4	51	44	36	37	5 652
Low	21-40	18	33	38	26	21	3 162
Very low	0-20	27	12	13	10	11	1 683

(1) These are averages for all unions in the different rating groups

The survey investigated the provision of child care by unions and the timing of meetings. Both factors have been suggested as possible barriers to women's union participation (Griffin and Benson 1989:86). Only a fifth of respondent unions in South Australia provided child care for union meetings or helped members meet the costs of such child care (a much higher 61 per cent in Victoria). The proportion was even lower for conferences and

union training. Just over half of South Australia's unions (55 per cent) held their meetings outside member's work time, while 25 per cent held them in members' work time and the remaining fifth used some combination.

### **6.2.1 The Dominant Paradigm: 'Women's Deficit'**

This examination of current union action in South Australia on behalf of women shows that many unions are doing very little to address women's under-representation. What is more, the most common types of union actions in Australia (based on what we now know from Nightingale's 1991 report and my findings) are the adoption of policy and low cost initiatives often initiated outside the union (such as distribution of materials targeted at women, produced outside the union).

The dominant theoretical approach is that of 'women's deficit' with much less activity in accord with the 'union deficit' theory. Measures relating to inadequacies in the structure and operation of unions (like holding meetings in paid work times) are much less frequent. Only 27 per cent of South Australian unions and 31 per cent in Victoria had adopted an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action program with respect to internal union structures. Initiatives which build the voice of women within the union (such as women's committees and conferences) or which directly address the under-representation of women in the union (through affirmative action) are also much less frequent. What is more there are few signs of the conception of masculinity and its practices as problematic, suggesting that theories of 'male advantage/male resistance' (which keep 'women' in view, and resist change that dislodges male privilege) may be relevant in explaining persistent male-domination.

These findings reinforce the schism which splits the Australian union movement into two definable camps: the 'feminised minority', who account for much of the movements' female membership and action to foster women's activism, and that 'masculinised majority' who, representing the dominant culture, continue to be extremely male-dominated and show scant interest in taking action to change that fact.

In the next chapter we see how this dominant Australian union approach - with its assumption of a deficit in women which overwhelms any deficit in unions - is contradicted

by empirical evidence and does not directly address the main barriers which women name as blocking their union voice, presence and leadership.

How does the level and nature of effort in Australian unions to address women's under-representation compare with that internationally, and what general themes arise from analysis of this effort? The remainder of this chapter considers these issues.

### 6.3 The Level and Nature of International Effort for Women

As in Australia, many efforts in industrialised countries to increase women's union involvement, have tended to focus rather more upon women than upon union transformation; they have been initiated in large part by women (rather than incumbent male officials); have been concentrated in larger public sector or white collar unions; and rarely have comprehensive, well resourced affirmative action strategies been adopted<sup>5</sup>.

In terms of relative effort, Australian unions appear to be doing less than unions in many industrialised countries such as England, New Zealand and Canada; however, effort in all places is very variable between unions<sup>6</sup>. In England the effort is more sustained<sup>7</sup>. Almost half of unions in England employ a women's officer (46 per cent, compared to 21 per cent in Victoria and 2 per cent in South Australia) while 14 per cent of English unions have reserved positions for women on their national executives - many more than in Australia (Labour Research Department 1991). Around three-quarters have women's committees and conduct women's training courses; these are almost double the levels in Australia (Labour Research

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<sup>5</sup>This discussion concentrates upon North America and Western Europe because these countries - for all their differences - are closest to the Australian case, both in terms of their origins and current states. By contrast, in most Asian and African countries, for example, the nature of women's participation in labour outside the home is very different from that in Australia: participation in the paid formal labour market is low and women's struggle often lies outside the conventional labour movement. Nonetheless, just as in North America, Europe and Australia, women's participation is largely missing from recorded labour movement history and their union institutions are as male-dominated, if not most so, as those in the industrialised world (Parpart 1988, ICFW Women's Section 1992).

<sup>6</sup>As in the case of statistics on women's representation, systemic evaluation of union effort on behalf of women is infrequent; this lack of comprehensive data makes a precise comparison impossible.

<sup>7</sup>The TUC is one of the few other organisations where details comparable to those set out for parts of Australia at the beginning of the chapter are available. Indeed at least one of the TUC's regional women's committees collects and publishes similar information on a regional basis (SERTUC 1992).



Department 1991, TUC 1989). Ninety per cent have an equal opportunity policy compared to around 60 per cent in Australia.

In New Zealand in the early nineties there were specific structures or activities for women members in every union except those particularly dominated by women: "All the unions which could be said to have a significantly mixed gender membership have special meetings or seminars for their women members, and about half have formalised union structures [for women]", though few had reserved seats on their executives for women (Sarr 1992:19).

On the other hand, the Australian effort may be more comparable with that of unions in the US. In one of the few US studies of effort across unions, one third of fifteen unions studied were 'affirmatively' committed to addressing women's concerns through "convention actions, budget allocation, standing departments and committees, conferences, and training materials" while another third were "somewhat committed" to providing resources but without functioning programs. The remaining third were "reactive" with respect to women's concerns (Baden 1986:239).

Turning to the nature of the international effort, there are many similarities with Australian unions' adoption of the 'women's deficit' model of union action. In the US for example, there is a long tradition of offering women training, reaching back to the 1920s and the Bryn Mawr Women's Summer School. Wertheimer and Nelson's 1975 New York study placed great emphasis upon training as an antidote to women's lack of knowledge and confidence (Wertheimer and Nelson 1975). The effects of family responsibilities and traditional masculine union culture have also been widely canvassed in the US literature (Feldberg 1987, Balser 1987).

Training has also played an important role in Canada (White 1993) and various forms can usefully be distinguished: training for women to increase their skills, stimulate their interest and encourage them to accurately understand their ready capacity for union roles; training for men about women and their situation at work and in the union; training on specific industrial issues that especially affect women and training on issues like discrimination and sexual harassment. Some unions have taken particular training initiatives which involve the families of activists and recognise the family responsibilities and social needs of activists (White 1993, 1997 forthcoming). Briskin points out that training programs for women in

Canada - as elsewhere - are not always oriented to fixing a deficit in women but increasingly also "concentrate on developing an activist politicized feminist constituency in unions." (Briskin 1993:96).

Other common forms of action in connection with women's representation in unions involve separate organising: women's conferences, women's committees and equality officers (Trebilcock 1991, Briskin 1993, Milkman 1985a, Eaton 1992a, Hastings and Coleman 1992); these are analysed further below. Rarely are such initiatives uncontroversial in unions (Mann et al. 1997 forthcoming, Briskin 1993).

Interesting models of comprehensive organisational responses to women in unions exist in several countries but remain infrequent exceptions: in England UNISON and the GMB (Taylor 1994, Mann et al. 1997 forthcoming), in the US the SEIU (Nussbaum and Sweeny 1989, Cobble 1993b) and in Sweden, Kommunal (Curtin and Higgins 1995). Such programs invariably include adjustments in the time and venue for meetings, assistance with child care, instituting branch women's or equal opportunity officers, specific activities and structures for women and changes in the cultural practices and norms of the organisation (Labour Research Department 1991, Trebilcock 1991, White 1993, Cobble 1993a, UNISON 1994, Cunnison and Stageman 1995, Stinson and Richmond 1993). The pressing need to lower the domestic load carried by women, and the union responsibility to encourage this, are often canvassed in discussions of women's activism (Roby and Uttal 1993, Needleman 1993a).

Action by UNISON, a UK union of 1.4 million members, provides one of the largest and most comprehensive programs, one which deliberately fosters separate organising through 'self-organising groups' (SOGs) amongst women and minorities. The union's rules commit it to gender proportionality in its elected structures by 2000; it is also committed to fairer representation for low-paid, disabled, lesbian, gay and black members, and its SOGs establish informal, separate structures for these groups to assist their mobilisation. In a recent assessment, Marian Mann, Sue Ledwith and Fiona Coglán conclude that progress has been made in UNISON through these changes which amount to a significant "break with union traditions...[and make] explicit and legitimate the sort of pluralism which many unions have spent years trying to control and contain" (Mann et al.

1997 forthcoming). However, the union remains some distance from proportional representation by gender (especially amongst appointed union staff where no targets apply) and the persistence of conflicting cultures amongst the pre-amalgamation unions complicates progress.

Swedish unions have used a variety of methods to increase women's voice: for example the Swedish Factory Workers' Union concluded a five year project in three of the union's locals in 1992. These programs included courses and conferences for women and resulted in increases in union activity, in the quality of that activity and in the number of women in leadership positions (ICEF 1992:54). While Swedish unions generally eschewed specific initiatives for women into the 1980s, they have recently changed direction. As women delegates to the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers Unions put it in 1992: "We thought for a long time that the differences in treatment between men and women would solve themselves when the differences between the classes were evened out. Now we know that is not the case and in order to create a just society both a class and a gender perspective must be borne in mind" (ICEF 1992:52).

Developments in several countries signal a growing recognition of the need to recognise women's difference from men, rather than insist upon narrow equality (ICFTU 1991, Briskin 1993, Curtin and Higgins 1995, White 1993, Labour Research Department 1991, Sugiman 1993).

Out of these and many other experiences a number of controversial issues arise and I will discuss three of these below: policy, affirmative action and separate organising. It is clear that women have increasingly turned away from mere policy, to the adoption of numerical targets and goals, choosing routes which effectively place women in senior positions, over initiatives which focus instead upon women's 'need' for training or 'special' measures (although there are many continuing examples of the latter). The use of designated positions for women has focussed attention upon routes to leadership which are other than the traditional one of seniority (Heery and Kelly 1989). Secondly, there is a growing emphasis upon changing the methods of union work to more effectively recruit women members - including employment of more women union officials and organisers. Thirdly, the importance of separate women's structures and caucuses - both within and outside unions -

is clearly in evidence, with effective progress often linked to the development and exercise of this independent voice (Briskin 1993, Trebilcock 1991, ICFTU 1991, Curtin and Higgins 1995, Balser 1987). Over the past few decades the importance of separate organising has grown amongst women, and unions that show significant progress - like UNISON - encourage the practice, seeing it as an essential underpinning of progress towards its proportionality goals. However, this 'separation' has not been without controversy.

#### **6.4 Union Policy in Support of Women: 'Purely Ceremonial and Limited to Solemn Occasions'**

Policy statements about achieving equality in trade unions and between women and men in the workforce are plentiful around the world. They have generally been the first type of initiative taken by unions to address women's issues. Alone, they have rarely led to real change:

[D]eclarations on paper remained both the starting - and ending - point of action in many trade union organisations, as elsewhere in society. Only when other elements in the strategy to promote women union leaders have come into play has change begun to occur (Trebilcock 1991:409).

In some places ILO policy has served as a stimulant to policy adoption in some national union federations, which has, in turn, influenced that of affiliates. Such national union policy declarations exist in Canada, the UK, New Zealand and South Africa (and Australia). However, their effect has been slight, in many places (Stinson and Richmond 1993:151).

In similar vein, Trebilcock argues that the most effective of these policy documents are affirmative action plans which set goals and timetables and specify monitoring mechanisms. This approach has been embraced by the French Democratic Confederation of Labour, the Women's Congress of the German Confederation of Trade Unions and the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions (USS) (Trebilcock 1991:410). Women in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) are also well aware of the limitations of policy as a lever for change: "Although most organisations subscribe to equality of treatment

for women as a top priority, this often remains at the level of a paper policy or within the Women's Committee." (ICFTU 1991:57)<sup>8</sup>.

Sexual harassment provides one important example of the gap between policy and action. As we have seen the majority of Australian unions have policy against sexual harassment (two-thirds in South Australia and half in Victoria). Many have had such policies for over a decade. However, at caucuses of women delegates at the 1995 ACTU Congress, stories of sexual harassment and inadequate union responses to it were numerous<sup>9</sup>. A similar phenomenon is reported in other countries<sup>10</sup>. ACTU Congress delegates spoke of union officials' general reluctance to take action on harassment, their confusion about what it is and what to do about it, and the tendency to characterise complainants and their supporters as lacking 'solidarity'. A number of Australian unions have been forced to deal with harassment within their own structures in recent years, (for example, harassment of members by fellow members and inaction in response to complaints by members and workplace representatives). In one notorious case in Western Australia in the early nineteen-nineties the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) shared a large fine with an employer when the union and its officers failed to take adequate action in relation to the harassment of two members by other members<sup>11</sup>. However, proposals to increase

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<sup>8</sup>The fifth annual ICFTU world women's conference (which gave rise to this quote) rested greater reliance upon improving representation of women throughout union structures through designated positions, the recognition and elimination of sexual harassment, continuation of women's committees and training for women (ICFTU 1991:62). These women also recognised that women "must take power. It will not be offered to us" though they spoke of a reconception of traditionally masculine notions and practices of 'power over' in favour of 'power to change and empower others' (ICFTU 1991: 58).

<sup>9</sup>Personal observation; I was a delegate at the Congress.

<sup>10</sup>Carl Cuneo quotes a Canadian woman:

The CLC has not dealt at all effectively with [sexual harassment]. They sent a task force around in 1989 investigating some of these horror stories from [residential labour] schools...I myself was a victim...A brother tried to rape me...The reaction of the CLC to this was to sit down with me and to say, 'This would be very bad publicity for us if this got out. So, you know, in the interest of the labour movement, this has never happened before; we are sure it'll never happen again. This was just this one case...'. Well it's happened all the time! (quoted in Cuneo 1993:123)

<sup>11</sup>This interesting case revealed the changing nature of solidarity discourses in unions, with the two women complainants pitted against their male co-workers and their union officials until a number of male members revealed that they also felt discomfort about offensive pornographic materials. The complainants were painted as anti-union by some unionists, but the decision of the relevant equal opportunity reveals the extensive efforts of the women unionists to have their complaint dealt with through union channels - without success (Equal Opportunity Tribunal of Western Australia 1994).

education for men about 'gender issues', including sexual harassment, are resisted in unions and at peak council level in Australia (even into the 1995 ACTU Congress). Many men do not consider that harassment is an issue of relevance to all members and all officials (although the latter actually have responsibilities to act when it is reported<sup>12</sup>).

Clearly, policy must be reinforced and activated by education and management which gives the written word some meaning in organisational structure and behaviour; in many cases policy is in existence, but has not changed practice<sup>13</sup>. The gap between policy and practice is explained by several common factors in every country. Firstly, policy is often written - or at least drafted - by specialist officers, or those with a strong commitment to the policy area; in the case of equal opportunities, affirmative action or women's policies, these are usually women. The gap between these writers and the actors with power in unions is often wide (as we have seen in the previous chapter), so that policy has little connection with the financial, structural, rule making and cultural operation of the organisation. Curtin and Higgins put this well when writing of Sweden:

To borrow terms from power theory, the [leaders] are immersed in an endless round of power plays...The power they wield is episodic, 'eventful', whereas gender power is uneventful - uneventfully constant and ubiquitous. The company LO leaders keep in their eventful lives also tends to reinforce instrumental rationality, and with it the 'crass view' of female labour and of women in general...The use these leaders make of their programme writers' products is often purely ceremonial and limited to solemn occasions (Curtin and Higgins 1995:8).

How else, these writers ask, could both the most senior leaders in the Swedish labour movement - with their exemplary gender policies which lead the world - have been recently "more or less forced into ignominious resignations, partly on the grounds of grossly sexist insult and practice" (ibid.:8)? The policy/action gap is also explained by the bureaucratic complexity and multi-layered nature of union organisation where even the most genuine and

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<sup>12</sup>At a 1996 training session at Australia's first cross-union management training course I ran an exercise based on the Western Australian case and while all twenty senior union managers/officials could name the amount of the fine incurred by the union only three could accurately describe the legal responsibilities of union officials in such a situation.

<sup>13</sup>Interestingly, sexual harassment is "only now receiving half-hearted authoritative attention" in Sweden with the Labour Court hearing the first case in 1995 and finding no specific law against it, perhaps reflecting Swedish reluctance to place priority upon legal measures specifically for women (Curtin and Higgins 1995:5).

heartfelt impulse can fail to permeate the many levels of organisation to reach branches and workplaces. National committees can pass resolutions against participation in pornographic events, but as long as local branches retain a level of autonomy (as many do) and remain attached to hiring a stripper for their annual Christmas breakup, the impulse is ineffective<sup>14</sup>.

In sum, the presence of policy in unions is no guide to union commitment and, in many locations, functions as an appeasement device: a strategic concession of the kind encountered by feminists on many other occasions in the history of unionism in Australia (see chapter four). Such policy generates some public appearance of progress but in many instances functions as a ceremonial distraction which generates little real change, and acts in fact as a substitute for it. An awakening to the limitations of this device has turned feminist activists' attention around the world to ways of increasing the numbers of women with power throughout union structures, and to building autonomous women's bases within unions which I now consider in turn.

### 6.5 Reserved Positions and Affirmative Action for Women

Over one-third of affiliates of the ICFTU now have reserved places for women on their executive bodies (Trebilcock 1991:407-426). Many have come to this decision after years of relatively little change following the adoption of policies and establishment of women's committees. Trebilcock concludes in her study of initiatives amongst affiliates to the ICFTU, that such measures are essential to substantial change. However they have not been without their controversies.

Of the 21 European union federations listed in table 5.1 in chapter five, four have designated positions for women on their peak councils<sup>15</sup>. In other cases the number of women on peak councils has inched upward in the absence of formal targets and quotas

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<sup>14</sup>Such events have become virtually extinct in Australian unions over the past five years, after much discussion in some quarters. They have characterised unions in many countries (Fellner 1993).

<sup>15</sup>In the UK the TUC, in France the CFDT (28 per cent of the 39 must be women), in Ireland the ICTU (increased from 2 to 4 positions in 1991), in Italy the CGIL (30 per cent, increased from 25 per cent in 1991). The peak European council, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has changed its rules to ensure that at least one member of the seven person secretariat and one of its nineteen person steering committee are women (Labour Research Department 1992:12). The TUC in the UK has had reserved seats for women since 1921 (Beale 1982, Labour Research Department 1992). The number of reserved positions for women was increased again, most recently in 1989, and in the early nineties women comprised 17 of the 56 general councillors (or 30 per cent).

(Labour Research Department 1992:11). In Canada between 1983 and 1987 all but three labour federations (or centrals) established minimum numbers of executive positions for women (White 1993:102).

Some national federations are also pursuing quotas at national congresses with respect to delegates: the Italian CGIL and the Irish ICTU have quota systems for delegates. The TUC threatened to consider this step if delegations at the 1993 congress were not representative of the gender balance in their unions and a number of individual unions in the UK are imposing quotas on their delegations to the TUC Congress.

Individual unions have also pursued this strategy with positive outcomes, but much less frequently than labour federations. They are even less common in Australia. In Britain 14 per cent of unions have designated positions for women (Labour Research Department 1991). White found that four of 13 Canadian unions which she surveyed had "some form of affirmative action program for central executive committee positions" and two of these were informal arrangements. She finds a strong argument for their extension (White 1993, 1997 forthcoming).

In England, NUPE (now part of UNISON) was amongst the first to add new seats for women on national and regional bodies and by 1984 there were ten women on the national executive council (five elected under quota arrangements). As we have discussed above, UNISON is now at the forefront of such initiatives around the world (UNISON 1994, Mann et al. 1997 forthcoming).

As part of its general rejection of special initiatives for women, Swedish unionists initially rejected quotas until the 1990s. While there were examples of informal initiatives to increase women's representation in union leadership, the absence of quotas or reserved positions appeared to retard progress: in the mid eighties Roberta Till-Retz found that "Overall representation statistics in the labor movement still do not show equity, and many Swedish union women privately favour quotas and other special efforts to get women into union offices" (1986:254). A public inquiry into women's representation in Swedish public life in 1987 recommended that organisations which remained male-dominated (like the blue collar labour federation, the LO) should be subject to quotas (Curtin and Higgins 1995:9). In fear of such a development:



LO has now commended to its affiliates a number of goals in regard to the representation of women, including mechanisms to see to it that women are elected as delegates to congresses and to LO's general council in proportion to their share of each union's membership, and that only women be appointed to vacant positions in union offices unless a special case can be made out for the employment of a man. The latter rule applies at LO headquarters, which also requires all papers and proposals for consideration by the executive to be accompanied by an analysis of their impact on gender relations (*ibid.*:15).

These reforms - at least on paper - are in advance of those in most other countries, and they represent a remarkable turn around from Swedish unionists' traditional path of subjugating gender considerations to those of class, with a strong preference (including amongst many women unionists well into the mid-eighties) against 'divisive' activities like women's structures.

Three questions emerge from this international experience. Firstly, how effective are affirmative action positions for women; secondly, should such positions be additional to existing positions or replace men with women<sup>16</sup>; and thirdly how should women be elected?

The use of affirmative action targets (or positive discrimination) in favour of under-represented groups has been controversial in equal opportunity literature. Cockburn, for example, has argued that positive discrimination, while sometimes providing a useful first breakthrough, may divide oppressed groups while leaving workplace hierarchies, processes, culture and attitudes untouched (Cockburn 1989: 217). However, experience in unions has encouraged a growing commitment to their use in order to create new power bases from which to mount effective challenges within masculinist organisations. Women in such positions are generally far from enough, however, as they are often vulnerable, and it is widely recognised that the kinds of changes which Cockburn lists are also essential (Dorgan and Grieco 1993, Heery and Kelly 1989). There is evidence that the introduction of quotas heralds a new wave of changes in support of women in organisations, rather than representing a culmination of activity (Till-Retz 1986).

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<sup>16</sup>Julie White calls these 'designated' positions, while the former might be termed 'additional' positions (White 1993:102)

The increase in the use of affirmative action positions for women across international labour movements attests to their efficacy. In the face of a glacial pace of change in women's share of union power, union bodies have increasingly (and generally reluctantly) resorted to the use of specific positions for women and targets for a general, at least proportional share, by a given date<sup>17</sup>. In many places - as in Australia at the ACTU and on state Trades and Labor councils, as we have discussed in chapter five - women's share of 'ordinary' positions has often increased relatively quickly alongside women's presence through affirmative action positions<sup>18</sup>. While Trebilcock argues that affirmative action arrangements must set realistic targets, and should be applied at all levels of the organisation (1991:422), the extension of these arrangements throughout union organisation is relative rare. The case of UNISON in England remains unusual, and very few Australian unions take such measures. In this respect Australian unions lag behind those in the UK and Canada and are probably closer to those in the US.

Should affirmative action positions for women be 'extra' or replace men with women? Pragmatic politics have generally resulted in the former arrangement. The practice of 'making way' for women by standing aside is almost unknown amongst union men<sup>19</sup>. Its rarity makes the creation of additional positions a political necessity in many settings to "alleviate ..nervousness and to reduce the chances of a backlash" (Cuneo 1993:129). The male contest for power and the reluctance to surrender position can be clearly read from this experience.

The process of selection of women to fill affirmative action positions is controversial: should men and women decide, or women only and if so, which women? In Canada it is

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<sup>17</sup>Carl Cuneo sets out this scenario in Canada, where an increase in the under-representation of women in Canadian unions in the eighties stimulated much feminist activism around designating positions for women, and drove unions towards their adoption "mostly to save their own neck" as one Canadian woman unionists put it (quoted in Cuneo 1993:127).

<sup>18</sup> It is no coincidence that the first woman president of the ACTU, Jennie George, was elected in 1995, eight years after the introduction of multiple affirmative action positions on the council. In Canada the number of women winning in open elections has increased following the implementation of reserved positions for women (Trebilcock 1991, White 1993).

<sup>19</sup>White reports that such standing aside has occurred in some Canadian organisations, most notably the British Columbia and Manitoba Federations of Labour (White 1993:103). I have seen it done only once in South Australia when a male union secretary stood aside in favour of achieving a better balance for women on the United Trades and Labor Council executive in the early nineties - not without a self-congratulatory speech about his own sacrifice in the interest of women, however.

most common for men and women to decide, though some exceptions exist with women's caucuses - after long struggles - effectively controlling the vote at the Alberta and Quebec federations (White 1995:105, Cuneo 1993:131). Men's manipulation of procedures to fill these positions is not unknown, and in most places the nature of the election process is a subject of struggle<sup>20</sup>.

In Australia all women delegates to the ACTU Congress vote on the affirmative action positions for women<sup>21</sup>. In South Australia all men and women delegates to the Council vote on the election of the Assistant Secretary (Women), but a broad left women's caucus recommends a candidate who is generally assured of winning<sup>22</sup>. The establishment of this system was not without its controversies (which in some ways parallel those at the Alberta Confederation of Labor and the CLC (Cuneo 1993:131).

When the position of Assistant Secretary (Women) was created at the United Trades and Labor Council in 1993 (following publication of the statistics reported in chapter five and much political work by women activists) there was debate amongst women about how left women's caucus<sup>23</sup> should decide on a candidate<sup>24</sup>. Some women argued in favour of putting the two contending candidates to a vote of men and women on the floor of formal council - a process which is not followed with respect to other positions and one that others (including me) argued against on the grounds that, having won the position, women should not prevaricate about exercising their power to select their candidate, and to avoid a bloody and divisive battle which would have been especially painful for the women candidates.

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<sup>20</sup>As the first vote at the CLC to fill six positions for women demonstrated in Canada (Cuneo 1993:129).

<sup>21</sup>These voting arrangements were established through amendments to ACTU rules in 1995. In reality political caucuses of women determine the candidates prior to the vote by Congress.

<sup>22</sup>In an interesting qualification to the power of such caucuses, however, the mixed-sex (male-dominated) left caucus recently over turned the recommendation of its women's caucus in Western Australia.

<sup>23</sup>This is a left women's caucus, reflecting the broad left's control of the Council. There was another simultaneous debate, especially involving men, about whether women should have the say about the selection of the candidate at all. Fortunately the women's caucus won this debate. In the process the 'legitimacy' of the women's caucus was questioned, particularly because its membership is decided by existing women members (who 'vouch for' new members, rather than along traditional union lines).

<sup>24</sup>I was (and am) a member of the relevant women's caucus and played a role in these debates. The account which follows reflects my view of events and would be contested by other participants. There is no other written record of these events as yet.

These alternative processes were believed by some to favour the two candidates differentially: one woman with a more traditional union career and base might have fared better in a vote which men shared, while the second - from a women's organisation - may not have been so well known to men. This developed into a divisive debate which was finally resolved by a majority of the left women's caucus voting in favour of confining the process to the women's caucus. This outcome was protested by some women (and, outside the caucus, men) since it firmly established a non-traditional method and basis of pre-selection through the women's caucus and challenged traditional lines of both seniority and the existence a union 'base' by candidates. In the event, the successful candidate was not a union official at all, but came from a position as director of the union-connected Working Women's Centre. She lacked a specific union base (she was a 'mere' member, not an official or even a shop steward) and had no current seniority though she had been a long time union and feminist activist; her seniority was well-established but not through traditional means. However, against the criteria developed by the women's caucus she was ranked the best candidate by a majority after both contenders had addressed the caucus. An otherwise fairly harmonious women's caucus, with a generally shared set of left feminist values, was painfully divided by this issue.

This anecdote clearly illustrates the challenge which new methods of work make to both women and men in the labour movement. Having been schooled in processes where union 'base' is supremely important to accession to power, and where established processes exist (especially seniority which can be read or defined in various ways, but usually against the interests of the 'different'), then some union women find new ways as challenging as many men.

And of course the contest for factional political interest and advantage exercises its effect: if one camp's candidate is likely to be favoured by a process (regardless of its patriarchal heritage and practice) then it may be promoted regardless of that camp's feminist beliefs (or vice versa). It is unrealistically romantic to think that feminism removes all union activists from the daily stuff of traditional political life; it does not, but debates like this one expose at least one significant cleavage *amongst* union women: that lying between those schooled in, and loyal to, (at least in some circumstances) the practices of conventional unionism, and

those who want to work differently. We return to this cleavage in the final chapter, but it is well illustrated by the process of selection of women candidates in many union settings. It seems that women's provisional status in unions may encourage some women to over-emphasise traditional practice (proving their loyalty to 'unionism' and its habits), in an effort to consolidate a fragile, female standing.

There are many ways by which officials in unions reach the top. Lois Grey suggests several: inheritance (of position), technical expertise, leadership through the founding of new organisations and, most commonly, "the elective route up from the rank and file" (1993:382). Appointment to positions based on technical expertise is a route into unions commonly used by Australian women; however, it has its limitation as a pathway to senior leadership and decisive power since it frequently sidelines appointees from non-elected career routes. The conventional union leader's career path presents a major structural impediment to many potential women union leaders, since ascendancy into leadership through seniority usually coincides with the child bearing and rearing years and requires many years of uninterrupted service. The majority of women union leaders are either younger and as yet childless, or older with older children. This creates in Kim Fellner's words " a unique form of selection process that clears the union leadership track of all but a few unusual women - women who are some mix of strong, ambitious, bright, dogged, aggressive, charismatic, ruthless, shrewd, politic, unconventional in their self-confidence and life expectations - and very, very patient!" (Fellner 1993:397).

The many women found in appointed positions and excluded from running for office "offer to the labor movement a pool of established competence and proven dedication" (O'Cleireacain 1986:42, Heery and Kelly 1989). The rich crop of potential women leaders in these positions has led some unions to allow appointed officers, as well as elected officers, to run for senior positions. In such cases the proportion of women leaders often rises (Trebilcock 1991:412). There are also examples of unions which have tried to prevent the loss of their activists and potential leaders to child rearing through temporary part-time work, family leave, child care support and so on.

Studies in the US and UK have shown that support from both other women and senior men - mentor arrangements - has assisted women to become union leaders (Ledwith et al.

1990, Fellner 1989). Clearly many of the strategies of affirmative action and the designation of positions for women cut across these traditions and directly surmount barriers to women's leadership: they drive a vital challenge to seniority, surely one of the most significant ingredients in the glue of masculine resistance to women in unions.

### 6.6 Separate Structures for Women: Making Space, Creating Momentum

The roots of women's resistance to traditional male unionism in Australia, and their claim for space, lie in the resurgent women's movement of the nineteen-seventies. This is symbolised by the strident march of delegates from the Women's Liberation Conference in Melbourne in 1972 on the ACTU Congress<sup>25</sup>, making their demands that unions begin to listen and give voice to women. The gradual incorporation of this rebellious critique into the 'animal-proper' is a common phenomena in unions around the globe. Great possibilities are created by an independent voice for women, exercised and developed amongst women free of the implicit requirement to keep their critique internal and act as 'loyal opposition' (in Ruth Milkman's phrase (1985b)). A long inhabitation of mainstream union organisation often works to constrain feminists' critique of unionism; the impulse to loyal opposition contains vision and limits demands, especially when close to the mainsprings of union power. Feminist critique and understanding of unions appears to rise in direct relation to the opportunity to think and talk separately from men, away from their influence.

Separate women's organisation in unions has traditionally taken two forms: organisation amongst women outside unions in the form of women's conferences, informal non-union forums and so on, and organisation that is inside, ranging from informal women's groups within unions to more formal women's committees, conferences, training and departments in unions and federations. The latter form of separation is frequently contested and under attack from men in unions.

The decline in a unified, autonomous women's movement in Australia and around the world has weakened and limited forums for women's independent discussion of unions over

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<sup>25</sup>Described by Suzanne Bellamy in her tribute to Betty Fisher at the Women and Labour Conference, Macquarie University 30 September-1 October 1995. The smirk of the then ACTU President, Bob Hawke (which was recorded in a photographic exhibition at that conference) as he confronts these women and their placards in 1972, contrasts with the seriousness with which women and their issues are treated officially at the ACTU Congress twenty years later, with the election of Jennie George to the ACTU Presidency.

the past decade<sup>26</sup>. The 'absorption' of autonomous organisation into the labour movement is well illustrated by the history of women's structures in the ACTU<sup>27</sup>. The Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations (ACSPA) established a Working Women's Centre in Melbourne in 1975 (Working Women's Information Service 1981, Pha 1982:179). This Centre, along with a similar independent women's centre, the Women's Trade Union Commission formed in Sydney in 1975, gave initial impulse to many issues for working women in unions including early work on the Working Women's Charter.

However, the Working Women's Centre in Melbourne was absorbed into the ACTU in 1979<sup>28</sup> when ACSPA joined with the ACTU, and the Centre's resources and functions were absorbed into the 'mainstream' of ACTU activities. While this action may have strengthened the internal commitment of the ACTU to women's interests, it undermined the autonomy of women's organisation. The Centre's coordinator reveals the disappointment of women at the time:

Our weakness was that when ACSPA amalgamated with the ACTU, the Working Women's Centre had to go along with it because it couldn't stand on its own...As a result the money earmarked for the WWC now gets paid to the ACTU, which does not consider providing services to individual women to be its role. There is only one person left in the WWC now and that's the child care coordinator, whereas when we went to the ACTU we had a staff of five...When we were absorbed into the ACTU that was the end of our autonomy. Until then we'd been able to operate in the way we thought best (Owen 1987:128).

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<sup>26</sup>This is illustrated by the fortunes of the five Women and Labour Conferences in Australia, which functioned in their early years in the seventies as opportunities for feminist and union activists and others, along with academics, to debate women's situation in Australia. They included lively debate about women in the labour movement. At their peak in the seventies and eighties 2-3,000 women attended and they gave rise to much work examining the historical roots of women in unions and in paid work, along with many other issues (Bevege et al. 1982). In 1995, the fifth conference was much smaller, more dominated by academic contributions, and exhibited much less activist work about women in the labour movement. The absorption of women into the labour movement proper and the larger transformation in political climate in Australia, including the decline of the left, appear to have narrowed opportunities for feminist discussion across unions and outside their formal organisation.

<sup>27</sup>This is not to imply an absorption that has been all bad in its effects. On the contrary much good has come of it. But it illustrates the nature of the fine balance between autonomy and incorporation, where the risks of becoming too polite are real.

<sup>28</sup>Mary Owen, coordinator of the WWC dates the actual absorption from 1981 (Owen 1987:128).

Since that time the ACTU has maintained an active women's committee, serviced by an ACTU official, while individual ACTU officers have taken carriage of individual issues like child care, equal pay and so on<sup>29</sup>.

In chapter five we saw how, historically, for equal pay activists like Muriel Heagney a base in unions was at once a strength and a weakness. This ambiguity characterises feminist discussion of wages policy in Australia today as 'outside' bodies like Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), the National Pay Equity Coalition (NPEC) and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission are often able to make much sharper critiques of the current wages system, and win a table at Commission hearings, than feminists working within unions can - or do - officially<sup>30</sup>.

The complexities of 'autonomy versus incorporation' are illustrated by the US experience of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) and '9 to 5', based in New York. Milkman argues that CLUW focuses upon "penetrating officialdom" and fails to contest the terms on which women must achieve leadership in unions (1985), while '9 to 5's organisational form does not replicate traditional union structures; instead it emphasises democratic participation, alternative recruiting structures, efforts to raise the health and esteem of clerical workers, and skilful manipulation of the media (Milkman 1985a, Shostak 1991, Cornfield 1987). These two US organisations have clearly attempted to link the labour and feminist movements, though on different terms<sup>31</sup>. The closeness of women's

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<sup>29</sup>A more autonomous model is provided by the South Australian Working Women's Centre which, while it receives some small financial assistance from the United Trades and Labor Council of South Australia (most of its financial support comes from the state government), includes representation from the Council on its management committee and works in close relationship with unions, is able to influence the Council and many unions through its work from an autonomous base. It meets unions as an established authoritative agency whose body of research and individual case work give it a unique critical perspective with respect to the world of paid work and union operations within it. On the other hand its dependence on state funding has led government to attempt to absorb it in a close parallel to the Melbourne Working Women's Centre experience described above.

<sup>30</sup>Of course there is no impermeable barrier between these 'outside' bodies and women unionists: the former are often comprised of union activists, past or present, who appear wearing their autonomous 'hats', and often act in knowing collaboration with their sisters 'inside'.

<sup>31</sup>As Milkman puts it: "CLUW has concentrated on gaining more power for women in the unions, particularly in the form of leadership positions, and has pursued this goal without challenging the basic structure or character of the labor movement. In contrast, 9 to 5 has drawn on the tactics of the women's movement in an effort to transform both the image and content of unionism so as to enhance its ability to serve the special needs of women workers." (Milkman 1985:303).



organisations and the extent of their incorporation, conditions the nature of the renovation they propose for unions, the depth of their critique and the extent of their influence on the 'malestream'.

What seems clear from this 'inside/outside' play, however, is that the latter (those on the outside) make space for the former, as so often occurs on the road to political change: the radical claims of those outside accelerate the impulse towards change and give the appearance of 'reason' to the demands of those on the inside. What also seems clear is that the outside voice is on the decline in many places - indeed has taken its place inside the whale - with the possibility that the space for women is consequently narrowed. This shift makes the autonomous organisation of women within unions of particular importance. It also encourages a more attentive eye to fostering external organisation amongst feminist activists to facilitate the 'outside' voice, its claims and its capacity to create internal space for women in unions.

At one extreme the creation of this space is illustrated by the creation of women's unions. The history of teaching unionism in South Australia provides one example<sup>32</sup>. A majority of women teachers seceded from the main teachers union in 1939 in protest at the treatment of their industrial concerns by the male-dominated union (Whitehead 1995). Coming to the re-amalgamation bargaining table in 1951 from an independent base, greatly strengthened the hand of women unionists as they negotiated the terms of their re-amalgamation. The structural gains women made in the new rules, guaranteeing equal male and female representation in key positions, have made the union unique in South Australia with respect to gender representation<sup>33</sup>. A period of separation, of independent organisation, a maturing of industrial experience, meant that the 'men's' union could not easily subsume women or sink their industrial concerns; it certainly could not prevent their fair representation in subsequent union structures.

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<sup>32</sup>Briskin's analysis of separate women teachers unionism in Canada strikes a similar note (Briskin 1993:104). See also Cobble's analysis of unionism amongst waitresses in the US (Cobble 1990).

<sup>33</sup>Though the period of separatism between 1937 and 1951 was not without its complexities and illustrates some of the tensions between different groups of women in such a union (or any union), in this case along the lines of marital status, age and experience (Whitehead 1995).

There are many critics of separate 'special' structures for women within unions. Into the nineteen-eighties at least, some men and women saw them as a source of weakness and division within unions. Some label them a source of marginality for women's concerns or as an insult:

[I]t is truly demeaning that a union whose members are predominantly women should have a women's committee or a woman's department. The whole union should be their organisation (O'Cleireacain, 1986:42)

In Japan and parts of Europe women's departments have a long history in some unions, though many have never had a feminist mission. Sometimes their objectives have been conventionally defined to meet 'women's needs' in the form of domestic hints and recipes.

However, the advantages of separate organising are made clear through recent Swedish experience. Sweden turned away from separate women's structures in the early 1970s, instead adopting 'family' issues and 'equality' initiatives and committees. However, they have since made increasing use of women's organisation:

Feminist analysts of the union movement now concede that its relationship to its female constituency appears to be shifting fundamentally, both in terms of its gender representation and of its policy orientation. LO in particular is beginning to look and sound like the 'women's organisation of some significance' that its million-strong female membership suggests it ought to be. (Curtin and Higgins 1995:18).

That shift in relationship is reflected in the considerable growth in independent women's organisation - related to the labour movement but not subsumed within it - in the form of *Tjejligan* ('the women's gang') which was formed in 1991 and is now formally funded by LO, though one fifth of its members are not LO members (Curtin and Higgins 1995:14). This independent women's structure has grown quickly in size and power. The 'real politic' of women's considerable electoral power in the nineties has quickly concentrated the minds and activities of Sweden's political and union leaders, so that the power of women's voice in progressive union (and parliamentary) politics is now substantial.

Trebilock's survey of initiatives in support of women's activism in unions suggests that the prevalence of women's committees, and their longevity in some cases, attests to their usefulness. Other research reinforces this conclusion (Beattie 1986). This assessment is

qualified by the availability of adequate resources and their structural linking to the main channels of union policy and decision making. For example, in Italy women's structures, parallel to the main centres of power within the union movement, left women even further from the centres of power in the seventies and eighties (Trebilcock 1991:417). Separate women's departments (committees, officers and so on) are sometimes politically ineffectual, especially when they are isolated from power and, indeed, are *mediated* by the power of male officials who direct, contain and pervert the objectives of women's officers and divisions (Cook, Lorwin and Kaplan Daniels 1984). International experience suggests that particular structural and financial arrangements are essential to real influence (Feldberg 1987:304, Gabin 1990, Baden 1986:24).

In Australia we have seen that women's officers are relatively uncommon in state branches of unions and women's 'departments' virtually unknown, but women's committees in the ACTU, in state Trades and Labor councils and in individual unions have a growing legitimacy. Here, as in other parts of the world, women's committees, officers and conferences have proved a vital means of creating space for women in unions and have gradually become legitimate parts of union structure. Linda Briskin comments upon a similar shift in Canada, indicated by the CLC's permission to its women's committee to hold separate women's conferences, which she points out:

demonstrates an interesting shift in the practices and dominant discourse of the union movement around the issue of women's organising - towards greater legitimation of 'separate organizing'. Simultaneously, it highlights the ongoing resistance to such practices. (Briskin 1993:90).

Briskin distinguishes separatism as goal and separatism as strategy: For union women the goal is not separatism *per se*, but as a means to strength (although the conflation of the two meanings often fuels the male critique of separate structures for women).

Cockburn has made the point that men's separate organising as a sex has gone undisputed in many settings, while when women meet as a sex their separation is a source of hostility (Cockburn 1989). This changing discourse around sex-separatism is particularly explicit in the union movement where men's separate organising has been an organisational norm in many historical instances.

Separate structures for women have made space for women in unions around the world in several ways. They have enabled the development of feminist programs, the determination of tactics to bring them to fruition, the encouragement of new activists, and they have provided support for those already leading. They have facilitated a better organised, more numerous and vocal feminist constituency to claim political power in the labour movement and to assert more vigorously women's difference from men - as distinct from their sameness which leads straight to the deadend of 'equality' claims. The fruits of this more developed and richer debate have forced the issues of parental and maternity leave, 'protective' legislation, child care, and the revaluation of women's work near to centre stage in some Australian unions - a direct consequence of women's better articulated demands and growing organisational strength, particularly through autonomous women's organisation within, across and outside unions<sup>34</sup>. They have given these issues momentum. It is no wonder that women's separate organising has been such a site of opposition for many men: it is the most direct challenge to male advantage that women in unions have mounted. The strength of men's response provides some indication of the strength of male resistance.

The delicate business of balancing women's autonomy with their 'inside' influence stalks Australian structures, a challenge which grows as women's presence in officialdom rises. The dangers of incorporation, as isolated women amongst men and traditionalists, are considerable: an incorporation which can drive a defensiveness about work on behalf of women, and a blunting of the aggressive expectation and demand for equity and change. The traditional spheres of empowerment for others - the women's committee for example - are sometimes sapped and enervated by this exodus so that women may lose the means of their own reproduction, support, ideas, tactics, energy and brashness which keeps sharp the impulse to resist, and to ride over the pressures to be contained and 'normalised'. Fortunately many women resist these pressures through their informal feminist friendship networks, and others can rely upon women's committee structures in their unions which refine and develop policy and programs. However, the atrophy of autonomous women's organisations outside the labour movement make the maintenance and expansion of

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<sup>34</sup>Briskin writes of a similar evolution in Canada to a "pro-active politic of separate organizing" (Briskin 1993:96).

autonomous women's organisation within the union movement, of the lively kind now witnessed in Sweden, a pressing need.

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the theory of 'women's deficit' underpins the great majority of union action in relation to women's under-representation in Australian unions. While the great 'masculinised majority' of Australian unions are doing little or nothing in relation to their male-domination, where activity does occur the concept of 'union deficit' gets much less attention than the hypothesised deficiencies of women. Measures which reshape the terms of unionism in light of the diversity of members' lives are infrequent. The existence of male resistance to women in unions is strongly suggested by the absence of effort to consider the impact of masculinity on the operation of unions. The nature and strength of this resistance is illustrated by the emphasis in union action on ceremonial policy - so often an empty, distracting substitute for action - and by the persistent, international and extraordinary alarm exhibited by so many men at the prospect of women's separate organisation.

This discussion illustrates the importance of separate organising to women, an importance which has grown amongst women around the world in recent decades, with its increasing emphasis upon an analysis of women's differences (from men, and from each other), on men's behaviour, and in favour of affirmative action for women in union structures.

Designated positions and quotas for women in union leadership have proved a reliable stimulant to long term change. While far from adequate on their own, designated positions have generally led to an increased number of women in non-reserved positions through open election and have resulted in increases in women's presence throughout union hierarchies. They have often been part of larger program embracing new definitions of seniority, along with improved facilities for women unionists and a shift in union methods, priorities and campaigning. Quotas and designated positions for women are gradually being adopted across the industrialised union movements of the world: they are no longer ridiculed as token, but increasingly seen as a necessary part of forcing change. Integrated,

comprehensive programs with targets, resources and regular monitoring of outcomes have met with success. They are, however, more the exception than the rule.

Clearly there is much distance to be travelled towards fairer gender representation in unions. The implementation of now well-proven initiatives is uneven and there are many areas where policy proliferates, men dominate and union density is falling. Despite the hard work of many, and some fruitful alliances with feminist organisations outside the labour movement, patriarchal models of unionism and its leadership continue to dominate.

New discourses of feminist unionism have taken root alongside them in many places, especially where women have built and maintained their separate space and independent critical voice particularly amongst the 'feminised minority' of unions. The maintenance and extension of this organisation and voice, both within and outside unions, is a vital element in the space available to feminists in unions in the future.

This review of Australian and international action for women in unions, reveals a tenacious attachment to doctrines of 'women's deficit'. The absence of any empirical justification or test of this doctrine, makes its strategies questionable. The next chapter undertakes an empirical test of its validity in Australia.

## Chapter 7

### Gender and Activism in Australian Unions<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen in chapter five, the problem of women's under-representation in union organisation begins in the workplace at the first level of union involvement: women are under-represented amongst workplace representatives in most unions. It is from this pool that most future union leaders are drawn and the union leader's career path usually requires years of union service as a workplace representative, member of branch and state committees and other union activities<sup>2</sup>. This means that in most unions, any long term solution to women's under-representation must begin at the workplace: the creation of a pool of potential activists and leaders is a first and necessary (though far from sufficient) condition for achieving more women leaders at all levels.

Little research has been undertaken in Australia about workplace representation and union activism with a specific focus on gender, despite a sizeable family of industrial relations researchers. And yet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, a number of unions are engaged in work to increase women's activism. Unionists have had relatively little help from empirical academic research in the process, though exceptions exist<sup>3</sup>. It is also true, however, that union activism itself - especially at the workplace level - has been until recently a relatively under-researched theme in Australia, where the study of institutions and wage fixing have been the dominant research preoccupations (Lansbury and Westcott 1992).

As discussed in earlier chapters, union responses to the South Australian statistics setting out women's under-representation in their unions were mixed, with three responses discernible: 'do nothing/blame women', 'do nothing' and an 'active and strategic' group that were implementing changes (based in the main on assumptions about 'women's deficit') and sought more information about what strategies would be most effective.

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<sup>1</sup>Much of the content of this chapter has been published as "Gender and Activism in Australian Unions", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1995 (Pocock 1995b).

<sup>2</sup>Other routes to leadership exist of course (Grey 1993:382).

<sup>3</sup>Griffin and Benson have undertaken this kind of research in two unions since 1982 (1984, 1989); Griffin undertook a third study in 1992; Turtle et al. published a study of women's activism in the NSW Teachers Federation in 1984; Fran Gale has reported on the results of studies of the union participation of small groups of immigrant and Australian born women (1990, 1993); Paul Rodan has examined women's participation in a college staff association (1990). Bertone and Griffin examined the union experiences of members of non-English speaking background and reflect on gender issues in their work (1992).

These contrasting positions were the stimulants for the survey discussed in this chapter which was designed to, firstly, test the view that the project of increasing women's activism is hard and hopeless because women are anti-union, disinterested and 'problematic' and, secondly, investigate how unions can make their actions more effective. The survey also provides a useful overall snapshot of union activism, along with its stimulants and inhibitors, which is of particular interest in the context of declining union density.

As discussed in chapter two, the survey was designed to play a part in shaping and motivating change to increase women's presence and voice in unions<sup>4</sup>. The parallel project to provide individual union reports on the situation of women surveyed in particular unions (described in chapter 2) illustrates this practical intent.

This chapter falls into six parts. In the first part international research about women's and men's activism in unions is outlined, followed by a brief discussion of the results of past Australian studies. Discussion of the results of my survey begin in the third section which explores the dimensions and nature of union activism, including differences in gender and other significant factors. Part four analyses various possible explanations for gender differences in union activism and is followed in part five by an exploration of what unions can do about the barriers which the survey reveals especially affect women. The implications of the research are summarised in the final section.

### **7.1 International Research on Gender, Unionism and Union Activism**

There is a sizeable body of work on the views and characteristics of union members internationally with some interesting insights about membership, activism and gender. In the US for example, it is now well established that women non-unionists are not less inclined to vote for union representation than men. Indeed white collar, private sector non-unionist women were "apparently more favourably disposed toward unionization - that is, more inclined to vote for a union - than their male counterparts" perhaps because they have

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<sup>4</sup>Chapter two described the method of the survey and establishes its validity with respect to discussion of gender and activism in the six participating unions and in the Australian union movement more broadly, given its inclusion of public and private sector workers, and its occupational and industry, and blue/white collar coverage. I also point out that the the survey is under-representative of young workers and personal service and sales workers, and it over-represents clerks. 1150 union members returned survey questionnaires with a response rate of 42 per cent (or 3.5 per cent of the total membership of the participating unions).



had fewer opportunities in the past to express their preferences for unionism at union certification elections: "...the lower unionization rates of women than of men in the private sector stem not from lower interest in unions, but from barriers to unionization faced by women" (Shur and Kruse 1992:100). Other studies have found no statistically significant gender differences in the propensity to vote for unionisation (Kochan 1979, Leigh and Hills 1987). It seems that much of any observed difference in union density in the US is explained by workplace rather than gender differences. As Dorothy Sue Cobble recently concluded: "Countering the conventional wisdom that women are less 'organizable' than men, research in the last decade consistently has shown that women workers are more interested in unions than men and, when given the actual choice, are more likely to vote for unionization" (Cobble 1993b:9). This is supported by findings in the United Kingdom (Booth 1986:54) and, as discussed below, in Australia.

A wide variety of studies have investigated barriers to women's activism in unions. Most have focussed on women and paid little attention to gender differences. The most frequently mentioned barriers to women's participation and leadership in unions are commonly grouped into three (sometimes overlapping) categories: firstly personal characteristics ascribed to women (lack of self-confidence or skills, responsibility for children; this group of characteristics relate to the 'women's deficit' model described in the previous chapter); characteristics of unions (inappropriate meeting times and places, lack of child care, indirectly discriminatory rules, masculine culture; 'union deficit') and characteristics of the gendered labour market (that many women are in the workforce temporarily or on a part-time basis, or found in jobs where employer opposition to unionism is higher) (Trebilcock 1991; Ledwith and Coglán 1990; Chaison and Andiappan 1989; Needleman and Tanner 1987; Weiner 1985; Feldberg and Glenn 1979; Kanter 1982, 1977; Boyd 1981; Hochschild 1973). A fourth set of 'societal' factors is sometimes distinguished, related to societal gender stereotypes which 'allocate' women roles of home maker and main parent (Grey 1993).

With respect to personal characteristics, organisational theorists point to the influence of cultural stereotypes in holding women back from leadership: "Consistently, traits relating to competence are considered male and those related to emotion, female...That may account for why many women as well as men view men as better leaders and thus are hesitant to run for

office" (Needleman and Tanner 1987:214). These authors argue that women union activists stress personal factors as barriers preventing women from becoming union leaders: "above all others - lack of confidence, home responsibilities, inconvenient meeting times, spouse's attitude, and child care concerns" along with the absence of role models and pressures to demonstrate competence (Needleman and Tanner 1987:215).

There is evidence that women and men union members espouse different reasons for lower activism amongst women: in some studies women mention harassment and lack of support or opposition (union related barriers) while men mention women's reluctance and unreliability (personal characteristics of women) (Trebilcock 1991; Chaison and Andiappan 1989). Some studies have investigated this issue, trying to separate the differences between women and men, to inform efforts to increase women's activism and leadership. Some of the earliest work in this area was undertaken in the US: Alice Cook's contribution was amongst the first (Cook 1968).

Wertheimer and Nelson undertook an important study of women in New York locals in seven unions in 1975 to discover what held them back from union activism. This study was the first of its kind and one rarely repeated (Wertheimer and Nelson 1975). They found that cultural-societal-personal barriers were more important to women than men and, of these, women gave highest priority to home responsibilities, partner's attitudes and knowing people at union meetings, as barriers to participation. Women appeared more apprehensive about confronting supervisors while men were more interested in doing union work to improve their upward mobility. Both men and women placed priority upon greater union education, more information about what they could accomplish in unions, and more information about the requirements for leadership.

The effects of household/child care responsibilities reinforce Cook's earlier hypothesis and the findings of many later studies. US studies of shop stewards found that female shop stewards were more likely than male stewards to give higher priority to household responsibilities than union responsibilities (Roby and Uttal 1993). A 1986 survey of US studies suggests five factors limit women's union activism: dual roles, sexist stereotyping of women, low self-image, distain for conflict, and a sense of marginality among women who achieve political office (Baden 1986:234).

Women's responsibility for children and domestic responsibilities negatively influences their union activity, while there is no evidence that household responsibilities restrain men (Cornfield 1990b; Roby and Uttal 1993; Wertheimer and Nelson 1975). This is not surprising in light of data from Australia and overseas about women's disproportionate responsibility for child care, care of dependents and housework (Bittman 1991). Women unionists from Sweden suggest that family responsibilities are a major explanation of women's lower union participation:

Research on trade union involvement in different kinds of families shows that small children are an important factor for participation in trade union activities...[S]mall children have an effect on the mother's trade union involvement. On the other hand children have no effect at all on the man's involvement in trade union activities...[M]arriage is an obstacle to women's trade union activity (Cornfield 1990b:145).

A survey of 500 US auto workers participating in union training in the early eighties contradicted this result, finding that gender was of low order importance in explaining autoworkers union activism. The study found that "community-political activities, liberal political beliefs, pro-unionism philosophies, high standards of involvement with unions and high general job satisfaction-involvement" were the five best predictors of union participation. Other factors had low explanatory power, including gender (Huszco 1983:289). The small number of women in this study (only 10 per cent) may account for this result.

In sum, the weight of existing overseas research suggests that women are generally less active in their unions than men. However, it seems that this difference cannot be explained by more anti-union attitudes amongst women. Rather, women's activism is dampened by a range of societal factors (especially domestic and parenting responsibilities), by some personal factors (like lack of knowledge and confidence), by some union-related barriers (like meeting times, lack of child care) and by some workplace or labour market characteristics (like women's concentration in part-time work).

## 7.2 Australian Research

Four sizeable surveys of women's participation in Australian unions provide empirical data about the Australian situation (see table 7.1). Two of these compared women and men; the remaining two surveyed only women and all include only white collar unionists. Smaller studies and research focusing on related issues also exist (Gale 1990, 1993; Roden 1990; Bertone and Griffin 1992).

**Table 7.1 Australian Surveys of Union Members, About Gender and Activism**

Union	Researchers	Year of survey	No. respondents	Main focus of study
NSW Teachers Federation	Turtle, Seymour, Anley, Barnard & Gilbert (1984)	1982	684	Women only. Explanations of differences between women activists and non-activists.
Australian Insurance Employees Union	Griffin and Benson (1984)	1982	379	Women only. Attitudes to unions. Reasons for joining. Levels of activism, barriers, and industrial priorities.
Municipal Officers Association	Griffin & Benson (1988, 1989)	1984	752	Women and men. Attitudes to unions, reasons for joining. Activism, barriers, industrial priorities.
Australian Services Union (Local govt & energy div'n)	Griffin (unpublished report to ASU)	1991/2	1887	Women and men. Reasons for joining. Activism, barriers, industrial priorities.

Some of this Australian research has produced results which are at odds with the weight of overseas material. For example the 1984 regression studies by Griffin and Benson in the Municipal Officers Union (now the Australian Services Union) lead them to conclude that much of the gender difference in union activism is in fact more closely associated with factors such as income, age, and other personal or union characteristics (of course gender is

usually a significant factor in explaining differences in income and other workforce characteristics given the continuing sexual division of labour). This led them to question the prevailing assumption that "gender influences trade unionism" at least in a white collar setting (Benson and Griffin 1988:213). In that survey 33.3 per cent of men mentioned 'family arrangements' as a barrier to participation in union activities compared to only 28.1 per cent of women (Griffin and Benson 1989:91). The one statistically significant difference in perceived barriers occurred when more women felt that they lacked encouragement, but Griffin and Benson find that this was associated with the intervening variables of income and age, rather than gender. They conclude that their evidence "largely rejects the hypothesised relationship between respondents' gender and their participation in the affairs of the MOA" (Benson and Griffin 1988:213).

Other studies, both in Australia and elsewhere, contradict this and suggest that significant aspects of women's union participation make a policy and action response in unions important: for example in the NSW Teachers Federation and in New Zealand (Turtle et al. 1984; Geare, Herd and Howells, 1979). The research waters about union activism remain quite muddled. It may be that the overseas evidence is not relevant to Australia, or is wrong, or fails to sufficiently differentiate factors like age and income from gender effects. However, it is more probably the case that authors like Benson and Griffin have not adequately captured in their methodology the effects of gender on participation: for example their 1984 study of Municipal Officers Association members uses only two items, 'lack of child care' and 'family arrangements', to capture the effect of child care, domestic work, spouse's opposition and family responsibilities and this may explain the result that more men than women indicated 'family arrangements' as a barrier to participation while concealing the specific nature of these barriers (Benson and Griffin 1989:91). It may also be the case that the Australian evidence, based mostly on white collar Australian unionists, is not giving an accurate picture for unions as a whole (as Benson and Griffin acknowledge: 1989:90, 1988:213).

In sum, Australian research to date provides relatively little evidence about women and their union activism and some of it contradicts significant evidence from studies elsewhere. Australian studies generally do not extend beyond white collar workers and, in most cases,

do not capture the effect of barriers to activism for women and men in sufficient detail to inform union responses.

This issue is not simply of academic interest: if gender is not a significant factor in explaining differences in women's and men's union participation, what is and how should unions respond? On the other hand, if gender is a significant factor in explaining male and female differences in activism (independently of differences in age, income, industry and so on), what issues should unions address: women's personal characteristics (like confidence, attitudes to unions), union characteristics (like culture and meeting arrangements), and/or factors relating to women's location in the labour market (for example their concentration in casual work)? The answers to these questions are of critical importance to the union effort to increase women's presence throughout their ranks and reduce male-dominance.

### **7.3 Survey Results: Union Activism**

The survey collected information about union members' participation in a wide range of union activities in six unions or union divisions, by asking members about their experience as shop stewards and other forms of workplace representatives. I also established an index of union activism based on how frequently members did ten activities, including vote in union elections, read union materials, attend meetings at work, attend meetings outside their workplace, discuss union issues with workmates, meet and talk with union organisers, contact the union for advice, take industrial action, attend union training and attend union conferences. The overall levels of union activism and its significant predictors are discussed below, followed by discussion of the different forms of activism.

#### **7.3.1 Levels of Activism**

The survey shows that Australian women are less active in their unions than men on a range of measures from representation in the workplace through voting, reading, meeting, and talking about the union. Women have significantly less experience as workplace representatives than men (in line with the findings of the survey of unions reported in chapter five), especially in the private sector. Only 14 per cent of women in the survey have

been workplace representatives (compared to 28 per cent men) and less than half this had been deputies or health and safety representatives (table 7.2).

**Table 7.2 Women and Men Who have been Workplace Representatives**

	Women (%)	Men (%)
All	14	28
No children	16	17
With children	12	35
One child	12	24
Two child	13	36
Three or more	10	40
Children < 5 years	10	32
Children 5-15 years	8	37
Children >15 years	12	37
Earn less than \$15,000*	10	8
Earn \$15-30,000	11	22
Earn \$30-45,000	29	35
Earn \$45,000**	14	31
Less than 25 years	3	8
26-35 years	14	22
36-50 years	16	32
>51 years	14	36

\* There were only 12 men and 47 women in this income group

\*\* There were only 7 women and 50 men in this income group

It is worth noting that the incidence of experience as a workplace representative varied considerably between unions: it ranged from only 8 per cent for women and men in one union to between 15 and 25 per cent in the other five. This difference probably reflects the fact that the first union's members are concentrated in large, well established, long unionised, manufacturing sites where turnover amongst representatives is low. This suggests that the incidence of experience as a workplace representative and other forms of activism is related to long established workplace and perhaps occupation and industry characteristics. The sex-segmentation of workplaces, industries and occupations collapses and confounds the effects of gender with these other factors.

Women made up only a small number of workplace representatives in all unions, sectors, sized workplaces, occupations and in male and female-dominated workplaces. However, amongst non-parents the proportion of women who have been representatives is much the same as men (around 16 per cent of non-parents of both sexes had been a workplace representative). The proportion of women who have been workplace representatives falls to very low levels amongst women with more than one child and with young children. The proportion of men with one child who have been workplace representatives is twice that of women; it is three times women's amongst those with two children, and four times women's amongst those with three more children.

As men age, the proportion with union experience as representatives increases regardless of their parental status. Indeed it is possible that men are entering union work to escape households with small and/or multiple children: their union activism is certainly higher in such households. While there is an increase in experience amongst women over 25 years, compared to younger women, there is no increase in subsequent age groups. This suggests that while women may be gaining experience at work, their responsibility for children and their interrupted working lives undermine the possibility of increased experience as workplace representatives.

Experience as a representative is greatest for both women and men in the \$30-45,000 income group; in this group the proportion of women who have been representatives is around three times the level in lower income groups of women. Most of the women (and men) with experience as representatives work in the public sector: only one in ten women in the private sector had been representatives, compared to one in five in public employment. The small number of women workplace representatives in the private sector means that the majority are very isolated and lack role models or support. Their much lower incomes (compared both to both men and their public sector sisters) are probably associated with less formal education and training and lower status and less recognition in their workplaces.

The gap in experience between women and men does not appear to be significantly narrower amongst younger people: the proportion of women under 25 with experience as representatives was only 3 per cent compared to 8 per cent amongst men. The proportion of men who had been representatives was double women's in the age groups 26-50 and



widened to two and a half times women's in the 51+ age group. This suggests that women of 26-50 years are getting more experience than their older sisters, but experience amongst women under 25 remains quite low and in the same ratio to men's as that amongst women over 51 years. In their written comments on the survey some women noted the low number of women representatives:

We need more women as union reps. Where are they (here)? It's a male-dominated place. Women don't get a fair deal. (woman)

Others suggested strategies to address this, through training, more support from officials, encouragement and rotation of shop steward positions:

It is difficult for people with families, etc, to take on the extra commitment of evening meetings, etc, especially after a day's work. It is always difficult to get people to be workplace delegates for this reason, and also because they have no training in it. It is also seen as setting you apart from the others to a certain extent. I would like to see officials coming to the workplace regularly to explain the role and history of the union. Also outlining the delegate's job and encouraging people to sign up for training so that there will always be a pool of people to take on the delegate's job and able to actively recruit new staff. Maybe the job could be shared on a rotation, or between the deputy and the delegate so it wasn't seen as a burden. (woman)

Others criticised the experiential basis of learning to be a shop steward:

The union should update information about protocols, elections, rights, etc, for the new reps. All I know about protocol, elections etc, has been passed on to me by word of mouth only. (man)

To some the position looked unattractive and lacked training:

The individual workplace set up equals isolation and too many layers. Individual workplace delegates, deputy workplace delegates, while well intentioned, are often unable or unskilled or unwilling and too naive to handle hard things. (woman)

The union should be more attainable by its members - ie, when a new representative is or is not appointed we should be advised. Also how to tackle work issues - ie procedures. (woman)

**Table 7.3 Per cent of Women and Men who Have Been Workplace Representatives**

	Women (%)	Men (%)
Workplace representatives	13.7	27.9
Deputy workplace reps.	5.6	8.2
Occupational health and safety reps.	7.7	12.8
Deputy OH&S reps.	2.2	2.7
Other types of workplace reps.	4.5	5.4

Turning to other workplace representative positions, the survey of members shows (in line with the survey of unions in chapter five) the proportion of women with experience as a health and safety representative lags significantly behind men (slightly above half) (table 7.3). The gap is not so wide amongst lesser status positions such as deputy and 'other' workplace representative positions: indeed there is no significant gap between women's and men's experience in these positions. Overall the number of deputy positions is very small (only 8 per cent of men and 6 per cent of women have been deputy workplace representatives).

Turning to the other ten forms of activism listed in table 7.5, women are generally less active than men and this gender difference is statistically significant even when we control for different unions, age, income, years in the union, parental status, the size of workplace, public/private sector, occupation and male/female domination of the workplace<sup>5 6</sup>. Activism is significantly lower amongst those working in mostly female-dominated workplaces, amongst older workers and those on higher incomes.

A 'union activism' score is calculated for each member by allocating points for the frequency (never, occasionally, and regularly/often) of participating in each of the ten listed union activities. Each activity is given equal value and zero points are allocated for never,

<sup>5</sup>This contradicts the picture presented by Benson and Griffin's 1984 study in a white collar union (Benson and Griffin 1988; Griffin and Benson 1989).

<sup>6</sup>The word 'significantly' where it appears anywhere below means that the difference referred to is statistically significant, with reference to a chi squared test where  $p < 0.01$ .

one for occasionally and two for regularly/often. These are then converted to a percentage so that the minimum possible score is 0 (never do any of the activities) and the maximum is 100 (do all of them often). Table 7.4 shows men's average activism score is 45 and women's is 36.

**Table 7.4 Activism Scores of Women and Men by Parental Status, Income, Size of Workplace, Sector, Age and Occupation**

	<u>Average activism scores</u>	
	Women	Men
All	36	45
No children	36	40
With children	36	47
One child	36	43
Two child	36	46
Three or more	36	52
One Child < 5 years	31	45
Earn less than \$15,000(1)	26	21
Earn \$15-30,000	35	41
Earn \$30-45,000	47	49
Earn \$45,000(2)	41	47
Less than 50 workers	34	43
51-100 workers	39	45
101-300	34	45
301-500(3)	38	52
501+ workers	38	44
Public sector	40	47
Private sector	34	42
Less than 25 years	28	36
26-35 years	36	41
36-50 years	38	47
>51 years	42	48
Semi-skilled(4)	37	41
Clerks	33.	45
Trades	39	46
Para-pro, pro and managers(5)	42	46
Personal service and sales	34	44

(1) There were only 12 men (and 47 women) in this income group

(2) There were only 7 women (and 50 men) in this income group

(3) There were only 37 men in this group (82 women)

(4) includes plant and machine operators, driver, labourers and process workers

(5) includes administrators, para-professionals, professionals and managers.

What explains the gender difference in union activism scores? Statistical tests indicate that several factors help predict activism: sex, union, years in the union, income and male/female domination of the workplace. Together (after eliminating the other insignificant factors from the analysis and using a 'main effects' model) these factors predict 25 per cent of the observed variations in activism in the survey group, leaving a large unexplained variation which is not related to any of these characteristics. Several other factors do not help predict activism beyond the five listed above: these are parental status (the presence, number and age of children), the size of workplace, public/private sector, age and occupation. This last finding contradicts a view that skill differences are associated with differences in activism: no occupational relationship was found in this survey.

It also suggests that activism is not systematically related to employment in the public or private sectors, nor can it be predicted systematically by size of workplace or age. Instead, sex, the nature of the union, income, the seniority of union membership and the feminisation of the workplace are useful predictors.

The pattern of activism varies significantly between unions - but not in predictable ways: it is highest in a large, public sector, female-dominated, white collar union followed by a large, manufacturing, male-dominated, blue collar union. It is lowest in a moderately sized, female-dominated, white collar union and next to lowest in a small, manufacturing, male-dominated blue collar union. It seems that activism levels reflect individual union culture and traditions, rather more predictably than public/private, workplace size or occupation. The female/male domination of the individual workplace also plays a significant role, suggesting that the culture and traditions in the individual workplace are important in explaining the activism levels of individuals.

Men's activism is higher with increasing numbers of children (from a score of 40 in households where there are no children to 52 where there are three or more children). Men in households with greater family responsibilities are more active than those men without children. There is little change in women's activism in relation to children except when children are young: women with a child under 5 years have a score of 31 compared to 45 for similar men and 36 amongst all women. This gender difference in activism in relation to family responsibilities is in fact predicted by the intervening variables of income, years in the

union and male/female domination of the workplace. For women the first two of these factors are highly correlated with family responsibilities, suggesting that women's lower activism is associated with their workforce characteristics of lower incomes, an interrupted career and shorter periods of union membership, which are in turn associated with parenting. In other words, while a direct relationship between children and activism by gender is not revealed, lower activism amongst women with more children (compared with similar men) is significantly associated with their lower incomes and fewer years in the union, which are in turn closely related to their family responsibilities. Indirectly, the presence of children negatively affects women's activism in a significant way, while the presence of children does not have this effect amongst men (in support of the findings of Cornfield 1990b and Roby and Uttal 1993). Men's incomes and years in the union are not suppressed in the same way by parenting: in fact men's activism is positively associated with their greater number of years in the union and higher incomes which are in turn associated with greater parental responsibilities. This suggests that until domestic work and child rearing become more equally shared on the home front, union activism is likely to remain dominated by men.

These results also indicate that activism is associated with seniority of union membership (years in the union). This might work in several ways: for example, women and men may believe that members with many years of experience have a more legitimate right to a voice in the union and to participation and so women stand back from activism while men step forward. The close relationship between activism/involvement, and seniority, revealed in these results suggests that part of the solution to increasing women's activism depends upon overturning the culture of reward for 'time served', where legitimacy is measured by longevity, in favour a culture of recognition based on rights, merit and capacity to act, thus moving towards more representative participation (by age, gender, occupation of worker). The achievement of these changes is likely to depend on formal rule changes and establishment of participation and representation targets within unions.

### 7.3.2 Forms of Activism

I now consider the survey results about participation in specific activities. Table 7.5 shows the per cent of women and men who often participated in each of ten union activities. In each activity the proportion of men often undertaking it, is greater than the proportion of women. The difference is statistically significant for all activities except for attending union training and conferences and contacting the union for advice and help.

Women's pattern of participation tends to be more occasional; the proportions of women who occasionally voted, attended union meetings at work, read materials, attended conferences and talked with workmates is greater than the proportion of men who occasionally did these things. A high proportion of women had never attended union meetings outside their workplace (63 per cent compared to 41 per cent men).

**Table 7.5 Frequency of Participating in Various Union Activities**

	Men	Women	Total
	(per cent)		
Often read union newspapers, newsletters or journals	60	46	53
Often attended union meetings inside the workplace	54	39	47
Often voted in union elections	45	34	39
Often discussed union issues with workmates	37	22	30
Often met and talked with union organiser	18	11	14
Often attended union meetings outside the workplace	15	9	12
Often contacted the union for advice or help	9	8	8
Often taken industrial action (strikes, bans, etc)	6	4	5
Often attended union training	6	3	5
Often attended union conferences	4	2	3

Just over half of all women had never taken industrial action compared to about a third of all men. Forty per cent of women had never met and talked with a union organiser (28 per cent men). This gap was especially wide in some unions/divisions particularly where male officials predominate. This suggests, in line with research in other countries (Crain 1994), that male organisers have habits of visiting workplaces which mean that they know and talk to more men than women and/or are more likely to strike up conversation with an unknown man than a woman. It is also possible that women are less likely to initiate conversation with a union organiser, particularly a man. In this way organisational structures tend to reproduce themselves and their social characteristics.

The most frequent form of activism amongst both men and women is reading union newspapers, newsletters or journals: 60 per cent of men and 46 per cent of women do this often. Men and women with children tend to do this more than those without. The next most common activity was attending union meetings in the workplace: 54 per cent of men and 39 per cent of women do this often. Voting in union elections is also a relatively frequent activity for both women and men, followed by discussion of union issues with workmates. Other activities (such as attending union meetings outside the workplace, attending union training, conferences, contacting the union for help and taking industrial action) are often undertaken much less frequently by both sexes.

As might be expected, women participated much more in activities which do not disturb work or domestic arrangements - such as voting, reading, going to workplace meetings and talking to co-workers. Once again the participation of men with children is greater than amongst their child-free brothers. For example 66 per cent of men with children read union materials often, compared with 49 percent of child-free men. Women with children tend to have slightly higher or equivalent levels of participation than child-free women where activities do not require leaving the workplace (eg reading union materials, attending workplace meetings, talking to organisers or workmates). Where activities mean leaving the workplace (attending conferences, training, or taking industrial action) the participation of women with children is lower than amongst women without children. In contrast, men with children have higher levels of all types of activity than men without.

Very wide gaps in participation exist between men and women in the private sector with respect to voting, attending union meetings in the workplace, reading union materials, and discussing union issues with workmates; for example, only 23 per cent of women in the private sector often discuss union issues with workmates compared to 41 per cent of men. The gender-activism gap is much narrower in the public sector. Only 8 per cent of private sector women often meet and talk with a union organiser compared with 19 per cent private sector men and about 14 per cent of both women and men in public employment. Women in the private sector see much less of their union officials than the men they work alongside, or other women. Given the importance that women in the survey generally attach to personal contact and encouragement (see below), this lack of contact may be very important in explaining their low level of activism.

There are significant and consistent differences between public and private sector women. Women in the public sector are consistently more active than women in private employment: for example 58 per cent of women in the public sector often read union materials while only 37 per cent do so in the private sector. Similar differences exist with respect to voting, attending union meetings in the workplace, talking with organisers and taking industrial action.

Women tended to often discuss union issues with their workmates with about the same frequency in both sectors (around 20 per cent did this often). One significant exception to this exists: women and men in the private sector tend to have contacted the union often for advice and help at about twice the level of those in the public sector.

Men's involvement tends to be fairly consistent regardless of public or private employment for most types of activities with the exception of voting and reading union materials (which men in the public sector do more) and discussing union issues with workmates (which they do less).

In sum, the survey supports overseas findings of lower activism amongst women than men. While much of the variability in union activism is unexplained, significant gender differences exist independently of differences in union, age, income, years in the union, parental status, the size of workplace, public/private sector, occupation and male/female



domination of the workplace. Activism is also significantly lower amongst workers in female-dominated workplaces, younger workers and those on higher incomes.

Women's interrupted working lives, lower incomes and less years of union membership (all related to family responsibilities), are associated with lower union activism. No such negative relationship exists for men. This means that union involvement which is contingent upon long periods of seniority (as member and activist), disadvantages women. Women's involvement (especially that of women with children) is higher in activities which do not take women away from their workplaces or disrupt travel and domestic routines. The evidence suggests that they are less likely to attend meetings or events away from the workplace and that established 'habits of organising' and the preponderance of male organisers in some unions, advantage men and reproduce the social/gender characteristics of the dominant organising group amongst union activists.

### 7.3.3 Parents and Activism

Amongst women, the presence of young children is associated with lower activism. However, men with children, greater numbers of children and young children have higher levels of activism than men without any children. This may be because men become more interested in union activism when their parental responsibilities increase because they wish to increase their job protection and conditions. Alternately it may mean that men may retreat from a hectic domestic front into union activism. For this they may be rewarded with power, public recognition and in some cases career opportunities and more interesting experience in the workplace<sup>7</sup>.

Women with young children are less active, reflecting their lesser years in the union and the workforce, their lower incomes, and their concentration in feminised work areas. However, women with older children have higher levels of interest and activism (see discussion of 'interest' below). Unions might usefully take a life-cycle approach to women parents, recognising that while early parenting for women is sometimes accompanied by reduced activism, it does not mean reduced interest. A concentration upon the forms of

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<sup>7</sup>Beliefs about these alternative explanations are highly gendered. On the many occasions that I have discussed these results with women and men unionists, women have without exception settled on the first explanation, while men invariably favour the second.

activism which women parents find easier is likely to bring results. These are activities which do not involve a change in location, such as the provision of relevant reading materials, personal contact, and assistance with the costs of child care or other forms of domestic maintenance in relation to union activities.

These outcomes suggest that some of the differences between women's and men's union activism are not the inevitable consequence of being female, but more of being a female parent - whose income is lower, and whose union membership and employment service are interrupted by children.

There is dissatisfaction amongst women with small and/or multiple children about their level of say in the union (discussed below) and unions can usefully communicate effectively with them during this period: they are not lost to unionism, but may be temporarily inactive and are often frustrated about this.

Clearly, a fairer sharing of domestic work amongst women and men is important to women's participation in unions, since women's activism is likely to approach men's as their primary responsibility for this sphere and children declines.

Finally, the findings outlined above relate to average differences between women and men parents and there will be, and are, many exceptions to the average activism levels of women parents of small children. Unions must avoid the adoption of any new stereotypic assumptions about women unionists who are parents.

## **7.4 Explanations of Gender Differences in Union Activism**

This section considers some possible explanations for differences in activism between men and women, including differences in attitudes to unions, differences in levels of interest in unionism, men's assumptions about women's interest in unions, knowledge about unions, and finally, differences in identified barriers to union involvement.

### **7.4.1 Attitudes to Unions**

Can persistent gender difference in activism be explained by anti-union attitudes amongst women members? In short, no.

The survey shows that there is no significant difference between male and female members' attitudes to unions, supporting the findings of overseas studies and previous Australian research. Respondents indicated their level of agreement/disagreement with four statements about unions (two were positive about the role of unions and two were negative). This allowed the creation of a measure of pro/anti union views in the form of a 'union attitude' score which, when converted to a percentage lies between 0 (most anti-union) and 100 (most pro-union). This is shown in table 7.6. Union members of both sexes are relatively pro-union (69 score amongst women and 70 amongst men) and there is no significant difference between them, laying to rest any argument that women unionists are simply more anti-union.

**Table 7.6 Attitude to Unions**

	Women	Men	Total
<b>Average Attitude Score</b> (0-100%)	<b>68.5</b>	<b>70.0</b>	<b>69.3</b>
Most anti-union (0-25)	2.3	2.2	2.3
Fairly anti-union(25-50)	17.0	13.6	15.2
Fairly pro-union(50-75)	52.1	52.7	52.4
Most pro-union(75-100)	28.7	31.5	30.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

This table is read, for example, as follows: 2.3 per cent of women and 2.2 per cent of men had scores of between 0-25.

While there were some slight differences according to other characteristics, none of these were statistically significant, including age, income, union, occupation, male/female-dominated workplace, size of workplace, parental status or public/private sector.

Women's and men's attitudes to unions varied very little according to family responsibilities, although women with children under five years had a slightly more anti-union views. There was virtually no difference by sector of employment: both public and private sector-based women and men were pro-union and attitudes were very similar in male-dominated, female-dominated and mixed workplaces. Older people (>25 years) and middle income groups (\$15-45,000) had slightly more pro-union attitudes than higher and

lower paid members but these differences were not statistically significant. Predictably, those who had been in the union longest and those who were least satisfied with their work had slightly more pro-union views but these differences were not significant. More skilled workers (trades, professional and para-professional etc) tended to be slightly more pro-union than less skilled workers but, once again, these were not statistically significant.

#### 7.4.2 Interest in Union Involvement

The survey asked those who were not interested in union involvement about the main reasons for this lack of involvement. About quarter of both sexes said that they were 'simply not interested' and there was no significant difference between women and men (23 per cent women and 21 per cent men). Women members, therefore, are not less active in unions because they are 'simply not interested' in unions and union issues. This points to the existence of specific blocks to women's activism, and away from assumptions about a deficit of interest in unionism amongst women.

About a quarter of young women who were not interested in union involvement indicated that they 'had never thought about it' compared to 14 per cent of young men and much smaller proportions of older men and women. These results suggest that this group of younger potential female activists, who are currently not interested, may held back much less because they are 'simply not interested' and more by lack of information and knowledge. Young women are more interested than young men in being involved and may be relatively easier to assist into union involvement, once again contradicting the 'women's deficit' thesis.

Many more men than women with less than 2 years in the union indicated that they were 'simply not interested'. For example, only 15 per cent of women with less than one year in the union were 'simply not interested' in activism compared to 32 per cent of similar men. The proportion of uninterested women rises gradually with increasing years in the union to reach 30 per cent of women with 21 years or more in the union (it is at its lowest - 20 per cent - amongst men with this seniority of membership). These different trends might be explained, at least into mid-life, by growing home responsibilities for women, but it may also be possible that women become less interested *because of dissatisfaction with the*

*unionism they experience.* The current shape and nature of union activism may be fostering and increasing men's activism while gradually dampening and draining women's. This is reinforced by women's written survey comments on the style, culture and nature of unionism in their workplaces - many find it too hostile or aggressive, oriented to problems, non-consultative and impersonal. For example:

I find union reps too aggressive. All the union business is yelling and arguing. It's too aggressive for me. (woman )

#### **7.4.3 Knowledge about Unions**

It is often said by women and men, that women have less knowledge about their unions than men, and that this holds them back from union activism; this forms part of the rationale for 'special' women's programs. The survey results offer us some limited insight into this issue. Firstly, as we see below, it is confirmed that some women (and many men) believe this to be the case and that this holds some back from union activism. However, with respect to one important area of union knowledge women knew as much as their male union colleagues: similar proportions of women and men knew the name of their workplace representative. This undermines the argument that it is women's lack of knowledge which explains their lower activism. This undermining is not, however, a clear contradiction of the possibility that women know less about unionism. Collection of other evidence is necessary to the complete rebuttal of the proposition; for example evidence about women and men's relative knowledge about the operation of unions beyond their workplace, and industrial relations procedures and practices in the workplace and beyond. Evidence about this broader knowledge was not collected in the survey. However, on the specific issue of knowledge about workplace representation in the workplace, 79 per cent of women knew the name of their representative compared to 78 per cent of men (table 7.7).

About one in ten male and female members worked in workplaces which they said did not have a representative. Some important differences exist between unions, however, with some women in the private sector much less likely to have a representative than either the men in their unions or other workers elsewhere. Overall, where representatives exist, a slightly greater proportion of women than men know the name of their workplace

representative, but this difference is not significant. Amongst people without children, women have much higher knowledge about their representative than men: 81 per cent know their name, compared to 70 per cent of men without children (table 7.8).

**Table 7.7 Knowledge About Name of Workplace Representative**

	<b>Knew name of representative (%)</b>	<b>Did not know name of rep. (%)</b>	<b>No rep. exists (%)</b>
Women	79	9	11
Men	78	12	11
All members	78	11	11

This suggests that where women and men's domestic responsibilities are similar (ie neither have any children in their households) women are well ahead of men in terms of their knowledge of local union representation. The presence of children is associated with quite different effects by sex. Women with children have less knowledge about their local union representative than child-free women. The opposite is true for men: men with children have much higher levels of knowledge than their brothers without (82 per cent compared with 70 per cent). It seems likely that as men increase in age and experience at work, their knowledge of representative structures increases significantly, regardless of fatherhood, the number of children in their households or their children's age. However, women's knowledge of representation may be negatively affected by the presence of children and, unlike men, their knowledge is not higher with greater age and experience as any increase associated with age and experience appears to be being undermined by the negative effects of parenting, employment interruptions and less workforce seniority.

These findings cast suspicion upon any assumption about women's lower level of knowledge about their union and suggest that both women and men unionists may be underestimating women's true capacities, relative to men.

**Table 7.8 Per cent Knowing Name of Representative by Parental Status, Sector and Age**

	Women who knew name of rep. (%)	Men who knew name of rep. (%)
All	79	78
No children	81	70
With children	78	82
One child	76	75
Two child	79	81
Three or more	77	90
Children < 5 years	84	81
Children 5-15 years	75	80
Children >15 years	77	85
Public sector	82	79
Private sector	78	77
<25 years	85	78
26-35	83	76
36-50	74	78
>51 years	82	80

#### 7.4.4 Men's Attitudes About Women in Unions

The survey shows that men have a much lower estimate of women's interest in unions than women (see table 7.9): 69 per cent of women think that women are as interested in the union as men, compared to 57 per cent of men. Those without children have more positive assessments than those with children. A large proportion of women without children had especially positive views about women's level of interest: 77 per cent compared to 60 per cent of men.

Some pronounced differences exist by age and sector of employment. Women and men under 25 years had much more positive assessments about women's union interest than older people. For example, 80 per cent of men under 25 believe that women's interest is generally the same as men's, compared to only 48 per cent of men over 51. Both men and women in the public sector had considerably more positive assessments of women's level of interest than did those in the private sector. Less people working mainly with men tended to believe women's interest was the same as men's (especially men in these workplaces). These findings suggest that men - especially older men, working in male-dominated

organisations - are particularly likely to assume that women are less interested in unionism. As we have seen above, the proportions of male and female union members who are 'simply not interested' in union activism are not, in fact, significantly different. Inaccurate assumptions are particularly common amongst older men from traditional male workplaces, and this is precisely the background and age profile of the majority of Australian union leaders in the early 1990s. These inaccurate assumptions are likely therefore to be underpinning many union behaviours and policies, with detrimental effects on women's activism.

**Table 7.9 Proportion Believing That Women Take As Much Interest in the Union as Men**

	Women (%)	Men (%)
All	69	57
No children	77	60
With children	65	45
Public sector	75	64
Private sector	66	50
less than 25 years old	89	80
26-35 years	70	56
36-50	64	56
> 51	69	48
Of those working with		
• mainly men	63	51
• mainly women	69	67
• half and half women/men	74	65

A number of men, mostly in trade occupations, commented that women's commitment to work and unionism was weak or that they are not 'genuine' workers. Several questioned women's right to work:

A majority of women are working only to supplement the family income and are not prepared to become involved in union matters and are content to sit back and reap the benefits. Many I have found consider unionism a necessary evil. This attitude needs to be addressed. (man)



Unions have lost track. They have forgotten the trades person. As for women, most are second wage earners and are not interested in long term or the problems and conditions of genuine fellow workers. (man)

Women and wives see things in a different light to men. Work and part-time work is more important to a mother than ideals. Ideals and principles don't pay the family or pay the rent.. (man)

I think women should stay at home and look after the kids because if the man and the women are both at work for nine hours a day, before you know it, the child bonds to the babysitter. (man)

In sum, women's lower union activism is not explained by anti-union attitudes, or simple lack of interest and the results cast doubt upon the idea that women know less than men about unions. On the other hand, it is clear that men under-estimate women's level of interest in unions and this undermines union strategies to involve women. This evidence about union activism directly contradicts the fundamental assumptions implicit in theories of 'women's deficit'. They show that more anti-union attitudes or a greater lack of knowledge or interest amongst women do not exist, and therefore cannot explain women's lower activism. Instead, as we see in the next section, women clearly point to specific barriers to involvement.

#### **7.4.5 Many Women are Interested in Involvement**

Contrary to the perceptions of some union officials that women are hard to draw into union activism, the survey results show that about a quarter of women were interested in being involved in their union (table 7.10)<sup>8</sup>. This is less than the level amongst men (around a third were interested) but is indicative of a significant pool of potential women activists.

Not surprisingly women without children or with older children, women in their mid-twenties or older, and earning between \$30-45,000 are more interested in being active than

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<sup>8</sup>While, as discussed above, women and men shared similar levels of 'simple lack of interest' in unionism, women were less likely than men to indicate interest in particular activities, naming specific barriers to their interest, like overwork and domestic responsibilities.

others. Women in the public and private sectors, and in different sized workplaces show similar levels of interest. The highest level of interest amongst women occurs where they have one child: it is about the same as men's in this situation. The presence of children is associated with lower interest amongst women, while the effect for men is small. Interest is much lower amongst women with more than one child or with children under five years while the opposite is true for men: their interest peaks amongst those with young children of less than five years.

**Table 7.10 Per cent Interested in Being Involved in Union Activities**

	Women (%)	Men (%)
All	27	35
No children	30	36
With children	25	35
One child	32	33
Two child	21	36
Three or more	23	35
Children < 5 years	20	37
Children 5-15 years	28	34
Children >15 years	24	34
Earn less than \$15,000*	17	42
Earn \$15-30,000	26	37
Earn \$30-45,000	36	34
Earn \$45,000**	14	33
Public sector	27	34
Private sector	27	37
Less than 25 years	23	35
26-35 years	28	39
36-50 years	27	37
>51 years	28	26

\* There were only 12 men and 47 women in this income group

\*\* There were only 7 women and 50 men in this income group

A sizeable pool of interested women also exists with respect to standing for a union position: sixteen per cent of women would like to stand for a union position in the future (23 per cent men). The presence of children is associated with a smaller proportion of both sexes and is especially low amongst women with small children.

Men's interest in standing in future tends to decline with income. It peaks for women (at 23 per cent) amongst those earning \$30-45,000. This was greater than the interest amongst men in this age group (20 per cent). Interest in standing in the future was greatest amongst women in larger workplaces; indeed in workplaces of greater than 501, slightly more women (19 per cent) than men (17 per cent) were interested in standing in the future. Interest was higher amongst both women and men from the private sector and in the 26-50 age group.

Clearly a sizeable pool of potential activists exists amongst women (and men). Activating these members relies upon specific actions by unions, with an awareness that women's patterns of involvement in their unions will vary with their life cycles, while men's do to a much lesser extent. It is also interesting that women on higher incomes and in larger workplaces are more interested in union involvement. However, there are many specific barriers which stand in the way of women exercising their interest.

#### **7.4.6 Barriers to Activism**

The survey asked respondents to indicate which of 24 factors (or one 'other') made it hard for them to be active. Table 7.11 shows the per cent of women and men affected by each factor.

No factor affected a majority of either sex. However, pressures in the workplace and at home are the most important barriers for both sexes. Work pressures affected more than a third of women and a similar proportion of men. Home pressures affected significantly more women than men: about a third of women are 'too busy at home' compared to a quarter of men.

This result contradicts that of Griffin and Benson who concluded from their 1984 study of women and men in the Municipal Officers Association that "some personal/social factors [like family arrangements] which are usually perceived as barriers for female union members only are, at least, equally as significant barriers for male union members" (1989:92). This contradiction can be explained by their imprecise formulation of 'family arrangements' which collapsed issues like responsibility for family with family discontent or spouse opposition. Their formulation does not specifically pinpoint the gendered effects of

responsibility for domestic work and dependents. In contrast, my results suggest that family responsibilities and other social factors impact upon women and men differently; this finding has particular implications for union action.

**Table 7.11 Factors That Make Involvement Hard**

	Men	Women (per cent)	Total
Too busy at work	34	36	35
Too busy at home	24	34	29
Too tired for something else	10	22	16
Negative attitude of employer/superv.	14	16	15
Never been asked	11	16	13
Meeting times are inconvenient	12	15	14
Lack training to participate	12	14	13
Lack confidence	6	14	10
Not enough information about mtings	10	13	12
Meetings held too far from workplace	9	10	10
Lack encouragement to participate	7	10	8
Shift work	10	10	10
Other	13	10	11
Issues at meetings are irrelevant	11	7	9
Part-time work	2	7	4
Might affect promotion	9	7	8
Don't want to go on my own	3	6	4
Costs of transport/transport problem	5	5	5
Union meetings unfriendly	5	5	5
Don't want to put kids into care again	2	5	4
Lack of informal/social union events	5	5	5
Child care not available	2	4	3
Discouraged by other unionists	2	2	2
Opposition from my partner	2	1	2
Discouraged by my family/friends	1	1	1

Work pressures at home and in paid work are by far the most important barriers for both sexes, though for women the two spheres are almost equal in impact, while 'too busy at home' came well behind work pressures for men. Women with children are especially held back by home commitments: 39 per cent of women with children indicate that they are 'too busy at home' compared with a quarter of similar men and a quarter of women without children. Significantly more women than men are affected by simple tiredness: 22 per cent of women indicate that they were 'too tired for something else' compared to 10 per cent of men.

An important group of barriers can be discerned behind those of home, work and exhaustion. Around 15 percent of women (and a smaller proportion of men in each case)

indicate each of the following barriers: the negative attitude of their employer/supervisor, that they had 'never been asked', that meeting times are inconvenient, that they lack training, that they lack confidence, or that they lack information. Employer opposition was reflected in comments made by respondents:

My experience has shown that women are reluctant to become involved with their union because of the negative attitude of the managers, who are often male, and who are unwilling to find the means to release women from positions that require constant coverage of customer service areas. (woman)

Other comments pointed to the need for more information and a more accurate understanding about women's interest:

The union is not satisfying the workers with any information about any of the union meetings. Also we are never invited to any of them. Our steward doesn't think that anything is important enough to tell us unless it's gossip about another worker. (woman)

Around ten per cent of women were affected by each of the following barriers: shift work, meetings too far from the workplace, and a lack of encouragement to participate. People under 25 years were especially held back by - apart from home and work pressures - lack of information about meetings and the fact that they had never been asked.

Smaller proportions of respondents - and more men than women in both cases - are affected by fears that their promotion might be affected or feel that issues at meetings are irrelevant. Lack of child care was a factor for only 4 per cent of women and 2 per cent of men. This may reflect the fact that assistance for child care in association with meetings is already available in some unions. However this result does point to a much greater negative effect on women's participation flowing from overwork and factors other than the absence of child care. Around 5 per cent of women (and fewer men) were also affected by a reluctance to put children into care again, costs of transport/transport difficulties, unfriendly union meetings, fear of going out alone, or lack of informal or social union events. Opposition from partner/spouse is virtually irrelevant to both sexes - less than 2 per cent indicated it - in contrast to Wertheimer and Nelson's 1975 findings in the US (1975).

In sum, there are a group of barriers which affect large numbers of women and men and action to combat their effects will assist both sexes. These include work pressures, negative attitudes of supervisors, inconvenient meeting times and inadequate training.

Other important factors affect women significantly more than men and particular attention to them is vital if women's participation is to increase; these are pressures of work at home, exhaustion, never being asked, and a lack of confidence. Significant gender differences also exist with respect to the less important barriers resulting from part-time work, fear about going out alone, not wanting to put children into care again and a lack of child care.

Factors like spouse opposition are virtually irrelevant to them - as are discouragement by friends or family or other unionists. In fact many of the things that hold them back can in most cases be directly addressed by unions through, for example, changed meeting times, direct invitations to women to be involved, more training for women to facilitate their participation and increase confidence, more information about meetings, and meetings and other union events closer to the workplace.

Some important barriers especially affect women in the private sector. We have seen that women in the private sector are less active than women in the public sector and that very few private sector women have experience as a workplace representative. And yet their attitudes to unions are the same as other men's and women's and more private sector women are interested in standing for a union position. Low levels of confidence, training and knowledge about meetings held women in the private sector back from involvement much more than women in the public sector. Almost one in five felt that they had never been asked (19 per cent compared to 12 per cent public sector women), and 22 per cent were held back by their employer/supervisor's negative attitude (19 per cent men). Private sector unions can directly address these issues and make a real difference to the involvement of women and men throughout their structures.

### **7.5 What Should Unions Do to Increase Women's Involvement?**

These results suggest a number of strategies that unions should consider in working to increase women's voice in unions. A large pool of potential women activists exists, there is strong support amongst men and women for more women union leaders (see below),

training for women remains important in members' perceptions, and personal encouragement and contact with the union's officers is considered very important by women. In addition, there is evidence that unions can better target their recruitment and union servicing arrangements to meet women's needs and that the industrial priorities of women and men are different: successful unions will reflect these differences in their work. Finally women make it clear that many aspects of union culture and practice turn them away from involvement.

### **7.5.1 More Women Leaders**

Australian women are doing most domestic work while at the same time increasing their participation in paid work. Without strong intervention and new tactics by unions, this is a recipe for more male domination of unions and a lesser presence for women: women's share of union membership is rising as they take on more paid work, but this research shows that their double work load inhibits their union activism. The impediments for men are much less, and so they are likely to continue to dominate union structures - and may increase their proportional domination - unless unions take affirmative action and, most importantly, change the way they work to accommodate the family responsibilities which fall especially upon women.

Survey responses indicate strong support for more women in union leadership: 82 per cent said that more women should run for union office. Women are significantly more supportive than men (91 per cent compared to 74 per cent) but a high level of support is evident amongst both sexes across all unions, suggesting that Australian union members are well prepared for more women union leaders (table 7.12).

Clearly an overwhelming majority want to see more women run as union leaders, especially in the private sphere where women's share of leadership positions is extremely low at present. This is a solid platform of support for affirmative action strategies to ensure more women achieve leadership at all levels. This majority support exists even in unions with a relatively high proportion of women leaders at present, as in parts of the public sector. There were some signs in such unions, however, of a small but vocal minority opposed to women leaders:

**Table 7.12 Per cent Who Think More Women Should Run for Union Office**

	Women (%)	Men (%)
All	91	74
No children	89	76
With children	92	73
Public sector	82	68
Private sector	94	79

More gender specific action equals sexist discrimination against men and must be to increase total level. If women are more apathetic that's their problem. God no more women officials'. (man)

This characterisation of women as 'apathetic' is in line with the dominant assumption amongst men that women are less interested in unions. This respondent sees women's lower involvement as unproblematic for the union and its organising success: it is women's problem.

The union concentrates too much on women's issues. This is the personal priority of many of the branch office staff and officials. The union should concern itself more with issues like superannuation, pay and conditions, which are vital issues for women and men. I believe the union is not facing these issues head on as they are too hard. (man)

This respondent projects his concerns as appropriate priorities for the union; the evidence below that superannuation and wages are much less of a concern to women than many other issues contradicts this very common projection by male unionists, including those who hold the power to determine union priorities.

Too much emphasis is being placed on Aboriginal issues and women's issues, to the detriment of white Anglo-Saxon males. A middle ground is required. (man)

In the union where these three comments were made, 84 per cent of women and 68 per cent of men believed that more women should run for union office, making these views a minority amongst members. It is interesting that they were the only such negative comments



written on survey forms, all within the union where women's progress was most advanced (though far from proportional to women's share of membership in the majority of position types). They illustrate the nature of a vocal backlash which is called into life when progress occurs, and must be viewed in the context of continuing majority support for more progress.

A third of all women respondents felt that more women in union leadership would directly assist women's activism, compared to a quarter of men. This made it the third most commonly nominated mechanism to assist women's activism (behind training and active encouragement by officials) (table 7.13). Support for this was especially strong, once again, amongst women in the private sector (39 per cent and 28 per cent of men) and amongst those in male-dominated workplaces. It was lowest amongst older men (older women were twice as supportive as similar men).

### 7.5.2 Training for Women

Despite the evidence that lack of skills, knowledge and confidence come well behind a range of other barriers to women's activism, women and men placed considerable emphasis upon training as a way in which unions can facilitate their activism. Table 7.13 shows that just over half of women indicated that training for women would increase their involvement. Men's high level of support for training for women (42 per cent supported this action) is not so surprising in light of their beliefs about women's lack of interest in unions.

Several factors may be at work here. Women may under-estimate their actual level of union knowledge and skills at present (as the data on knowledge about the name of workplace representatives shows). Women's emphasis upon training may be telling us more about women's lack of confidence than their lack of knowledge. The result may also mean that women are encouraged to believe that they are ignorant about unions by the current practices of activists and officials, or it may mean that union action to deal with more significant barriers (such as over-work at home and in paid work, and exhaustion) is beyond imagining (certainly the list of alternative union actions that I offered on the survey form did not include such actions). This result suggests that women believe that they need training about unions and union methods, and many men agree with them.

**Table 7.13 Actions Which Would Increase Women's Involvement**

	Men	Women (per cent)	Total
Training for women about unions and union methods	42	53	47
More women in union leadership	26	34	30
More active encouragement by union officials	32	33	33
Child care at meetings	26	31	29
Training for men about women and their workplace and union experience	20	31	35
Creation of women's representative positions in the workplace	22	30	26
Funds for child care organised by self	14	20	16
More friendly union meetings	15	17	16
Changed meeting times	10	12	11
Changed meeting locations	7	9	8
Other	1	1	1

### 7.5.3 Encouragement and Personal Contact

Active encouragement of women by officials is also seen by women as important to their greater activism. Amongst men it was the second most commonly supported action to assist women's activism (after training for women) and third amongst women (after training for women and more women leaders). A third of women and men in the survey group (generally regardless of their family responsibilities, public or private employment, male/female domination of the workplace or seniority of union membership) felt that active encouragement would increase women's involvement. This result supports the finding that the fifth most common factor making union involvement hard for women was the fact that they had 'never been asked'. Clearly, a more deliberate effort to invite and involve women will bring results. In this light the above evidence about women's much lower level of contact with union officials and organisers is particularly damaging.

### 7.5.4 Encouraging Women to Join through Better Industrial Services and More Say

In terms of the decision to join the union, it seems that women and men share a dominant common motivation: the protection of their rights. Thereafter, men are much more likely to join unions because of compulsory unionism (the closed shop) and are much more likely than women to join because of a belief that 'all workers should be in the union'. This suggests that women - more than men - are *practical, voluntary* unionists, joining in the pursuit of union protection, rather than because it is a requirement of their job or out of ideological/political beliefs.

Figure 7.1 shows that women and men commonly join to protect their rights. Over half of women (55 per cent) and a similar proportion of men gave this as a reason for joining. (Respondents could indicate more than one reason for joining). This factor was especially important for young workers and amongst those who had been in the union for shorter periods of time.

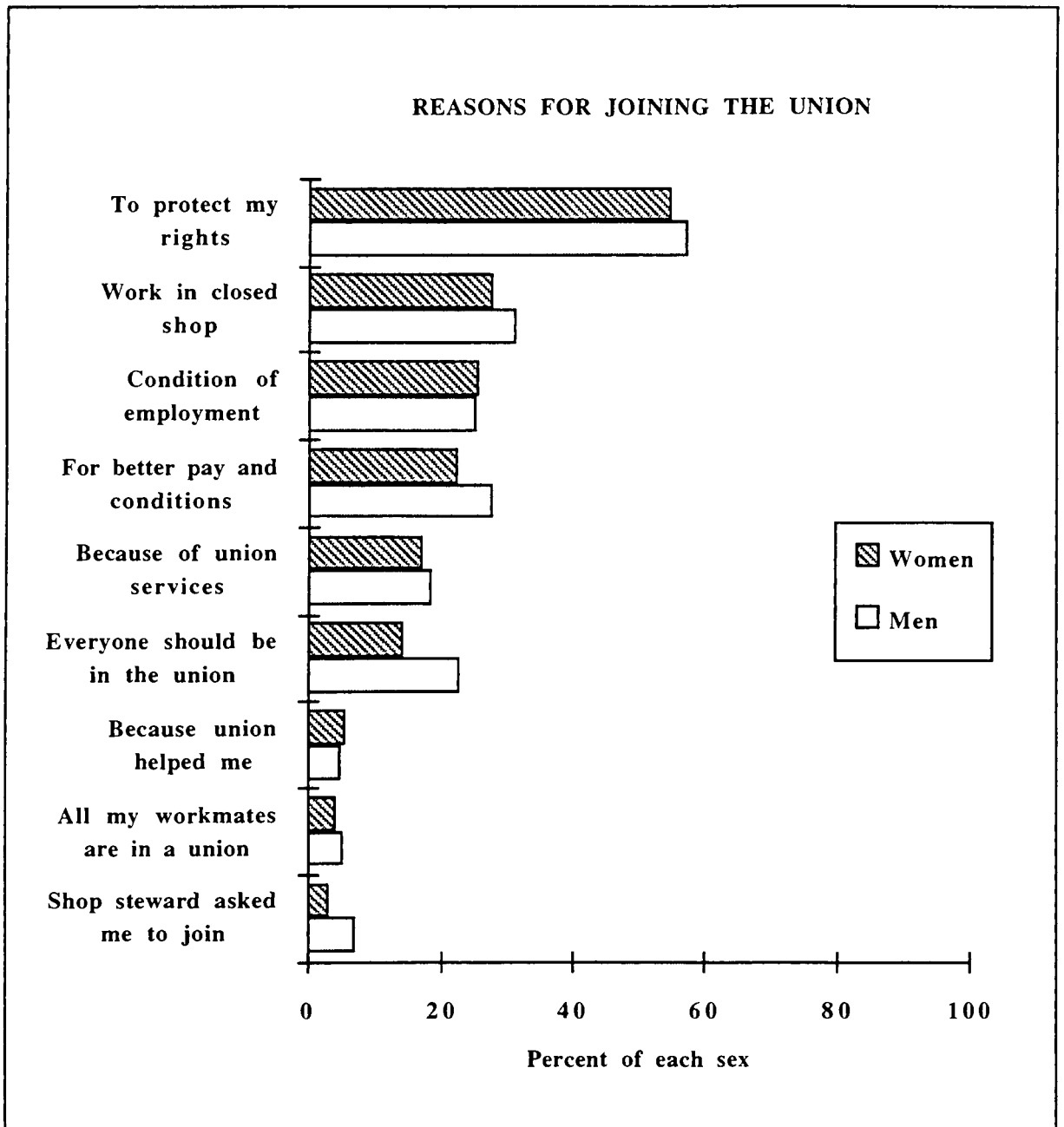
Forty-four per cent of men in the private sector indicated the closed shop as a reason for joining compared to 26 per cent of women and only 6 per cent of men in the public sector. However, this difference may be more exaggerated amongst the survey group than in the broader population given the under-representation of retail sales and service workers, where closed shop arrangements are more common amongst women.

Better pay and conditions stimulated joining for a quarter of the total sample and a smaller proportion indicated a belief that all should be in the union. Significantly more men than women held a belief that all should be in the union (23 compared to 14 per cent). Joining because the union helped them, because a shop steward asked them to, or because their workmates were in the union motivated only small numbers of women and men. Significantly less women than men joined because a shop steward had asked them to.

Union services were a factor for a relatively smaller number of union members, suggesting that, in order to recruit women (and men), unions would do better to concentrate upon assertive protection of members than upon offering incidental services like insurance, finance, or union holiday homes. This is an interesting result in light of recent action by the ACTU and many Australian unions to boost union services in an effort to increase

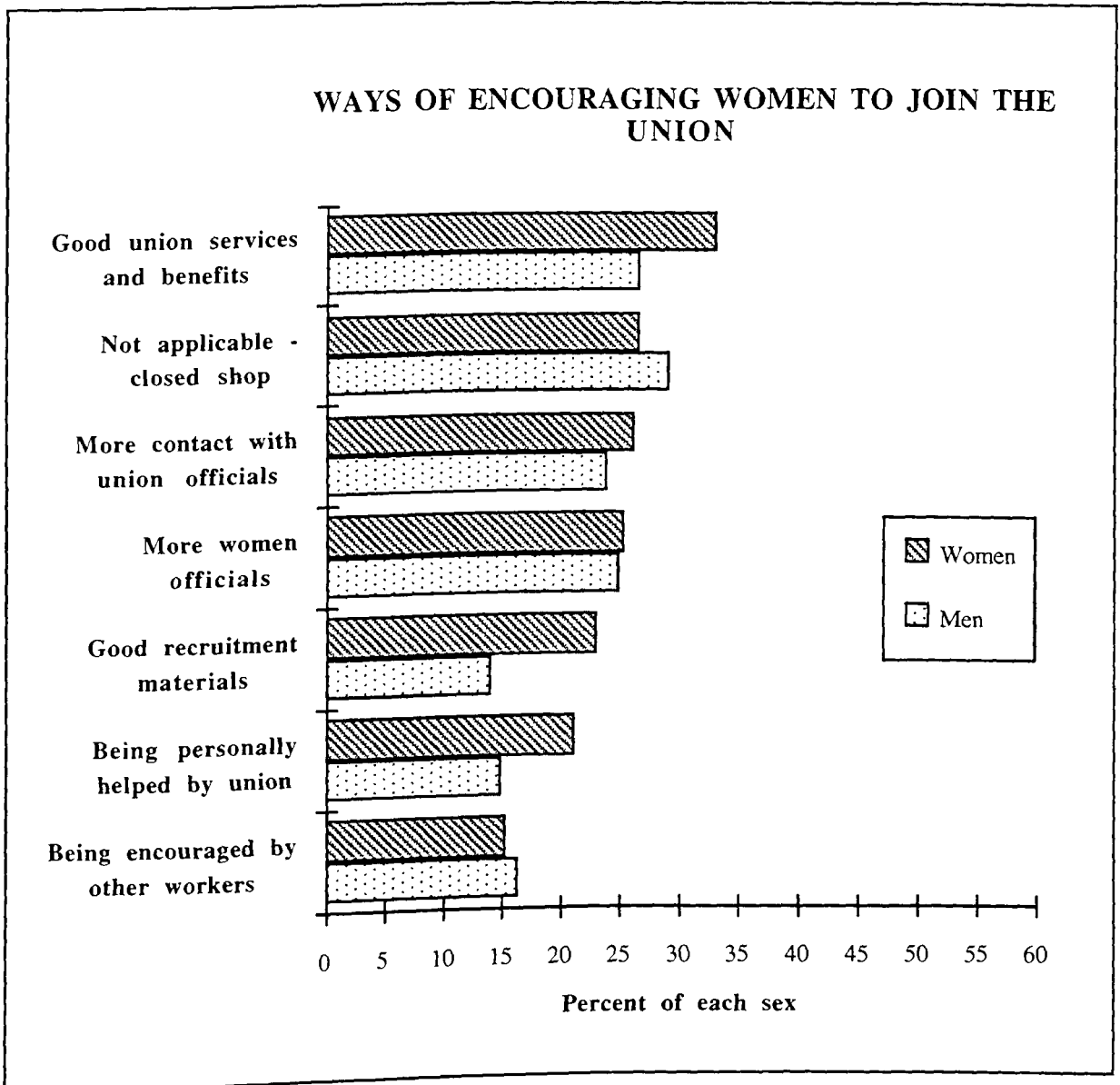
recruitment. Unaccompanied by effective representation and protection on the job, these efforts may be wasted. The results suggest that women in particular are more likely to be drawn to join in pursuit of effective union representation, than out of any ideological commitment to unionism, or through closed shop arrangements.

**Figure 7.1 Reasons for Joining the Union**



In support of this, both women and men gave strongest support to good union services and benefits (which included wages and other services) as a means of recruiting women (33 women and 27 per cent men indicated this factor) (see figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2 Ways of Encouraging Women to Join the Union



About a quarter indicated that more women officials, more contact with union officials or good recruitment materials would help, and slightly less felt that being personally helped by the union would assist women's recruitment. Sixteen per cent of women and men indicated that being encouraged by other workers would also help. Significantly more women indicated that good union services and benefits, good recruitment materials, and being personally helped by the union would assist the recruitment of women.

Men and women gave equally strong support to more contact with union officials and more women officials as ways of encouraging women to join. Specific initiatives to encourage women to join were supported by some:

We need more active recruitment, especially for women, who seem to see unions as less relevant to them personally. (woman)

Personal contact and more active recruitment strategies which directly reached women were specifically mentioned by a number of respondents:

The union of the future needs to be more approachable, especially to non-union members. Far more promotional literature and/or meetings for members and non-members. (woman)

Where I work there are six women and thirty-one men. Five people belong to the union. Three men knew I was in the union. They asked me how they could join as they didn't have a clue how to join. I would like to see the union place a notice in all factories inviting people to contact them. There must be hundreds of people who don't know how to join the union, especially small factories. (woman)

We don't see enough of union leaders visiting and talking directly to the worker. We all have things to say but want the freedom of a sympathetic ear. (woman)

I wouldn't have joined the union if I didn't have to - the unions need to consider better marketing to attract our support. (woman)

Some women in the private sector suggested more direct contact as a strategy for recruiting:

I had to go to the union because of trouble with my employer. Why aren't businesses visited by the union? I know you can't force people to join, but out of sight out of mind. (woman)

Others were unhappy about their contact after joining:

At the time joining the union was a condition of my employment, but I understand this is no longer true. I have never spoken to a union representative except to correct their literature being sent to me as Mr. (woman)

### 7.5.4 Union Services

Alongside differences in the motivations for joining, women and men use union services differentially. Almost half of the sample group had asked the union for help at some time but men made significantly greater use of the union than women: 52 per cent of men compared to 45 per cent of women had asked for help in the past (table 7.14). There was little difference between those in the public or private sector. However, a much smaller proportion of both women and men working in female-dominated workplaces had asked for help than those in male-dominated workplaces: differences in reliance upon the union, and its culture, strength and the nature of its presence are likely to be at work here. Clearly women make a lesser call upon their union for help, especially those women (and men) on lower incomes and in smaller workplaces. They are, however, happier with the help they receive than their male co-members: a significantly greater proportion of women than men felt that the union had subsequently helped them: 83 per cent compared to 74 per cent of men.

**Table 7.14 Getting Help from the Union**

	<i>Have asked for help</i>		<i>Would ask for help</i>	
	<b>Women</b> (%)	<b>Men</b> (%)	<b>Women</b> (%)	<b>Men</b> (%)
All	45	52	90	91
No children	42	50	89	92
With children	46	54	90	91
Earn less than \$15,000*	21	33	85	92
Earn \$15-30,000	46	52	91	93
Earn \$30-45,000	48	55	90	91
Earn \$45,000**	100	71	86	66
Public sector	44	45	87	92
Private sector	50	54	90	92
Of those working with				
• mainly men	53	57		
• mainly women	36	35		
• half and half women/men	45	49		

\* There were only 12 men and 47 women in this income group

\*\* There were only 7 women and 50 men in this income group

Overall there appears to be a high level of satisfaction amongst women and men members about the help provided by the union, though this varied between unions. Men and women union members had similar, high propensities to ask for help if they should have a problem at work; ninety per cent of members would contact the union should they have a serious problem at work and there was no significant difference between women and men.

In sum, women ask significantly less of their union, and are significantly more grateful for what assistance they receive. This positive assessment by women of the services that they receive - even when these are demonstrably lesser than those used by men - is also evident with respect to satisfaction about the level of say in unions<sup>9</sup>.

Significantly more women than men are happy with their level of say in the union: 65 per cent of women feel that they have enough say in their union compared to 57 per cent of men (table 7.15) (there was, however, considerable variation between unions). Given women's lower participation in their unions, this suggests that women may have lower expectations about their of say than men. Interestingly, when parenting responsibilities are the same or similar between the sexes (that is, neither have children) many more women than men think they have enough say: 71 per cent compared to 54 per cent. However, greater parental responsibilities amongst women - particularly small children or more than one child - are associated with lower levels of satisfaction with say in the union. A much smaller proportion of women with children under 5 years and with more than one child feel that they have enough say, compared with other women. For example, only 54 per cent of women with children under five years think that they have enough say, compared with 61 per cent of men similarly situated and 70 per cent of women with children more than 15 years old. This suggests that women with small children or more than one child are aware of their lower union participation and are unhappy about their lower level of say.

The opposite is true of men. The proportion of men who are happy with their say is greater than the male average where small children are present in their households and it actually rises with their number of children.

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<sup>9</sup>This phenomena of high levels of gratitude is evident in other research studies where, although women are shown to have lesser resources, or lower levels of consultative voice, they have high levels of satisfaction than the men alongside them. This is demonstrated with respect to consultation about enterprise bargaining in Australia (DIR 1995), for example, and suggests that women, having had little voice in many such forums in the past, respond very positively when access is provided.



**Table 7.15 Satisfaction with Level of Say in Union**

	Women (%)	Men (%)
All	65	57
No children	71	54
With children	61	59
One child	65	54
Two child	58	58
Three or more	59	63
Children < 5 years	54	61
Children 5-15 years	62	55
Children >15 years	70	61
Earn less than \$15,000*	72	67
Earn \$15-30,000	64	57
Earn \$30-45,000	67	57
Earn \$45,000**	86	66
Public sector	66	63
Private sector	65	52
Of those working with		
• mainly men	62	54
• mainly women	61	64
• half and half women/men	70	63
less than 25 years old	69	50
26-35 years	65	58
36-50	63	55
> 51	71	67

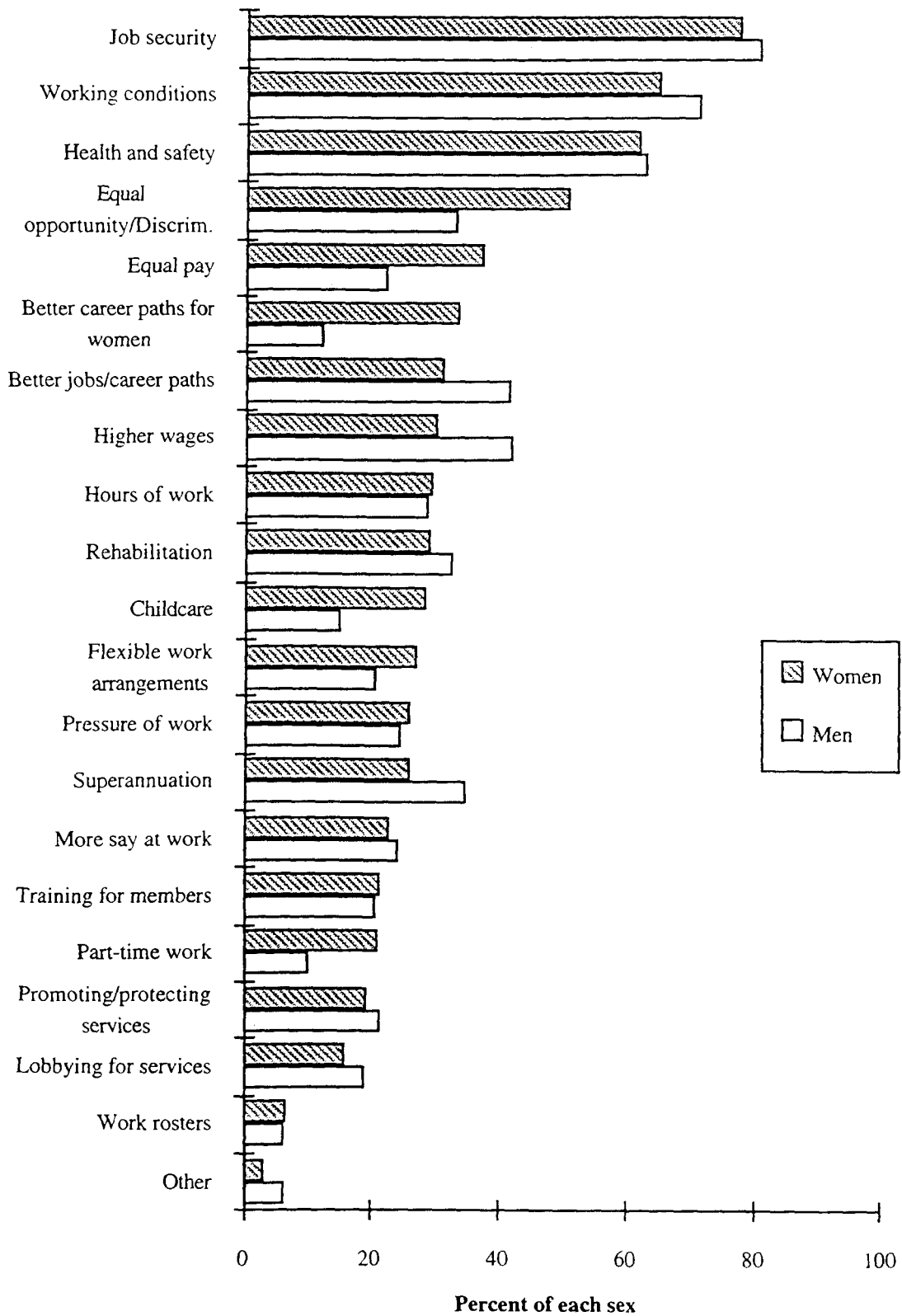
\* There were only 12 men and 47 women in this income group

\*\* There were only 7 women and 50 men in this income group

### 7.5.5 The Union's Industrial Priorities

Women members share some industrial concerns with men, with some important differences. The survey listed 21 areas of union industrial activity (and one called 'other') and asked respondents to indicate which should be the union's main priorities (see figure 7.3).

**Figure 7.3 Union Priorities**



Preferred union priorities fell into three groups for each sex: a first order group shared by both sexes, a second order set with real gender differences and a third order group of lesser concerns. Job security (indicated by 82 per cent men and 78 per cent women), working conditions (66 per cent women and 72 per cent men) and health and safety (63 per cent women and men) were by far the strongest concerns amongst both women and men and held in both male and female-dominated workplaces, the public and private sector and amongst younger and older workers. Significantly less women than men indicated working conditions as a priority; otherwise the level of support for these 'first order' issues was very similar for men and women.

Thereafter women gave significantly greater weight to equal opportunity/discrimination (51 per cent), although it is interesting to note the high level of concern amongst men about this: 34 per cent of men indicated it as a priority making it their sixth most commonly listed concern. A high 62 per cent of women working in male-dominated workplaces were concerned about this, compared to 48 per cent of women in female-dominated and more mixed workplaces.

Significantly more women than men were concerned about equal pay (38 per cent compared to 23 per cent men), and better career paths for women (34 per cent and 12 per cent). Women of all ages and seniority of union membership showed high levels of concern about these three issues. Men's second order priorities were instead wages (42 per cent), better jobs/career paths (42 per cent) and superannuation (35 per cent), and significantly more men than women indicated each of these priorities. Concern about wages was especially high amongst men in the private sector (49 per cent) and lowest amongst women in the public sector (23 per cent). A similar pattern exists with respect to superannuation and rehabilitation.

Significantly more women than men were concerned about child care, part-time work, and flexible work arrangements. About a quarter of both women and men were concerned about each of the following: hours of work, pressure of work, more say at work, and slightly less with training, lobbying for services, and promoting or protecting services. Not

surprisingly, public sector women (and men) were much more concerned about promoting and protecting services than those in the private sector.

More traditional union concerns like wages, superannuation and rehabilitation - while far from insignificant in women's minds - are much more important to men. These findings suggest that discrimination, equal pay, career paths, and also child care, part-time work and flexible work arrangements should be high within the general union movement's program, since amongst women, they are almost equivalent to, or more important than, wages.

These findings constitute a strong argument for gender difference in the construction of union industrial priorities: a failure to admit these important (and no doubt changing) gender-specific variations will cost unions membership loyalty. Unions who respond to these concerns will be addressing women's issues and, based on the survey's results, are likely to find it easier to recruit women and encourage them into involvement. A number of women - and men - commented upon union priorities:

Unions concentrate too much on money/wage issues and virtually ignore health care and child care issues. (woman)

Many workers have issues/concerns that are outside the scope of traditional union concerns. (man)

The union should push for child care centres at big companies. Also English language training for migrants. (woman)

More information on sexual harassment in the workplace, and more help from unions on the subject. (woman)

Some women feared that their union would oppose changes that they wanted:

I am concerned that the union is opposed to job sharing. Surely the encouragement for women returning to work after maternity leave is part-time work and job sharing. (woman)

### 7.5.6 Transforming the Nature of Union Jobs and Culture

A number of respondents wrote comments about the need to change the experience of workplace representatives who are often overworked, isolated people who must deal with (and often project) aggression. They were not attracted to this type of position. Others found the style of unionism in their workplaces alienating, unnecessarily aggressive or confrontational rather than 'subtly forceful', and that new ways of building 'female solidarity' would help:

It would be nice to see the unions using a little more subtle force without bending too far to employer's demands. (woman)

There needs to be greater emphasis on female solidarity ...Traditionally unions were trade unions and historically there were few women in trades. Historically our society has not placed great emphasis on female solidarity in the workplace. (woman)

Several women's commented upon the need for personal contact and encouragement from their union officials:

My main concern would be that union officials or representatives take a stronger step towards getting to know the employees they represent and to encourage them more to participate in union issues and events. (woman)

At my workplace women members only seem to become important when voting takes place. Not the fault of the union but stewards for not educating the men on the importance of our vote. Strength is in unity. (woman)

Others suggest that they will respond to a change in union culture, away from conflict and formalism at meetings and in communications between union members, towards an affirmative and supportive environment and culture. Some are put off union activism by their perceptions of a confrontational and critical union culture and politics and some men were in agreement:

I believe a more friendly, less aggressive attitude at some meetings by some officials, needs to be made, and this would assist both women and men to feel more inclined to participate. (man)

I find union meetings too formal and therefore rather intimidating. I'm better off contributing in [other] areas where I have better skills. (woman)

Many believe that they don't know enough to be involved and this belief is fostered by language, traditions, and practices which require prior knowledge but may not be essential in practice. A masculine culture and style is unattractive to many potential women activists, and probably partly explains the high level of enthusiasm amongst women (and men) for more women union leaders. Encouraging these women into sustained union involvement hinges on a significant change in the internal practices, climate and culture of unions, along with the many other practical changes outlined above.

## 7.6 Conclusion

International and Australian studies have used a taxonomy of categories of barriers (union, societal, personal or job related) to analyse impediments to union involvement and shape union responses. The results of this study suggest that the factors inhibiting women's activism in particular are a tangled combination of societal factors (which keep many women overworked at home and exhausted), union factors (like failing to ask or encourage women and inappropriate meeting times) and some personal characteristics often shared by women (like low confidence). Job related factors are also at work, with women especially affected for example by part-time work. All four types of barriers are in play.

Several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the results suggest that gender differences in most aspects of union life exist, and should constitute an important site of union analysis and strategy (this result is in accord with the balance of overseas studies and contradicts some previous Australian studies (notably those by Benson and Griffin)). Secondly, the survey results confirm that Australian women members - like their sisters internationally - are less active in their unions than men, but that this lower activism cannot be attributed to more anti-union attitudes, to a simple lack of interest, or to lower levels of knowledge about unions. Each of these is contradicted by the evidence in this survey. On the other hand there is evidence that men under-estimate women's level of interest in involvement. In fact, over-work at home and work are important factors in explaining women's lower activism. It is

also clear that many aspects of union operation act as barriers to women's involvement: there is firm support for 'union deficit' theories about women's under-representation in unions. However, while 'personal' factors amongst women like a lack of confidence, knowledge or skills affect some women, they are much less significant than structural barriers like over-work at home and in paid work, exhaustion and existing methods of union work. In other words any theory of 'women's deficit' as a primary explanation of women's under-representation in unions is severely undermined by these results.

Returning to the taxonomy adopted in the last chapter (women's deficit/union deficit/male resistance), the survey shows that Australian unions, with their dominant assumptions of women's deficit, mistake the 'problem' of women. If unions are to secure real increases in women's workplace activism they must address several factors, but in a different order than that traditionally adopted, with much greater emphasis on the habits of unionism and their fit with the contours of women's and men's daily lives, and much less on an assumed and now largely discredited theory of deficit in women. A focus on the characteristics of women - as has traditionally occurred - misses the main point. Women are too busy at home and work, exhausted, held back by their supervisors' and employers' opposition, have often not been asked and find meeting times inconvenient. Each of these factors acts as a barrier to more women than any 'personal' characteristics (like lack of confidence, knowledge or skills). Unions which fail to address these structural factors are missing the main game: they should refocus efforts towards the ways in which the union works and the structural responses it can make to the domestic/paid over-work situation of women. The results suggest that unions should make efforts to assist activists with overload in their paid work and with the domestic costs of participation (meals, care, cleaning). They also indicate that a sizeable pool of women union members (around a quarter) are interested in union involvement and many of them would consider running for union office. The high level of support amongst members of both sexes for more women officials should encourage the effort to stimulate women's activism and interest in affirmative action.

Some of the factors which women name as major barriers, like domestic over-load, are categories which are named as 'societal' in the academic literature. It is a patriarchal discourse which labels responsibility for the domestic sphere a societal factor - by

implication beyond unions' direct control and 'proper' business', while leaving so many 'societal', personal or job related aspects of men's life within that orbit. For example, the difficulties of drawing men who work as transient shearers, on boats, on oil rigs and on shift work into activism are profound and yet have been accepted as the daily challenge of union work. Indeed many of these workers have been the activist backbone of the traditional labour movement in Australia. The categorisation of factors which complicate women's activism - like interrupted working lives or domestic workloads - as societal, personal or job related factors, beyond the reach or responsibility of unions, functions to protect male advantage and, if applied in the face of empirical data to the contrary, constitutes a form of male resistance. Only sexism allows the effects of domestic work to be defined as 'societal', while shift work and geographic distance are accepted as the day to day challenge of union organising to be overcome - not by the individual - but by the union.

A genuine transformation of the Australian union movement, with a greater share of leadership and activism by women, depends upon a shift in perception and action in many unions away from 'fixing deficient women' towards a close examination of union methods, organising habits, and support structures for activism. Long established traditions and practices entrench in many unions a politics of male advantage (Eveline 1994b): the informal adoption of the seniority principle with respect to union involvement and office is just one example, and this and others are discussed in the next chapter. This study shows that the work, domestic and cultural aspects of women's lives must be a more central focus of union action to overturn existing male norms which privilege and authorise men while locking women out.



## Chapter 8

### Male Advantage, Male Resistance

Underpinning much of the empirical work discussed in the preceding three chapters is a belief that by making a clear, well substantiated argument about the situation of women and men in unions, I would - to state my naivete baldly - convince men with power in unions to change their behaviours and thence change unions<sup>1</sup>. This belief - that 'facts' change behaviour - has been severely tested in the process of the research as it has historically in many other areas of feminist endeavour<sup>2</sup>. I took the analysis showing the under-representation of women throughout union structures to the union movement in many settings, and it contributed to winning some new space on new terms in unions<sup>3</sup> - and it may do more on this front in the future if progress is shown to be slow, relative to the base line which now exists. However, it is fair to say that the greatest interest in this work has been shown by women.

This is even more pronounced with respect to the analysis of union activism discussed in the previous chapter which undermines many hypotheses about women and men and their union involvement and indeed it challenges much of conventional practice. Male union officials have shown very little interest in the results<sup>4</sup>. While I have briefed several union secretaries and mixed sex committees in most of the six unions/divisions, these meetings have always been initiated by active women in these unions and little action has followed except referral of the issue to the women's committee or equivalent. On the other hand, I have been invited to present and discuss the results with almost every formal and informal women's committee and forum in all of the six unions and beyond, from local to national

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<sup>1</sup>There were other objectives too: providing clear research results to assist women and men activists with union strategy, for example.

<sup>2</sup>For example, in chapter two I point out that correct argument (or 'facts') have never won women much progress with respect to equal pay: other factors which have increased women's power explain most progress. While I believed that I understood this with respect to women's wages and working conditions, it seemed that I have underestimated it in the sphere of changes in union practice. As Jane Flax puts it: "There is no evidence that appeals to reason, knowledge or truth are uniquely effective or ought to occupy privileged positions in strategies for change...It is simply not necessarily the case (especially in politics) that appeals to truth move people to action, much less to justice." (1992:458).

<sup>3</sup>For example, the position of Assistant secretary (women) at the UTLC, though this was primarily a political struggle waged by women in their unions and in left caucuses.

<sup>4</sup>There are exceptions: unions in the banking sector, some Trades and Labor Councils and national training bodies are amongst these.

level; this has included meetings of women shop stewards through to national conferences in several of these unions, and annual national cross-union training schools for women in several instances. Women are very interested in the results, while men are not.

Alongside this, having used research methods which I believed would be relatively easily accepted by unionists, and carefully applying them to ensure their validity, I have found the results sometimes simply denied by men on occasions when they have not been ignored. For example, I presented one union's results about activism and gender to that union's secretary; these results showed, amongst many other things, that women in that union saw their organisers half as frequently as their male co-workers. The union secretary replied that these results *simply could not be true*. Despite the large sample of his union's members included in the study, and the very significant differences in male/female experiences of union service, the secretary responded with simple disbelief. He said that his organisers (who were and are all male) *simply could not be doing this*<sup>5</sup>. A subsequent meeting of the union's women's committee had no trouble 'believing' these results and drawing up a list of reasons which explained them, most importantly that the all male organising group knew mostly men in workplaces and found them easier to approach, while many women were shy about approaching them. In other words, with respect to the results of the study overall, women believed them, while some men simply did not.

These responses - of disbelieving the research and its challenge to the dominant discourses of female disadvantage in favour of problematic union organisation and culture, and directly denying its outcomes - reveal a strongly rooted masculine resistance; the above official was choosing not to know something. For some decades dominant behaviours in Australian unionism with respect to women have kept the *femaleness* of members who are women in focus, infusing that femaleness with deficiencies relative to unchallenged masculine norms. When an alternative possible truth<sup>6</sup> is offered, using some of the orthodox devices of empirical method (though in feminist hands), some male power holders either ignore or deny this possibility. Women, on the other hand, take it up energetically,

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<sup>5</sup>I know this union secretary well and he is committed to building an effective democratic union, and indeed had spent some years contesting then winning the leadership of his union on a ticket of democratic reform. His denial of the results was quite sincere; he was perfectly blinkered to the possibility of systemic bias against women amongst his hard working, competent organising cadres.

<sup>6</sup>Or a result which is 'less false', as Sandra Harding prefers to say (1991:112).

deepen its analysis, attempt to use it within their unions, promulgate it to women throughout their organisation, and encourage its use by sympathetic men. (Generally, however, these sympathetic men are not union secretaries). These outcomes severely undermine part of my purpose of this research - that part oriented to influencing powerful men. This disappointed hope leads directly to a much larger territory: that is, the *degree and mechanisms of resistance* to women in unions.

It is to these issues I turn in this chapter, referring to the empirical results in previous chapters and my experience discussing them in a wide variety of union settings. I make some comments based on that experience and my observations about male resistance to women in unions, and draw upon other related areas of feminist research and theory.

### 8.1 The Mutating Virus of Masculine Resistance to Women in Unions

Over the past two decades, as Australian women have methodically proposed ideas and means to make unions more representative of women; that effort has focussed on women - on the effects of under-representation on women, on getting more women into activism and so on. A 'view from the bottom'<sup>7</sup> has kept our mind off the mobilisation and mechanics of masculine culture and bias in unions. Fortunately, others have made a start on the study of these phenomena. Collinson and Hearn observe:

[T]he failure to recognise the embeddedness, flexibility and dominance of..multiple masculinities within conventional power relations in organizations is a major reason for the ineffectiveness of many equality initiatives. The possibility of sabotage by men at various hierarchical levels (and sometimes women too) in the construction of many programmes, has only recently begun to be addressed (Collinson and Hearn 1994:11).

Only rarely do we chronicle and investigate the dense fabric and mechanics of male opposition to women. Why do unionists who are men resist unionists who are women? What are the mechanics by which men in unions stand in women's way?

To speak of male resistance is not to imply a universal masculine conspiracy. For one thing masculinity is not a singular category within which all men are united: Collinson and Hearn above (1994) and Bob Connell (1995), for example, speak of multiple masculinities.

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<sup>7</sup>As Peta Tancred-Sheriff and E. Jane Campbell put it (1992:39).

Secondly, men do not act in gender concert against women's interests always in a conscious or plotted way. However, the tendencies within a patriarchal system, and especially within masculinised institutions like unions, are for men's actions - diverse, contradictory and unmapped as they are - to work on the whole to protect men's interests. It is the mechanics of this resistance which are under-studied and of under-estimated importance<sup>8</sup>.

This resistance has enormous mutative capacity: like the most clever of viruses its shape mutates as rapidly as women are able to challenge it. Equal opportunities programs are subverted to give the appearance of progress while blocking the majority of women (Cockburn 1991, Homans 1986); overtly discriminatory recruitment barriers are removed but still few women can over-ride "the ways in which women are controlled and regulated by male gatekeepers" (Spencer and Podmore 1987:8); research outcomes which contradict dominant 'truths' are ignored or denied, and so on.

This resistance is international in complexion: Briskin and McDermott discuss four important ways in which unions resist women's advance in Canada:

[U]nion complicity in the gendered segmentation of the labour market; union support for traditionalist ideologies about women's work, breadwinners, and male-headed families; union resistance to broader-based bargaining; and patriarchal, bureaucratic, hierarchical, and often fundamentally anti-democratic union structures and practices which marginalize women inside unions (1993:7).

Stinson and Richmond write of some women's union experience in Canada:

The lack of acceptance reported by female staff may range from being ignored to outright hostility, causing women to feel either that they don't 'fit in' or are definitely not wanted. As well, it often causes women to work harder in order to be listened to, respected, and able to accomplish their goals...some women also encounter more open forms of hostile resistance which may take the form of repeated demeaning and belittling comments, ostracism by other unionists, and sexual harassment. (1993:143).

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<sup>8</sup>This discussion is not meant to suggest that other barriers do not also work to retard women's progress in public life: prominent amongst these in unions, as we have seen, is the domestic sphere and its workload. However, the reaction (or lack of a reaction) to this and other significant barriers also comprise an important part of masculine resistance, as I argue below.

Stinson and Richmond ask why women are resisted in Canadian unions, and reply that some men are afraid of losing power and prestige while others fear change itself and prefer the predictability of tradition. Jude Elton makes very similar comments about the Australian context (Elton 1997 forthcoming).

In the UK, Heery and Kelly's research showed that full-time women union officials were angry at the mistreatment they experienced in unions; the majority felt that they were "disadvantaged because of their gender" (1989:197) that men did not accept them, and over half had experienced sexual harassment. "Trade unions constituted a 'discriminatory environment'...It appears that many trade unionists and managers regard women as 'out of place' in trade union work" (Heery and Kelly 1989:198). This is supported by other research in the UK (Dorgan and Grieco 1992; Ledwith et al. 1990) which found evidence of homophobia, rivalry and opposition to women amongst men, along with little change in many aspects of internal union operation which work against women.

While men are rarely named as men in studies of organisations, and while unions are rarely studied as organisational *forms*, there are many reasons for masculine resistance and many ways in which that resistance to women in Australian unions can be catalogued.

## **8.2 Why Does Masculinity Resist? Union Power Constructs Masculinity**

Alongside simple fear of change, there are at least four further reasons why men resist women as activists in unions in Australia. Firstly, at its most benign, many men in unions have little alternative occupational choice. Even if they want to move on and make way for women, they often have no, or very limited, occupational choice after holding any kind of full-time union position or even after active shop floor engagement. Outside some areas of the public sector, many cannot return to their previous occupations. So some resist women (or other potential new activists) out of the lack of any other job to go to.

Secondly, union leadership is obviously materially rewarding, in the form of payments to shop stewards for their work (as occur in some unions), and, for full-time officials, wages, cars, opportunities to travel, sitting fees and other benefits, and longer term career prospects - available to some - in parliament, industrial relations commissions, and on superannuation

and other boards. These are the conventional material rewards for many retiring union officials in Australia.

Thirdly, beyond material reward, union power is exciting, interesting and psychically rewarding. While union work is often exhausting and hard, it is also a source of power and pleasure. Working men (and women) who otherwise may have few opportunities to take power at work or to achieve recognition or promotion, often enjoy the pleasures and authority of representing others. Union power is thrilling. The pleasures and status of this work rise with the level of the position but, just as many union secretaries would not easily surrender the rewards of their office, neither will many shop stewards.

Finally, alongside the inducements of material reward and public standing and the pleasures of wielding public power, for many men their masculinity is *materially constituted* by their position of union leadership (whether as shop steward or union secretary). The fabric of this material, in turn, constitutes a major set of resistances to women: men find solidarity in their communion with other men in union positions and - for some at least - the intrusion of women is an assault on that masculinity and is to be energetically resisted in a multitude of ways.

Union office reinforces and expresses their masculine identity and sense of themselves. Of all occupations, union official is one of the most masculine in its traditional portrayal and character. As Clare Burton says of men in power generally: "much satisfaction comes from wheeling and dealing, from feeling powerful and important, from the accumulation of the experiences of exerting influence" (1991:6). There is no doubt that for many men in the union movement, in particular, their rewards on this count are significant and their masculinity is indeed consolidated through their brotherly unionism. Such reward will not easily be given over. Indeed many women unionists must not only not challenge male ego, but must *look after it*: as one woman unionist interviewed by Cynthia Cockburn put it in the case of successful union election: "you have to help [the man you challenge] to reconstruct his identity" (1991:136). Many feminist tactical discussions in unions, in my experience, pay attention to the business of assessing male egotistical needs (for position or recognition),

in order to be forewarned about the reprisals they provoke, or to satiate them in one way or another<sup>9</sup>.

Further, part of the satisfaction in such jobs where men have traditionally dominated, lies in the very fact that they have *traditionally been* men's jobs. Female entry threatens some men's sense of status and presents a threat to masculinity itself (Burton 1991:6). Men will resist the entrance of women to their employment spheres, including that of union official and representative. A growing literature establishes the links between work and "masculine values and assumptions in the structure, culture and practices of organization", links which are especially strong in the world of unionism:

For many men, employment provides the interrelated economic resources and symbolic benefits of wages/salaries, skills and experience, career progress and positions of power, authority and high discretion. Typically, it seems men's gender identities are constructed, compared and evaluated by self and others according to a whole variety of criteria indicating personal 'success' in the workplace. In turn, these measures of success in paid work come to reflect back on men's sense of masculine identity. (Collinson and Hearn 1994:6).

As discussed in chapter four, men establish and consolidate their male identities through a variety of practices which allow them to both subjectively identify *with* other men (or certain subgroups of men), and to identify *against* others (such as women)<sup>10</sup>. Women union activists contest male power on male territory, provoking what Valerie Hey describes as a coincident male power and male vulnerability, which brings a special reprisal for women who enter male-controlled territory:

It is amongst other men that patriarchal masculinity is celebrated and constructed and it is within this bonding that men also experience their vulnerabilities. Their chief vulnerability lies in their emotional dependence on a desired yet despised gender, a

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<sup>9</sup>This is not an unusual experience for others in unions in many situations who might, for example, be organising a public rally or meeting and usually give considerable thought to who speaks and when, as fragile egos are often disturbed with uncomfortable effects.

<sup>10</sup>Collinson and Hearn illustrate with the example of working men:  
[M]anual workers frequently seek to maintain masculine identities and their sense of difference through these simultaneous discourses and practices of identification and differentiation...Patriarchal shopfloor discourses and practices, including those related to men's sexuality, appear to be fundamentally shaped by these subjective concerns with defining 'self' and 'other'. (1994:9)

gender group whose sexuality cannot be thought of except in terms of control and exclusive 'ownership'. Thus a man's failure in masculinity can be provoked simply by a woman's autonomous action. (Hey 1986:69).

In the case of pub culture and other male social locations, men are "hostile to female solidarity and go to considerable lengths to subvert it" (Hey 1986:70). Women entering male turf, or meeting separately as women, therefore constitute a particularly loaded challenge to men, perhaps especially within organisational forms like unions where 'solidarity' has been such an important buttress of masculinity. It is not surprising, therefore that women's separate organising in unions has been challenged by men in almost all locations and forms in which it occurs.

The discourses and practices through which these male subjectivities (and their 'others') are created, change over time and place of course. But, their establishment is likely to be especially important to men who are under constant threat and who live in challenging strife, as do many male (and female) unionists, engaged in struggle with employers. The fact that union officials are often under threat of attack, and are accustomed to fighting, makes the construction and consolidation of their masculinity of particular importance. Maintaining a strong identity within the protective citadel of masculine labour is an important part of psychological survival. Threat to it - by the entry of women, by way of challenges through new styles, by the assertion of non-heterosexualities, or by direct threat to ownership of position itself - must in this light be vigorously resisted for the purposes of maintaining an unruptured sense of masculine self and a protective 'solidarity'.

So in entering unions, and a traditionally male job, women must contest all kinds of structural barriers and concrete hurdles, *along with* many men's real resistance to any threat to their positions and sense of male selves. Attention to these practices and discourses is important to women's long term progress in unions. Many women - in male-dominated unions or the movements' peak councils - work in a 'discriminatory environment' which means that their bodies and sexuality are on critical view, the patterns of their lives and domestic responsibilities will be 'different', and they will usually be seen through the prism of sexual stereotype<sup>11</sup>. Of course women ride over, contest and constantly disrupt many of

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<sup>11</sup>The term 'discriminatory environment' was first coined by Bourne and Wikler (1978) and has been developed in Spencer and Podmore's edited collection (1987).



these practices, but their existence is in focus here, because their systemic character has been so little named or explored. A better understanding and naming of these resistances will assist that contest and disruption.

Important amongst these practices which constitute male resistance to women in unions are, as we have seen, propagation of myths around women's deficit and resistance to women's separate organising. Alongside these are habits of leadership style; language; the concession of position without power; the unchanging terms of political engagement; maintenance of the public/private divide; homo-social reproduction; bureaucracy, seniority and the power of incumbency; and the manipulation of category politics. There are also a variety of ways in which sexuality and the body are constructed differently for women and men in union work. There are no doubt many others, but I will briefly outline some aspects of these nine types of male resistance.

### **8.3 Leadership Styles**

The dominant discourses of union leadership generally position women in a negative way and work to undermine their interest in leadership and assessment of their capacities for it. Perhaps the most common traditional organisational style for male union secretaries is one of authoritarianism. This style is common in many unions (and not only amongst men). Its characteristics are, in its crudest form, authoritarian styles of decision making, verbal bullying, aggressive body language, swearing, anger, hostility and sometimes violence. This form of leadership thrives on the accumulation of power, self-elevation, self-differentiation and 'negation of others' (Collinson and Hearn 1994). It is often associated with competitiveness and individualism. These characteristics are part of union culture in many places, not only in relation to members and potential members, but also in relations between union activists. This form of authoritarian unionism can take a less aggressive shape in the form of non-consultative, dominating, anti-democratic behaviours. Women with their often more consultative styles are often positioned as weak: they cannot be 'proper' leaders.

Another common form of leadership in unions is paternalism<sup>12</sup>, where men are fatherly and protective, and act 'for' women; in this discourse women are positioned as weak and in need of protection; they are not leaders.

Where women are leaders in unions there is considerable evidence to suggest that the style and content of their leadership differs from these dominant discourses. Cockburn's study of the women-led Northern Ireland division of a union in the UK (1991), Leena Sudano's research amongst women union secretaries in South Australia (1993), Stinson and Richmond's work in Canada (1993), and Eaton's research in the US (1992b) all indicate that different models of leadership dominate amongst feminist union leaders, particularly where they are able to establish their own styles in a more feminised environment (often amongst teachers, nurses, public servants and other female-dominated or mixed-sex unions). Sudano's work shows, for example, that women union leaders read their role as one of facilitator. They implement power sharing and place strong emphasis upon union education; similarly Eaton's research in the US reveals women unionists favour a collaborative and empowering form of democratic leadership (Eaton 1992b). Further,

Their role conception is informal, context and relationally based. Peak union leadership is something they do for a period of time, prior to handing it on to others, who they have 'brought along', rather than a career for life. Whilst experiencing some difficulty with the legitimacy of their power, chiefly a fluctuating sense of competence, these leaders actively work to acquire knowledge and skills to improve their contribution to the relevance and effectiveness of unions. The quality of participatory democracy in unions is a central concern to these leaders, as is improving the perception and reality of unions as representative organisations (Sudano 1993:68).

This concern with participation is echoed in Cockburn's Northern Ireland case, and in the work of Stinson and Richmond in Canada. It is no wonder that the five women union leaders interviewed by Sudano suffer "a fluctuating sense of competence" when their leadership objectives are at once so different from the traditional, and so much on view and a source of curiosity and criticism amongst many men. In fact, this phenomena of being "constantly on view", as a woman, pervades the experience of women union representatives

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<sup>12</sup>Collinson and Hearn describe this discourse in organisations more broadly (1994:13).

throughout their union work, as it does that of women in any non-traditional occupation (Spencer and Podmore 1987).

#### 8.4 Language and Verbal Interaction

An extensive literature about male advantage in language and conversation exists (Spender 1981). In unions, many of these practices can be observed, perhaps most starkly in the sexualised language of swearing and of conflict/class war<sup>13</sup>. The metaphors of union expression are often those of war and rape, with the latter positioning women as quarry and victim<sup>14</sup>.

As we saw in chapter seven, many women comment upon the aggressive nature of union interchanges at union meetings (as do some men), and other say that they can't get a word in. Recent studies of unionism amongst shop stewards in England show how women's concerns, when they are expressed, are often labelled as personal and outside the scope of proper unionism, while women are also excluded from active voice in unions through conversational practices, formal meeting procedures, and the location and venue for meetings (Cunnison and Stageman 1995).

#### 8.5 Conceding Position without Power

In terms of numerical position, this study has shown that men continue to lead most Australian unions, especially outside the large, public sector, white collar unions. Women's share of all union official positions is on the rise and probably at a faster rate than in either the corporate or parliamentary spheres. However, much of this increase is attributable to the rise in the 'feminised minority' of public sector, white collar unions since the 1970s, more than to a rise in women's share of union official positions across all unions.

Despite a lift in momentum, an entrenched pattern of women's under-representation and their over-employment in junior, appointed positions remains. Women officials are often

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<sup>13</sup>For example 'we screwed them to the wall', 'we shoved it right up them', and so on. These terms are frequently used, still, in union meetings. When women argue against their usage, their 'difference' is immediately on view, they become 'woman' more than 'unionist' and the triviality of their complaint and politics is 'exposed'.

<sup>14</sup>I have also noticed of late the frequency of homosexual sex/rape references amongst the metaphors used by male unionists.

sidelined in terms of their longer term role in union leadership and in terms of their current influence on union decision making. They are industrial officers, trainers, organisers, health and safety officials rather than members of federal councils, presidents, secretaries, and are much more likely to be appointed than their male official colleagues. Power continues to reside mostly in male hands.

The gains made by women within union representation often take the appearance of *strategic concession*: men concede some paid, full-time and unpaid positions to women - for example honorary treasurer, research officer - but in all of this, outside the female-dominated unions, women are effectively insulated from real power in most places. These strategic concessions, just like equal opportunity policy, form part of the fabric of male resistance. They give the appearance of progress (and appease some women) while conceding little. While there are more women, their distance from the driving seat of power subverts their voice and influence.

Apart from undermining feminist goals, this concession of position without power has a heavy costs for the union movement. Male officials trip over their egos in hanging onto positions at the cost of recruitment gains and membership satisfaction and this trip could prove fatal. We have seen that the overwhelming proportion of existing union members want to see more women running for union office and where women hold significant power in unions now, the backlash by annoyed male members is insignificant (if sometimes vocal). It is hard to exaggerate the negative effects of too much male leadership of unions upon the public perception about unions and their malfunctioning: it perpetuates the perception that unions are for men not women, it leaves us with leaders who lack an appreciation of the detail of women's lives and our concerns and it distorts every aspect of unionism from the structure of recruitment initiatives, to peak council policy making.

Too much male leadership retards organising success. Research in the US shows that male officials (especially at the critical level of organiser) are much more likely to think that women are harder to organise than men, in contrast with female organisers and those in successful unions like the SEIU<sup>15</sup> (who consider women easier to organise (Crain 1994)).

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<sup>15</sup>The SEIU is an outstanding example of organising success in the US where its membership has almost doubled between 1981 and 1993. Its leadership is much more diverse than in most US unions with a third women and a quarter coloured elected officials (Needleman 1993).

This is bound to affect organising habits and practices. Male organisers are much more likely to consider that organising women is simply too hard. Women and SEIU organisers agree that it sometimes takes longer to organise women, and that different approaches meet with success; but once organised, women are often more militant and more tenacious in their unionism. In the same US study male organisers tended to think that their own gender was irrelevant to their organising success: "men uniformly denied any doubt about their ability to relate to female workers". In contrast women organisers and those in the SEIU saw their gender as important factors (Crain 1994:241). Men are less likely to be successful in organising women and women organisers are much more likely to adopt 'gender specific' organising styles. Women organisers are energetically recruited by unions like the SEIU which recognise that part of their success in recruitment is through the presence of women elected officials and women organisers.

The empirical results discussed in chapter seven reinforce these findings. Clearly Australian women currently receive less union service than their male co-workers, they have much less contact with officials than men (especially where organisers are men), and both men and women union members believe that there should be more women union leaders, and that their presence would enhance recruitment success. On the other hand, we have seen how male unionists - particularly older men from male-dominated workplaces - underestimate women's interest in unionism, and no doubt the overwhelming proportion of male union organisers, who are drawn from this population, believe with their US counterparts that women are simply harder to organise. These Australian findings also show that women union members have a different order of industrial concerns than men, and women organisers are likely to be more alert and responsive to these. Generally male union leaders tend to underestimate the effects or existence of masculine habits of union organising and their costs for union organising. This systemic underestimation is part of male resistance to women.

## **8.6 The Terms of Political Engagement**

The dominant current discourse about women in unions in Australia has been one of assimilation: 'add women and stir'. This unspoken framework states, basically, that unions

exist and women must be encouraged to 'join' them. The project is simply one of 'attraction'. But, in joining, women enter a well established institution with many habits which are often prized as sources of power and strength, not least solidarity and unity through the suppression of difference.

As discussed in chapter four with respect to some historic examples, the traditional masculine identity of unions positions women as 'other'; as *women* first, *unionist* second. This infusion of their unionism with their sex, means that women are often viewed as unionists of doubtful reliability, perhaps of an unreliable class and politics and possibly only a temporary resident in the house of labour. As we have seen, the conditional and partial nature of union 'solidarity', with its gender, 'race', ethnic and other exclusions, is illustrated on many historic occasions.

The dominant union discourse suggests a 'sameness' requirement for unionists who are women; they *join, engage, lead* on the established terms, which are men's terms. These terms hold in place, the male standards and norms out of which they grow: with male activist defined as a man whose reproductive, bodily, domestic and private needs are assumed to be well met elsewhere, releasing him to be the political, public actor, with wifely support at home (or succession of partners as many find is increasingly necessary, as partners refuse the terms on offer to 'union wife').

This discourse has conditioned and shaped the union response to the 'problem of women'. We have seen how women have been problematised, rather than unionism and its practices. Women's disadvantage is highlighted, while men's advantages are concealed and hidden and all the norms of masculine behaviour and circumstance are held in place: to be 'one of us' you must be one of them. Women are characterised as 'disadvantaged' in unions by their assumed 'exceptional' differences (anti-unionism, lack of interest, skill, training, assertiveness, knowledge, strength, sense of class). 'Special' programs are invoked to assist them. The category 'women' commonly is assumed to subsume the category parent, and be equivalent to the category 'mother' (though of course it is neither). While a feminist minority of unions take the issue of women's disadvantage seriously and introduce child care at meetings, reconsider the times of meetings and put in place measures of 'special remediation' for women, most do not.

Rarely do unions consider their cultural habits, or more concretely, *the ways in which they make union activism difficult for the many members who are women*. The research set out in chapter seven shows that overload at home and work, along with exhaustion, are the main barriers to women's union activism. They affect women much more than men. Yet unions continue to act on assumptions about women's anti-union attitudes, the opposition of their spouses, and their low levels of confidence and skills and knowledge. Relatively few make comprehensive adaptations to unions themselves; many do not take simple measures, which, systematically applied, would change women's participation, such as training of organisers to encourage and meet women members more frequently, changed meeting times and locations and so on. Unions can recruit transient workers in remote workplaces which change every few weeks, but they stall at the prospect of organising tired workers with children or workers who work part-time or casual. It seems that it is the *femaleness* of these workers which is at the forefront of the problem - not the structural aspects of their lives, and the many union responses which can be made to them.

The job description of many full-time union workers remains unattractive to many women. The workload and stresses make even shared care for dependents almost an impossibility, and as more and more men experience this, we are seeing many men take a hard look at what Stinson and Richmond call one of the 'greedy institutions'<sup>16</sup>. A recent Canadian study of workloads amongst women union officials revealed that their average working week ranged between 72 and 90 hours (10-16 on union work, 16 at home and 38 at work) and in the Canadian public sector a recent unpublished survey of honorary women officials indicated high levels of overload and stress<sup>17</sup>. As comments by union members revealed in chapter seven, many women are not attracted to activism on these terms. Jude Elton has recently discussed these aspects of union work with respect to Australia (Elton 1997 forthcoming). We will not see more women leaders in unions in sizeable numbers unless the terms of engagement change and the model of individual hero (overworked,

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<sup>16</sup>Stinson and Richmond (1993) employ C.A. Coser's term of greedy institutions when speaking of Canadian unions and Suzanne Franzway has subsequently taken up the notion in her analysis of women at work in Australian unions (Franzway 1995).

<sup>17</sup>Julie White, unpublished seminar presentation to Centre for Labour Studies, Adelaide, 5th May 1995.

under-holidayed, often unfit) is dislodged and replaced by a more humane, rested, less guilt-driven being.

The exclusions guaranteed by these terms of political engagement are an important means by which men's control of unions is effectively policed.

### **8.7 The Public/Private Divide**

The continuing divide between public and private life and the construction of public life - populated by men on terms that they set - upon a hidden, private life populated mostly by women, precludes many women from union activism, especially senior union leadership. The maintenance of this divide actively undercuts women unionists and constitutes a central pivot of men's resistance to women in unions.

Many men find little reward in the private sphere. To take up a fair share of the domestic load hardly results in a lift in prestige and instead means much more, harder, hidden work. As this study of union activism shows, women's involvement in their unions did not change much regardless of whether they were parents or not, and regardless of their number of children; on the other hand, men's activism rose with the onset of parenting and with *each successive child*. This result substantiates Pateman's thesis that responsibility and work in the private sphere, undermines women's participation as political citizens in unions and other public political forums. A failure to understand this reality and to change the patterns of public citizenship and the terms on which it occurs, along with the private life which underpins it, constitute a vitally important part of male advantage in unions.

### **8.8 Homo-social Reproduction**

Social dynamics within unions foster habits of homo-sociality, that is of men choosing men to work and socialise with, so reproducing themselves. Such patterns are clearly evidenced by women's much lower levels of contact with their male officials. We have seen above how these homo-social patterns affect organising success amongst women. They also shape many social and power relations in union organisations where men select and foster their heirs on the basis of 'social similarity' (Burton 1991:5). As Cockburn has described:



The daily business of organisations, their operation as male power bases, depends on men generating a closeness between men. Clubbing and socialising...helps men control information. The transmission of power from one generation of men to another, for example, calls for the sponsorship of younger men by older men. Homo-sociality is thus the dominant cultural form in male-dominated organizations (Cockburn 1991:189).

Patterns of union socialising effectively exclude women from many decisions. The pub has played a particular role here, historically. More than a device of misogyny as argued by Hey (1986), the pub also forms an important place of politics: a place of "economic, social, and cultural capital that men acquire via their easier access to these obligatory haunts" (Smith 1976:49). Women who choose not to do politics in the pub, or its many male-dominated equivalents, miss out on important decisions and influences.

Homo-sociality also takes form as resistance to women socialising or meeting as a group, and to the 'solidarity' implicit in feminism. These are often posed as divisive ruptures of union 'solidarity'. Isolating women from each other, opposing feminism, resistance to female caucusing and separation, disparaging feminism and characterising feminism as middle class and anti working class, are expressions of male resistance to women.

### **8.9 Amalgamation, Bureaucracy, Queues, Seniority**

Bureaucracy<sup>18</sup> has never been a help to women in organisations. Size is an important aspect of this problem: larger organisations are associated with a weaker voice for the marginalised, elaborate systems of accession to power, complex cliques around which power collects, and high entry/election costs for newcomers who lack a factional or incumbent base<sup>19</sup>. In this light the program of rapid, extensive union amalgamation in Australia must be viewed with some concern by feminists.

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<sup>18</sup> By which I mean multi-layered organisations, with specialised officers and complex formal rules along with - in the case of unions - multi-layered representative structures.

<sup>19</sup> All of these problems were chronicled by Roberto Michels in his 1911 study of the relationship between bureaucracy and democracy when he found the former to be the enemy of the latter, particularly in unions where he based much of his discussion.

Notwithstanding ACTU policy, all the signs are that amalgamation of unions in Australia has worsened the systemic under-representation of women. The queues for positions (whether elected or appointed) have lengthened and the tiers, where time is expected to be 'served', have grown in number. As we saw in chapter six, only a small number of amalgamating unions in Australia have paid attention to improving women's representation in the process of amalgamating, and unions like the UK's UNISON, with its targets for fair representation based on gender amongst elected officials, are rare indeed (they are not common in the UK either).

While there are examples of progressive union amalgamation policies<sup>20</sup>, in other cases positive policies about women's representation have fallen by the wayside in amalgamation agreements. Apart from the very important issue of women's presence, there is also the vital issue of women's *voice* and *involvement* in larger organisations. Larger organisations develop deadening layers of officials and professionalise the 'servicing' of members, a tendency which detaches mobilisation from representation. The practice 'of acting on behalf of' undermines the enlarged perspectives and collective interests that are fostered through direct involvement in unionism and through which many women come to their unionism.

A practice of 'servicing' (rather than mobilising or organising) has significantly weakened the US labour movement<sup>21</sup> and is now the focus of significant campaigns to overturn it in that country, with parallel developments here<sup>22</sup>. While union cultures vary widely in Australia, the shift to large union divisions within even larger unions poses a real danger to a functioning union democracy and to the effective participation of groups whose voice was already muted by existing procedures, practices and structures.

Against these negative effects for women, larger unions present *potential* gains in the form of more resources for women's officers and affirmative action and other programs, and the possibility for sizeable groups of women officials to develop internal union structures which take them perhaps to 'critical mass'. The absorption of large numbers of smaller

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<sup>20</sup>The Australian Education Union is one (Evatt Foundation 1995).

<sup>21</sup>Along with many other factors, not least the historical legacy of ethno-religious division, racism, sexism, craft sectionalism, and the assertive attacks of extremely anti-union employers and government (see Moody 1988 and Davis 1986).

<sup>22</sup>In 'Organising Works' the important ACTU initiative to train significant numbers of young union organisers (over half of whom are women) in the 'organising model' of unionism. (McManus 1997 forthcoming).

unions whose practices were often hardly democratic or open to public scrutiny, into better governed organisations may bring opportunities for women. At a basic first level, it certainly means that more unions are required to report under the Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity) Act.

However, without particular initiatives to aggressively promote *participatory* democracy and more fully *representative* democracy, amalgamation increases the distance that lies between individual women and the 'union', it professionalises union services, lengthens the route to union power for women and reduces their share of representative positions. Given the importance that women place upon personal contact in their union involvement, these developments are especially negative for women.

The process of amalgamation was certainly not undertaken with any view to resisting the progress of women; on the contrary, no doubt some of its architects had the thought that such a massive restructure would dislodge some of the organisational glue which constitutes the masculine hegemony in unions. However, the outcomes and the process of amalgamation are illustrative of some of the fabric of resistance. For example women went to work, in the face of amalgamation, and drafted policy about how it should occur to advantage women; this policy was duly passed by the ACTU but has had almost no effect, demonstrating the continuing gap between policy and practice, and its ceremonial and distracting functions.

The principle of seniority has been overturned by equal opportunity programs in many organisations in Australia. Seniority promotes 'time served' over skills and capacities (or merit), and precludes younger, non-traditional candidates from becoming leaders. Notions of seniority shape the facilitated pathways down which chosen heirs are often shepherded to union leadership. They favour men. Alongside these, the processes of election in many organisations allow experienced political operators (or those advised by them) to outmanoeuvre 'new' candidates and block them from leadership.

New approaches to eligibility and suitability are necessary if accession to union leadership (at any level from shop steward to secretary) is to take account of the contours of women's lives. We have seen how women's lesser years of seniority as members and their interrupted periods of union membership (often associated with their domestic responsibilities and

mothering) undercut their activism as workplace representatives, and to the many positions which are built from there. If more women are to take leadership, then a shift away from eligibility based on years of service in a range of positions must change, with much greater attention paid to the capacities of potential leaders, and their encouragement into activism and leadership. At present the power of male incumbency and the practices which consolidate it, stand firmly in the way of women and youth.

### 8.10 Category Politics

I outlined in chapter two Bacchi's argument that the manipulation of outgroup 'categories' (like 'woman', 'Black', 'immigrant') form a site of politics where feminists must constantly deconstruct and contest the uses to which categories are put, either to women's advantage or their disadvantage. The analysis in previous chapters suggests that Bacchi's idea of category politics is useful in contemporary union politics. As she outlines in other contexts, the category 'woman' in union politics has carried little political weight in many union settings, particularly when incumbent men who hold power make use of it. While women are a growing potential force in unions, the existence of the category 'woman' in established union policy and action has generally been constructed as a site of disadvantage, at which remedial programs are targeted. In this usage, 'outgroup' categories have often been placed in the kind of contest with each other, that Bacchi highlights with respect to affirmative action more generally, whether in terms of resources, committee structures or designated affirmative action positions. In this context the categories 'women', 'non-English speaking background', 'Aboriginal' are often assumed to be mutually exclusive groups<sup>23</sup>, sometimes fuelling a critique of 'women' unionists as a middle class elite that is not truly disadvantaged. In this way competition between categories has effectively been fostered in some union settings, particularly as union resources contract as in recent years.

Within unions, conventional uses of the category 'woman' have served male power holders in two important ways: by focusing attention on women and locating gender problems with that category alone, and by leaving the practical work of addressing them with

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<sup>23</sup>That is, the non-'woman' categories are "deemed to be constituted by men" (Bacchi, conference presentation, Sixth International Interdisciplinary Congress of Women, Adelaide, April 1996).

women alone. The establishment and use of designated, additional affirmative action positions for women, while bringing important gains, has also in some settings worked to masculinise the core: carrying the suggestion, perhaps, that if some positions are for women, the rest must be for men. In these ways the play of category politics in unions in many settings has worked against a deeper analysis of gender issues, absolved men from involvement in them, and left much of the resource, decision and power heartlands of unionism insulated from change in relation to gender inequities.

These uses of the category 'woman' contrast with the powerful ways in which feminists in unions use and have used the category 'woman', when they meet on their own terms and exercise power as a group - for example as a left women's caucus, or as *Tjejligan* ('the women's gang') in Sweden. Their stronger assertion in recent years of women's difference from men (and difference between women) has, for example, strengthened the argument for the expression of that difference in the industrial agenda of unions. It will also strengthen a feminist analysis of the masculinised norms which form the conventional terms and habits of unionism.

This suggests that feminist strategists in unions might usefully take care to unhinge the category women from the notion of disadvantage, deconstruct the male norms of traditional unionism, talk more of a gendered gerrymander of resources and power, and adopt language of democracy and fair/proportional gender representation, along with the firm assertion of women's right to meet as women, and to exercise their political power with the support of the movement's resources. Interestingly, these strategies form part of the program of UNISON in the UK, and also characterise the decision of Swedish women to exercise political power through their political formation, *Tjejligan*.

### 8.11 Sex, Body and Image in Union Work

Women unionists can never leave their bodies out of their unionism<sup>24</sup>. This embodiment occurs on several levels but especially with respect to sexuality and reproduction. Even if

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<sup>24</sup>Of course, neither can men (though many try) - but in quite different ways. Nancy Hartsock, for example, writes of men's denial of their body and its importance, relying as they do upon women for their reproduction and sustenance in so many circumstances (Hartsock 1983:253). This denial is in itself very costly to men as their lack of body awareness is no doubt in part responsible for their much higher levels of health and safety

women were able to 'freely'<sup>25</sup> invent and determine their own presentation of themselves (eg 'as a unionist, a heterosexual, a mother, a forty year old woman, this is how I like and choose to look and behave in my union roles') women do not control the narrow, often sexualised prisms through which others view them, and around which male interactions with women in unions are often built. The central of these prisms is that of sexuality: while men are rarely sexualised at work, women can rarely escape it.

Sexualisation has been a particular object of study by Hearn and Parkin who write "Enter most organisations and you enter a world of sexuality" (1987:3). Unions are no exception. It is estimated that a quarter of marriages are formed through work (Hearn and Parkin 1987:15); the proportion in the field of union work is probably much higher. Certainly there is a very high level of interest in sexual relationships in union circles and relationships are a strong source of gossip and even personnel practice<sup>26</sup>.

There is a growing awareness of how "organisations construct sexuality and sexuality constructs organisations" (Burrell and Hearn 1989:25). These constructions are very varied in time and place, but in reproducing the male/female power imbalance general in society, they are often negative in their consequences for women. Certainly women in unions are well aware of sex at work, not only through our ongoing struggle to have the labours of sex workers recognised *as work*, but also with respect to the broader sexualisation of the workplace (including the union workplace), most obviously through sexual harassment - the area where most public recognition of sex at work has been achieved.

As we have seen in the UK more than half of full-time women union officials experienced harassment. Sexual harassment has similarly proved a vexed issue for Australian unions for many reasons: its recognition and naming in the workplace was initially resisted and trivialised, it persists there and in union relations (between union officials and between members) and union officials seem to become especially confused about intra-union harassment (ie by a male official against a female unionist) when it is of a sexual kind. As

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risk at work, and their ill-health as union officials, through poor diet, and a lack of exercise and 're-creation'.

<sup>25</sup>And of course its is doubtful, given the social construction of each of these categories that any of us do so freely, as if writing on a blank slate.

<sup>26</sup>All new employees at a union office where I worked for some years were cautioned against forming sexual relationships with other employees or those in any of the affiliates (we called this the 'morals lecture'); the rule was invariably broken.

discussed in chapter six women who 'breached' union solidarity in Western Australia by going public about their union's failure to deal with their harassment by fellow-unionists were rumoured to be anti-union (despite evidence to the contrary and their persistent efforts to resolve the complaint without 'externalising' it). Union officials in this case, initially at least, chose to maintain solidarity with their mostly male members, against the complaints of female members. Management made the same decision, and both shared the eventual financial penalty.

Of course the workplace is sexualised in many other ways, some of which are negative for women. While the 'sale' of a sex worker at the end of year party and pornographic pin ups have largely disappeared from union practice in recent years, other sexual legacies persist. Australian union officials who are women are subjected to much sexual humour, are assessed by their bodies and appearance (like all women in public life), and generally devote at least some attention to the sexual messages which will be constructed from their stance, dress, language and so on. Women who form sexual relationships with fellow unionists are often the subject of negative judgement and are thereafter 'sexualised' as unionists and workers in intensified ways, while the image of men in similar circumstances is more often enhanced<sup>27</sup>.

With respect to their body 'images' or sexual personas, women are often constructed within narrow caricatures and in some cases exist only as dualities (for example, sexual or non-sexual), framed within patriarchal discourses. These affect the ways in which many union activists who are women look and behave. Of course many women choose to ignore them, but they cannot easily escape the narrow ways in which their sexuality and actions are 'read'.

Women are especially sexualised when they work in a mostly male environment - in 'non-traditional' work. Clearly such sexualisation is generally heterosexual in its public play. Indeed compulsory heterosexuality characterises much of this sexualisation in the Australian union workplace: homosexuality is hidden or denied in many instances, while lesbian union

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<sup>27</sup>Cuneo (1993:121) documents this in Canada and it is common in Australia.

activists are often constructed as 'isolated exceptions' whose sexuality is seen as deviance and/or a 'personal problem' (Hearn et al. 1989:23)<sup>28</sup>.

Women deal with the public sexualisation of their 'selves' or bodies in a variety of ways which might be conceptualised as lying along a spectrum, ranging from attempted non-sexuality, to deliberately sexualised. Some deny, play down and attempt to 'neuter' their bodies and their sexual selves. This is expressed in the way they dress, behave, talk, laugh, and interact with men and co-workers, so that by being 'neuter' the unionist who is a woman can be a 'union activist', rather than being principally seen by some male co-activists as predominantly, and sometimes exclusively, (sexual) 'woman', or at best 'woman unionist'.

In an alternate strategy some women unionists wear their (hetero)sexuality openly, even flamboyantly. They act and represent themselves as 'sexualised actor' in an attempt to 'work' heterosexuality and its behaviours and expression to an end. Such a 'sexualised actor' might wear clothes which display the body and allow or express femaleness; they may humour and cajole men in a flirtatious or 'feminine' way or participate in sexualised conversational play or humour. In some cases these women cooperate - whether consciously or not - in their sexualisation, and some clearly take considerable enjoyment from this aspect of their working lives. However, they are often unable to stay in charge of their sexualisation. The readings of such displays of 'femaleness', the signs of a sexual being, while they may be the chosen expression of an individual, rarely stay within her control. The sexualisation of women (and of course in many cases, regardless of what 'choice' they may be attempting to make between the 'sexual neuter' or the 'sexualised actor') is often determined by men, since men and their culture are dominant in most union situations. As a result, women who choose the 'sexualised actor' route are often the butt of male behaviour: some men feel licensed to sexually pursue, to make sexuality a focus of interaction, to sexually assess or control through refusal or rejection, or public exposure. Such women are often especially viewed as 'bodies' (or even parts of bodies), then as 'women' and a long way beyond this, as unionists or serious political actors. Cockburn has argued that such behaviours make things harder for other women, and unless "deft and

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<sup>28</sup>Unlike union movements in other countries (the UK, US and Canada for example) there is very little public discussion within unions, even within women's caucuses, of homophobia, or of lesbianism and homosexuality. This is probably an indicator of the level of homophobia within the Australian movement.



clever in handling men they may suffer emotional and sexual exploitation" (Cockburn 1991:155). Sexualisation occurs in a situation of severe power imbalance in many union settings, with women relatively weak in controlling the ways in which their sexuality is interpreted.

This is not to deny the possible pleasures of the sexualised workplace/union/union relation, or the possibility of a woman's control of her sexuality in many circumstances. However, women's lives in public unions are often saturated with their sexuality, regardless of the wishes, actions or behaviour of individual women, and outside their complete control.

### **Reproductive embodiment: Mother/Non-mother**

Motherhood offers women similar limited presentational or embodiment options in many union situations. The majority of women who hold senior office in unions do so either before their children are born or after they have grown up; mothering of small children is for most women incompatible with union activism. Very few do it with small children. When women do become mothers and remain full-time union officials they are often positioned within a narrow range of established stereotypes. They can be 'mother/unionist' where their motherhood overshadows their unionism and saturates it with a set of competing identities and priorities, perhaps undercutting their presentation as a 'full' or 'valid' activist (quite separately from the material difficulties which mothering creates). Others might be positioned or choose to portray themselves in ways which minimise their mothering in favour of their activism ('unionist/mother'). In doing so they perhaps contribute unwittingly to the creation of new stereotypic images of 'superwoman-unionist': a new ruler against which other women are measured so that the fully-rounded woman union official becomes a woman who demonstrates herself also as a mother (and incidentally encodes her heterosexuality). The badge of motherhood thus becomes perhaps something which removes a threat to men, 'softens' the appearance of feminism, while also constituting a new pressure on non-mothering leaders who are women. The latter's 'difference' is underlined in each public image of women union officials accompanied by their children<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup>The Australian media particularly enjoys these images. Suzanne Franzway has discussed this image making with respect to women union leaders in Australia (1994), as has Kathie Muir (1997 forthcoming).

There are very few such women, however, and the pressures on women who are mothers with young children and full-time union officials are extreme, given the travel, hours, work load and the 'automatic priority' which union work assumes.

## 8.12 Conclusion

Masculine resistance does not stand like a singular wall between women and union power: all the bricks conspiratorially in place, and all men behind them. There are no doubt men who resist any such wall of masculinity and the ways in which it resists women. But it seems that, per capita, relatively few such men inhabit the upper levels of union structures, relative to other social movements, and their voice is muted, infrequently heard and rarely occupies seats of union power. These are much more likely to be held by men - even men with good intentions - who simply do not understand how their behaviours keep women 'at bay' and how their own unexamined masculinity constitutes part of the mortar of that wall. Then there are those who are more consciously misogynist and purposefully put the fabric of masculine resistance to work.

Alongside this diversity, other factors stand in women's way in unions, not least amongst these is the internalised oppression which divides women through competition, limits our vision and feeds self-doubt.

Recognising all of this other paraphernalia and its lethal legacies for women, along with the great variety of ways in which women subvert, undermine and contest male advantage, this chapter has attempted to clarify the idea and mechanics of masculine resistance. There is no doubt that, on balance, many men do resist women's progress in unions. Understanding these mechanisms better, and crafting tactics in response to them, should form a more central part of the feminist emancipatory project in Australian unions.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

#### **Theorising Gender Relations in Unions - Challenging Male Advantage**

Gender relations are rarely a principal object of industrial relations research in Australia. The contribution of this thesis lies in its work on this under-explored terrain, and its establishment of an important new collection of empirical data around which a new theorisation of gender relations in unions is built. This theorisation includes a number of precepts. Firstly, gender represents an important category of analysis in any thorough conceptualisation of workplace and industrial relations and, in particular, to an accurate understanding of the institutions which shape workplace and political relations. Differences between the experience and situations of women and men constitute an important fault line around which power divides - not always in consistent or uniform ways - but always in some ways that are worthy of direct analysis. In many areas of industrial relations research where gender issues are not directly considered or addressed, men are implicitly in focus, while the contest which often characterises gender relations in the workplace is concealed, and the experience of women is hidden. Such an incomplete analysis obscures important struggles and power inequalities which shape and affect all types of workplace outcomes.

My analysis of gender in unions reveals that, within a complex economy of power where gender effects intersect with other contests including those of class, skill and so on, patriarchal power relations have shaped and continue to shape union relations. Men in their workplaces and the institutions of working class organisation and mobilisation, exercise and take power over women. A general pattern of male unionists' power over women - contradicted certainly by many individual men and women, some unions and in particular events on occasion - is consistent and persistent enough in many union settings and organisations to call for its investigation in any study of unionism, and in organisational studies more broadly.

Secondly, in analysing relations between the sexes, 'women' cannot stand in for gender. To make this conflation leads to mistaken conceptualisations about women, men and gender politics - an analysis which is not so much partial, as sometimes simply wrong since it

misses the interdependent nature of gender politics in unions where women's situation is so often shaped by men's actions and position, and vice versa. The mechanics of that dynamic relationship are missed when only women are admitted as a category of analysis. A fully gendered analysis of men, women and the relations between the two is essential to a complete discussion of gender relations in an organisation.

Thirdly, an adequate analysis of gender in an organisational setting requires a sophisticated separation of gender from other characteristics related to, for example, industry, occupation, union, male or female-dominated workplaces, age or parenting responsibilities, so that genuine gender effects are left in view. For example characteristics related to the industry of employment, rather than to being female, must be properly distinguished from the effects of gender on union activism. What is more, an understanding of complex factors like the gendered character of domestic loads is vital to an accurate understanding of the dynamics of gender in organisational studies. For example, Griffin and Benson's previous work (1989) fails to unpack the nature of the impact of the household on women's and men's union activism and they thus conclude that 'family arrangements' do not negatively affect women, within an overall conclusion that gender differences are of relatively little significance with respect to union activism. My research separates out the effects of child care, spouse opposition, overwork on the home front and other effects of the domestic sphere and reveals, on the contrary, that the gendered nature of unpaid domestic and paid work is critical in explaining the significant differences which exist. Models which unpack and differentiate these issues, are essential to a comprehensive insight about gender effects.

Fourthly, this study of the gendered nature of representation and activism in Australian unions has established three new bodies of empirical data which are amongst the first comprehensive collections of their kind in Australia. Firstly, building on Nightingale (1991) this research undertakes a comprehensive analysis of women's and men's participation in union positions in Australia. Secondly, it analyses data on the nature of the union effort in relation to the gender imbalance in unionism. Thirdly, it provides the first sizeable, cross-union, fully gendered analysis of activism in Australian unions. This analysis distinguishes the effects of gender from job and many other characteristics and provides results across a

wide range of unions that can be generalised more broadly to Australian unions as a whole. These empirical results establish a new base line against which advances in women's representation or activism can be measured through further research. Further research might also build upon these results through qualitative studies of particular union activities which address the gender imbalance in unions.

These empirical collections inform my theorisation of gender relations in unions. In the process of developing this theory, I have made explicit the prevailing concepts about women's deficiencies and disadvantage that have underpinned the majority of past union action around the 'problem of women's under-representation' (as it has traditionally been conceived). I have revealed how much union action has been constructed around assumptions of women's deficiencies with respect to their anti-unionism, knowledge, skills, confidence and lack of interest in unionism: much less action has been undertaken in relations to union deficiencies. These orthodoxies have been largely discredited, however, by my analysis of activism which suggests that while women are less active than men, their activism is inhibited much less by these so-called 'deficits' (several of which simply do not hold) than by inadequacies in union structure and organisation in relation to women's lives. Assumptions about women's deficiencies, their anti-unionism, their lack of interest in unionism compared to men, can no longer be sustained. It is clear, however, that this set of assumptions has functioned to keep women in central focus and has concealed male advantage. Seen as 'women's problem', it has been women, largely, who have been set to work to address it, with minimal resources in many cases, while many of the 'mainstream' activities, budgets, and union priorities have been little disturbed. The focus on women's deficits has distracted from a resource gerrymander and kept the dense fabric of male advantage and resistance out of view.

My empirical study of the barriers to women's and men's activism in unions has shown how men are advantaged by organisational practices which pay little attention to women's domestic loads, their double day, the nature of their work, their industrial concerns, and the contours of their paid working and domestic lives. In each of these characteristics, women are disadvantaged by the ways in which unions work, while men are advantaged. It is no wonder that the profile of Australian union positions is so sharply gendered with men in

control of most of the commanding heights of institutional structures amongst the organised working class. What is more, unless the habits which construct male advantage in unions are changed, the continuing feminisation of union membership may well be accompanied by an increasing male-domination of these commanding heights.

These results suggest a new theorisation of gender relations in unions, one which places the masculinised norms of unions' organisational structures at the centre of explanations of gender differences in participation and power. Further, reaction to these empirical results in unions and my discussion of the masculinised habits of unionism, suggest that the concepts of male advantage and male resistance help explain why women remain pinned to the periphery of these important institutions. These concepts are useful in understanding why male unionists frequently fail to understand or simply contradict research results, why unions persist with mistaken strategies (focused on women's mythical deficits), why unions repetitively adopt policy but refuse action and resources, and why women's separate organising - so often, demonstrably, a key to progress for women - is energetically resisted rather than supported and fostered. Men, who take pleasure in and are advantaged by existing position and power, resist. I have analysed some aspects of that resistance. Its fabric includes leaving the business of redressing women's under-representation to wallow in a mistaken discourse of 'women's disadvantage' and inadequacy, one which continues to obscure men's practices, devices, power and resistance. The male point of reference which underwrites the construction of unionism is hidden in this discourse, and concepts of male advantage and resistance help reveal it. Working hard towards 'equal opportunity', while ignoring the fabric of male advantage and resistance cannot liberate women, and cannot realise feminism' objectives in unions. Strategies which remove women's 'handicaps', while ignoring the myriad other ways in which men - and unions made in their image - block women, will be inadequate. Instead strategies which challenge and remove male advantage and resistance are called for.

Kurt Lewin has conceptualised organisations as force fields in which, in any process of change, there will be at least two sets of forces at work: those in favour of change and those opposed to it (Lewin 1951). Many women have been hard at work on the first. But the more we have pushed in some locations, the more men have pushed back, their resistances

mutating in many different ways, in the form of harassment, questions about women's sexuality or class loyalties, opposition to separate meetings of women, manipulation of credentials or seniority rules to preserve male advantage, concession of policy or positions without power, and positioning of categories of 'outgroups' in competition with each other, while the masculine heartlands remain relatively unperturbed.

My theorising of gender relations in unions has also revealed the critical importance of parenting and domestic work to an understanding of how women's and men's activism and presence in unions is shaped. Male parent's activism is effectively, it seems, *propelled* by parenting responsibilities, while women parent's is obstructed and dampened. These results provide a clear example of the sexual nature of the public, political contract: public, political life is constructed around the dominant norms of men's lives and these handicap women and prevent them from exercising their full rights as union members and beyond, as citizens.

This study has also revealed that Australian unions are not a unitary phenomenon with respect to gender politics. Two distinct classes of unions can be discerned: a masculine majority which are dominated by male leaders and are doing very little to increase women's voice or activism and where masculine resistance is a lively force, and a feminised minority which accounts for most of the increase in women's share of leadership positions in unions, and are doing a great deal in some cases to increase that leadership and women's activism. Nonetheless, across the movement as a whole, 'union official' remains a non-traditional occupation for women and, as in many other such occupations, women face particular challenges: they are sexualised in intense ways, are closely observed by many, and often experience what Sudano has called a "fluctuating sense of competence" (1993).

In analysing some historical material about the experience of women and men in unions I have argued the gendered character of Australian unionism and its fluctuating solidarities. The absence of a comprehensive history of women's workplace struggles and gender politics in Australian unions is a particular liability for activists in unions. The pace of activism, the great gaps in the record of women's labouring history and the legacy of a movement which is profoundly anti-intellectual, have stymied the development of a functioning feminist tradition for many women who work in unions<sup>1</sup> - despite many efforts to remember all the

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<sup>1</sup>This is not to deny the very real solidarity and support which exists amongst many collectivities of women in Australian unions.

sisters who have gone before. My selective rereading of some of the recorded story of Australian women's activism in unions in chapter four sharply challenges a forgetful position of belief in the benign possibilities in unions for women - a belief based on an almost unconscious assessment that the well intentioned brothers simply made *errors* against their sisters out of ignorance in the hasty processes of class war. There is some of that, but also a persistent story of conscious and unconscious trading off of women's interests, in the interests of men and sometimes their families. We are reminded to a much sharper view of male unions' repeated betrayals of women in the first fifty years of Australian unionism - and beyond.

These patriarchal power relations are often discernible in the dominant discourses of the union movement. For example, the term 'union' has often been mobilised to mean only men, and women have been positioned as a threat to that 'union' and the interests of the men defined within it. Similarly, 'solidarity' has often been a rousing cry amongst men, concealing the gendered reality of that unity, and its inclusions and exclusions. When these terms are employed in traditional discourses of unionism - often against employers, but on some occasions against low-paid women, new immigrants, outworkers and so on - they in fact signify a partial, gendered unionism. The pejorative use of the term 'middle-class' to label union women who organise *as women*, as unreliable and disruptive outsiders, provides another example of the discursive constructions of traditional unionism which are highly gendered. The mobilisation of these terms protects men's interests, while silencing or subjugating women's.

Without an autonomous space, individual women activists are prevented from making connective links across their individual experience. This space is fostered (as we have seen in the historical review in chapter four and again with respect to union action in chapter six) through separate structures of women's organisation both within and outside unions. Where separate organisation exists, women's space is invariably enlarged and feminist strategy sharpened. Feminist structures outside and parallel with unions have played a particularly important role in many places and at different times.

The exercise of patriarchal power in Australian unions is often complex and there are many local resistances made to its systematic effects by women and men. However, my



analysis provides evidence of power flowing with arterial strength along the lines of gender, rather more than having an appearance of a capillary-like net, as Foucault (1980) and some postmodernists might argue. While it is useful to study the local resistances to power and the effective ways in which it is contested, it is clear that systemic patterns are also at work in contemporary unions.

To summarise, in retheorising gender relations in unions I have disproved entrenched assumptions about women's activism in unionism, and instead established the importance of union characteristics as buttressing male participation and control, while frustrating women's. Women's under-participation is facilitated by the habits and practices of unionism - habits which reward and invite men, foster their homo-social reproduction, their humour and their solidarity, a solidarity which in some instances is premised at some level on women's exclusion, constructed *against* them.

This theory of gender relations focuses on men and the relations they have with women in unions. It is, however, likely to be applicable to an understanding of gender relations in organisations more broadly. If these relations in Australian unions have been mistakenly theorised through a preoccupation with *women* and by taking a view from the bottom, then it is likely that gender relations have been similarly mistaken in other institutional settings. Analysing these relations by paying appropriate attention to the shape and nature of masculinised institutions, to the men who inhabit them and to the material strategies by which these men exclude, block and frustrate women, is critical to shaping effective action to counter masculine control in a range of public, political organisations.

Effective theory about gender relations is critical to effective feminist political practice. This thesis has made existing theories of gender in unions (more accurately, theories about women's inadequacies) explicit. It has tested these theories empirically and, in the event, disproved them and instead consolidated an alternative theory of gender relations in unions, one which shows that existing institutional norms - which privilege masculinity, exclude women and position them as deficient - conceal and consolidate male advantage.

The connection between power and knowledge or 'truth making' is clearly exposed in this study. The existence of unproven but pervasive beliefs about women and their deficient unionism have allowed most of a relatively small effort on behalf of gender equity in unions

to mistakenly focus on women, with most of the work done by women. This unproven orthodoxy, or 'knowledge', has had the effect of protecting men's power and position in unions. Replacing this 'knowledge' with knowledge that is 'more true' does not, in itself overturn power relations. But the disruption of at least the 'knowledge' claim for existing behaviour is at least potentially disturbed by this study. Certainly the powerful link between knowledge and power, which has been a subject of feminist epistemological discussion, is confirmed by this experience.

This research has influenced women and men in unions, peak councils and individual unions. It also illustrates how 'facts' are limited in their power to change behaviour. While some women and men have made use of this 'evidence' in support of progressive change in women's interests in their unions, the simple *refusal to believe* amongst some important power holders illustrates the vitality and existence of male resistance in unions and men's interest in retaining their position. Clearly, the latter can affect the former (ie facts about the oppression and under-representation of women can accelerate change) but the relationship is complex and far from linear: it seems that vested interests in unions are on occasion quite inured to facts about injustice when otherwise secure from political challenge.

In terms of methods, this research has simultaneously employed a feminist standpoint approach, along with more orthodox social science empirical methods within an action research framework. Contrary to Harding's view that empirical methods cannot be applied to critique the paradigm within which they are situated, I have used an established empirical method to challenge prevailing patriarchal orthodoxies about women and their unionism (Harding 1991:116). I have identified myself as a situated participant within unions as I have undertaken this research. This methodology has had its complexities and disadvantages: at times, as outlined in chapter two, it has no doubt constrained my approach. On the other hand, these methods and the coincidence of political location (or 'interestedness'), experience, involvement and empirical data have given rise to a rich collection of information about organisational change and gender, a collection that quite probably could not have been made by a researcher who has not so situated. The opportunity to reflect on the results of a large survey *along with* the institutional reaction to it, has

resulted in important insights about the relationship between organisational change and 'facts', and revealed the character of male resistance.

The results of this research have been directly applied by feminist activists in the process of making feminist change in unions. This form of engaged research, oriented to informing the practical activism of feminists in a particular sphere, has been a relatively minor preoccupation of feminist theory and research in the past decade. Much recent feminist theorising has taken the form of social critique: for example Carole Pateman's work about the sexual contract is more in the form of a diagnosis of the root of the problem of patriarchy in modern liberal democratic (and socialist) societies than a description of strategic response (1988). Much recent feminist and poststructuralist critique is 'anti-programmatic' in its focus; indeed it constitutes a critique of the validity or development of *feminist programs*. Rather than assisting activists to theorise the possibilities in their practice, it theorises *against* the possibilities of some forms of practice. For feminists engaged in specific emancipatory projects this constitutes a debility, no doubt explained by the importance of fully understanding the issues of difference and their implications for feminist theorising and feminist practice, and a reaction against the globalising theorising and 'activism programs' of the seventies.

In the meantime, however, many feminists are at work trying to affect social conditions outside the academy<sup>2</sup>. If a significant strain of feminist research and theory argues against theorising about programs and action, with little space or interest in their evaluation or theoretical basis, then such theory may be of little use to feminists outside the academy. Indeed such theory encourages a defensive tone in work like this, where an emancipatory goal is explicit and programs of action are necessary, indeed, are the daily stuff of feminist union life. This is not to suggest that feminist theory can develop *a* program of feminist action: clearly there cannot be any single program. But a range of implicit theories underpin feminist activism and even local activities represent choices about useful strategies and areas of work. A greater willingness to explore these as tactical choices, and to consider their theoretical rationales, is important feminist research work which can be usefully expanded.

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<sup>2</sup>Of course work within the academy can be a form of activism.

The implications of my theory of gender relations for feminist activism in unions are significant. As I argued in my discussion of category politics in the previous chapter, it is necessary to uncouple 'women' from 'disadvantage' in some debates and instead turn the spotlight on the category 'men', notions of male advantage, deconstructing the norms of traditional unionism, and speaking of democracy and proportional gender representation. Women unionists must also refuse both the 'class versus sex' dualism and the 'category competition' which they are also often encouraged to play.

In examining union efforts in relation to women's voice and activism, it is evident that policy has frequently functioned in Australia, as in many other countries, as a ceremonial substitute for action: most unions have policies with respect to women, but action in relation to many of them has been weak or absent. This research has also reinforced the finding in other places (in Canada by Briskin and McDermott for example) about the importance of women's autonomous organisation, whether inside or outside unions. Such organisation fosters a critical mass of women activists, and provides a location in which alternative models of unions, leadership and activism can be built.

In undertaking feminist politics in unions, then, it is necessary to shift the locus of responsibility and to make male resistance more uncomfortable, by making 'taking advantage' more costly in terms of the public standing of individual unionists and their organisations. It is also necessary to undertake structural reforms (like designated positions for women and proportional representation rules) which force change and place women in power. Not all such women will be oriented to feminisms' goals, but their presence will make a difference by exposing women's competence, by shifting critical gender balances, and by disturbing traditional norms.

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**Appendix 1 Survey of Gender Representation in South Australian Unions**

UNITED TRADES & LABOR COUNCIL

AND

CENTRE FOR LABOUR STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

**Survey on Women in South Australian Unions****INTRODUCTION:**

Thankyou for taking the time to complete this survey.

Some questions may not be relevant to your union or the information may not be available. Simply write N/A and move on to the next question.

The questions apply to the South Australian Branch of your union.

Please feel free to give Jane Clarke a call at Labour Studies on (08) \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_, for help or clarification on any questions you are having difficulties with.

If you wish to expand on any question with specific comments, please do so.

A stamped, addressed envelope is enclosed. Please return by 10/12/91.

**UNION DETAILS:**

1. Name of Union: \_\_\_\_\_

## SECTION 1: UNION MEMBERSHIP AND OFFICIALS

2. Membership: Total Financial Membership at end of June, 1991 (State)

Men	Women	TOTAL
[ 263 ]	[     ]	[ 263 ]

- ✓ 3. Please indicate the industries where a significant proportion (ie more than 20%) of your membership work.

Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting	[     ]
Mining	[     ]
Manufacturing	[     ]
Electricity, gas and water	[     ]
Construction	[     ]
Wholesale and retail trade	[     ]
Transport and storage ( Loading + unloading vessels )	[ ✓ ]
Communication	[     ]
Finance, property and business services	[     ]
Public administration and defence	[     ]
Community services	[     ]
Recreation, personal and other service	[     ]

- ✓ 4. Please indicate the occupations in which a significant proportion (ie more than 20%) of your members work.

Managers and administrators	[     ]
Professionals	[     ]
Para-professionals	[     ]
Tradespersons	[ 10% ]
Clerks	[     ]
Salespersons and personal services	[     ]
Plant and machine operators and drivers	[     ]
Labourers and related workers	[ 90% ]

3

- ✓ 5. Please indicate the sector in which most of your members are employed.

Public [ ]

Private [ ✓ ]

Mixed (if close to 50%) [ ]

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- ✓ 6. Would you classify most of your members as:

Blue collar [ ✓ ]

White collar [ ]

Mixed (if close to 50%) [ ]

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Please indicate the number of union officials you have in the following categories:  
(Note: some categories may not be applicable to your union)

	<u>Note</u>	<u>Pt Adelaide Branch only</u>	Men	Women	TOTAL
(a)		State Council	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
(b)		State Executive Members	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
(c)		State Conference Delegates	[ 2 ]	[ ]	[ 2 ]
(d)		Division/Sub-branch Committees	[ 50 ]	[ ]	[ 50 ]
(e)		Other decision making structure (please specify)	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
		_____	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
		_____	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
		_____	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
(f)		Delegates to Federal Executive	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
(g)		Delegates to Federal Council	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
(h)		Delegates to Federal Conference	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
(i)		Delegates to UTLC and/or pool of Delegates to UTLC	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
(j)		Delegates to ACTU Congress	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

4

8. Please identify the number of men or women holding a specific position. (Note: Q10 deals with Administrative Staff) Please indicate the number of men/women in the position who are elected or appointed and the number who hold the position in an honorary capacity or the number who are full-time (employed by the union). For example:

Position by gender		Number	Number Elected	Number Appointed	Number Honorary	Number Full-time
Organiser	Men	[ 4 ]	[ 3 ]	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ 4 ]
	Women	[ 5 ]	[ 2 ]	[ 3 ]	[ ]	[ 5 ]

In this case, the union employs 9 full-time organisers, some of whom have been elected and others appointed.

Position by gender		Number	Number Elected	Number Appointed	Number Honorary	Number Full-time
President	Men	[ 1 ]	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Vice-President	Men	[ 4 ]	[ 4 ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ 4 ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Treasurer	Men	[ 1 ]	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Secretary	Men	[ 1 ]	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Assistant Secretary	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Industrial Officer	Men	[ 1 ]	[ 1 ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ 1 ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Organiser	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Industrial/Organiser (Combined role)	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Education Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

combined one officer



5

Position by gender		Number	Number Elected	Number Appointed	Number Honorary	Number Full-time
Research Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Health and Safety Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Rehabilitation Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Migrant/Liaison Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Publicity Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Equal Employment Opportunity Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Women's Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Workers' Compensa- tion Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Recruitment Officer	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Other: _____ (please specify)	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Other: _____ (please specify)	Men	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	Women	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

9. If your union has a Women's Officer, is this responsibility:

the total workload? [ ]  
 in addition to other duties? [ ]

10. Please indicate the number of Administrative Staff (eg, Clerical, accounting, records management, librarian, etc):

	<b>Full-time</b>	<b>Part-time</b>
<b>Men</b>	[   ]	[   ]
<b>Women</b>	[   ]	[   ]

11. Please indicate the number of:

	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
(a) Workplace Delegates/Shop Stewards (WPD/SS)	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
(b) Deputy WPD/SS	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
(c) Workplace Health & Safety Representatives (WPHSR)	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
(d) Deputy WPHSR	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
(e) Workplace Reps on EEO Committees	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
(f) Workplace Reps on Training Committees	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
(g) Workplace Reps on Consultative Committees	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
(h) Other Workplace Representatives (please specify)			
_____	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
_____	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
_____	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
_____	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**SECTION 2: ACTION FOR WOMEN MEMBERS**

- ✓  
12. Does your union do/have any of the following:
- (a) Distribute UTLC/ACTU/Government information specifically targeted towards Women members? [ ]
  - (b) Publish information specifically targeted towards Women members? [ ] *N/A*
  - (c) Send members to TUTA/UTLC Women's Courses or Seminars? [ ]
  - (d) Conduct Women's Courses/Seminars? [ ]
  - (e) Conduct Women's Conferences? [ ]
  - (f) Participate in the Anna Stewart Memorial Project? [ ]
  - (g) A Women's Committee? [ ]
  - (h) Take any other specific action regarding Women members? If yes, please specify: [ ]

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12.1 Please comment on the relative effectiveness of any of the measures you have taken:

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- ✓  
13. Does your union have:
- (a) A Sexual Harassment Policy? [ ]
  - (b) A Women's Policy? [ ]
  - (c) An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Policy? [ ]
  - (d) A Childcare Policy? [ ]
  - (e) Any other Policy related to Women? If yes, please specify: [ ]

---



---



---

✓

8

14. Is childcare, or assistance to pay for childcare, provided for members to attend:

<b>Union Meetings?</b>	[ ]	
<b>Union Conferences?</b>	[ ]	<i>v/h</i>
<b>Union Training?</b>	[ ]	

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

✓

15. When are your union meetings conducted?

	<b>In Members' Work time?</b>	<b>Outside Members' Work time?</b>
<b>State Council?</b>	[ ✓ ]	[ ]
<b>State Executive?</b>	[ ✓ ]	[ ]
<b>Other union meetings?</b>	[ ✓ ]	[ ]

✓

16. Please specify any initiatives your union has taken to encourage women to attend union meetings, conferences or courses.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**SECTION 3: AFFIRMATIVE ACTION**

17. Please describe any specific actions regarding equal opportunity or affirmative action taken by your union in relation to the following:

(a) Engaged in consultation with employers as required under the Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity) Act?

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(b) Developed an internal equal opportunity or affirmative action program for members within the union's structure?

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(c) Developed an internal equal opportunity or affirmative action program or plan for employees of the union?

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**SECTION 4: UTLC AFFIRMATIVE ACTION**

18. Do you have any suggestions for initiatives which could be taken by the UTLC to improve the participation and level of union membership for women?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10

## SECTION 5: AMALGAMATIONS

- ✓ 19. Are you in the process of amalgamation? Yes No  
 If yes, with which unions: [ ✓ ] [ ]

\_\_\_\_\_ *unions of Oost* \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Are any special measures being undertaken by your union to improve women's representation in the new union? (eg, affirmative action plans, special affirmative action positions)

Yes No  
 [ ] [ ✓ ]

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

- ✓ 20. How do you believe that the relative position of female and male representation will be affected as a result of current amalgamation proposals?

Remain the same? [ ✓ ]  
 Improve? [ ]  
 Become worse? [ ]  
 Don't know? [ ]

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_



THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

Centre for Labour Studies

*Survey of Union Members*

6 0 2 1 4

Dear Union Member,

c1 c5

I hope that you will take a few minutes to complete this survey and return it in the enclosed envelope. By doing this you will be helping your union and also assisting the University in an important research project. This research is designed to investigate members' views about their unions and particularly to focus on the differences (if any) between the views and union activities of men and women. Your response is *completely anonymous* - you will not be able to be identified as an individual in the survey results. Thankyou for your help in completing the survey and watch out in your union journal for a summary of results.

Barbara Pocock, Centre for Labour Studies, University of Adelaide

*Please use crosses rather than ticks, and ignore the numbers printed next to the boxes on the right hand side - they are there simply to help us analyse the results.*

1. How many children do you have? (please write the number in the relevant boxes)

- |  |                                     |    |
|--|-------------------------------------|----|
| None                                       | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c6 |
| under 5 years and living with you          | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c7 |
| between 5 and 15 years and living with you | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c8 |
| over 15 years                              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c9 |

2. Where are you employed? (please put a cross in only one box)

- |                          |                                     |   |     |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|-----|
| Government/public sector | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 1 |     |
| Private company/business | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 2 | c10 |

3. What is your occupation? (please put a cross in only one box)

- |                         |                                     |    |         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|----|---------|
| Plant operator          | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 01 | c11-c12 |
| Machine operator        | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 02 |         |
| Driver                  | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 03 |         |
| Labourer                | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 04 |         |
| Process worker          | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 05 |         |
| Clerk                   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 06 |         |
| Tradesperson            | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 07 |         |
| Salesperson             | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 08 |         |
| Personal service worker | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 09 |         |
| Administrator           | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 10 |         |
| Para-professional       | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 11 |         |
| Professional            | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 12 |         |
| Manager                 | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 13 |         |

4. How many people work in your workplace? (please put a cross in only one box)

- |               |                                     |   |     |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|---|-----|
| Less than 50  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 1 | c13 |
| 51-100        | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 2 |     |
| 101-300       | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 3 |     |
| 301-500       | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 4 |     |
| More than 501 | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 5 |     |

5. What sex are you? (put a cross in only one box)

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	c14
Female	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	

6. Are you the sole income earner in your household?(put a cross in only one box)

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	c15
No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	

7. How long have you been in paid work? (Indicate the total number of years even if your paid work has been interrupted. Put a cross in only one box)

Less than one year	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	c16
1-2 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	
3-10 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	
11-20 years	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	
More than 21 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	

8. How long have you been a union member? (indicate the total number of years even if your membership has been interrupted. Put a cross in only one box).

Less than one year	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	c17
1-2 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	
3-10 years	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	
11-20 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	
More than 21 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	

9. Do you work with - (put a cross in only one box)

Mainly men	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	c18
Mainly women	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	
About half and half	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	

10. Approximately how many workers in your workplace do you think are union members? (put a cross in only one box)

All	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	c19
Most	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	
Some	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	
Only a few	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	

11. How old are you? (place a cross in only one box)

Under 25 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	c20
26-35 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	
36-50 years	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	
More than 51 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	

12. How much do you earn?(place a cross in only one box)

Less than \$15,000	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	c21
\$15,000-\$30,000	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	
\$30,000-\$45,000	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	
More than \$45,000	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	

13. Do you know the name of your shop steward/job representative/workplace delegate? (put a cross in only one box)

Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	c22
No	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	
There isn't one in my workplace	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	

14. Have you ever asked your union for help?(put a cross in only one box)

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	c23
No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	



15. Do you feel that they helped you? (put a cross in only one box)

Yes  1 c24  
No  2

16. If you had a serious problem at work, would you contact your union? (put a cross in only one box)

Yes  1 c25  
No  2

17. Do you think you have enough say in your union? (place a cross in only one box)

Yes  1 c26  
No  2

18. How satisfied are you with your work? (place a cross in only one box)

Very satisfied  1 c27  
Satisfied  2  
Not satisfied  3  
Very unsatisfied  4

19. How much you agree or disagree with the following statements (by circling the appropriate number)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
I get better wages and conditions because of my union	1	2	3	(4)	5	c28
My union interferes with the efficient running of my workplace	1	2	3	(4)	5	c29
Without a strong union I would be at the mercy of my employer	1	2	(3)	4	5	c30
My union has too much power over my employer	1	2	3	(4)	5	c31

20. How often have you - (Please indicate by circling the appropriate number)

	Never	Occasionally	Regularly/Often	
Voted in union elections	(1)	2	3	c32
Attended union meetings outside your workplace	(1)	2	3	c33
Attended union meetings in your workplace	1	(2)	3	c34
Read union newspapers, newsletters or journals	1	2	(3)	c35
Attended union training	(1)	2	3	c36
Attended union conference(s)	(1)	2	3	c37
Discussed union issues with your workmates	(1)	2	3	c38
Met and talked with a union organiser	1	(2)	3	c39
Contacted the union for advice or help	(1)	2	3	c40
Taken industrial action (strikes, bans etc)	(1)	2	3	c41

21. Do you think women generally take as much interest in the union as men? (put a cross in one box)

Yes  1 c42  
No  2

22. Why did you join a union? (you may wish to place a cross in more than one box)

- |  |                                     |     |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----|
| I work in a closed shop where everyone is a union member | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c43 |
| For better pay and conditions                            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c44 |
| Because of services provided by the union                | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c45 |
| Because I believe everyone should be in a union          | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c46 |
| Because all my workmates are in a union                  | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c47 |
| Because a shop steward asked me to join                  | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c48 |
| Because it's a condition of employment                   | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c49 |
| Because the union helped me                              | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c50 |
| To protect my rights as a worker                         | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c51 |

23. What could your union do to encourage women in your workplace to join the union? (you may wish to place a cross in more than one box)

- |  |                                     |     |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Not applicable because my workplace is a closed shop | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c52 |
| Being personally helped by the union                 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c53 |
| Being encouraged by other workers to join            | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c54 |
| More women union officials                           | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c55 |
| Good recruitment materials                           | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c56 |
| Good union services and benefits                     | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c57 |
| More contact with union officials                    | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c58 |

- Other (please specify).....  c59
- c60
- c61
- c62
- c63

24. Are you interested in being involved in activities related to your union? (put a cross in only one box)

- |     |                                     |   |     |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---|-----|
| Yes | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 1 | c64 |
| No  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 2 |     |

25. If you are not interested in being involved, what are the main reasons?(you may wish to put a cross in more than one box)

- |  |                                     |     |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Simply not interested                      | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c65 |
| Work commitments                           | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c66 |
| Home commitments                           | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c67 |
| Don't know enough about the union          | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c68 |
| Not confident enough                       | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c69 |
| Never been asked                           | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c70 |
| Never thought about it                     | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | c71 |
| Concerned about employer's reaction        | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c72 |
| Concerned about spouse's/family's reaction | <input type="checkbox"/>            | c73 |

- Other (please specify).....  c74
- c75
- c76
- c77
- c78

26. Would you like to stand in the future for a union position (as a union official, shop steward/job representative/delegate or other position) (put a cross in one box)

- |     |                                     |   |     |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---|-----|
| Yes | <input type="checkbox"/>            | 1 | c79 |
| No  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 2 |     |

27. What do you think should be the main priorities of your union?  
 (please put a cross next to the issues that you think are the most important)

- Job security  c80
- Health and safety  c81
- Higher wages  c82
- Superannuation  c83
- Childcare for workers  c84
- Hours of work  c85
- Rehabilitation for injured workers  c86
- Part-time work  c87
- Working conditions  c88
- Equal opportunity/discrimination  c89
- Work rosters  c90
- Pressure of work/work load  c91
- Equal pay  c92
- Better jobs/career paths  c93
- More say in the running of the workplace  c94
- Flexible work arrangements to care for sick relatives/family  c95
- Better career paths and conditions for women  c96
- Training for members  c97
- Lobbying government for better services  c98
- Promoting and protecting public services  c99

Other (please specify)..... Permanent Part-Time Work .....  c100

28. If you are active in the union, why are you active (you may wish to put a cross in more than one box)

- Union work is interesting  c101
- To change the union  c102
- I want better wages and conditions  c103
- To help other workers  c104
- To help out the union office  c105
- To meet people  c106
- To stand up for myself  c107
- To learn more skills  c108

Other (please specify).....  c109

29. Have you ever - (you may wish to put a cross in more than one box)

- been a workplace representative  c110
- been a deputy workplace representative  c111
- been a health and safety representative  c112
- been a deputy health and safety representative  c113

represented the union in some other position (please specify).....  c114

30. Would you like to do more trade union training? (put a cross in one box)

- Yes  1 c115
- No  2

31. Do you think more women should run for union office? (put a cross in one box)

- Yes  1 c116
- No  2

32. Do you think that any of the following would help increase women's involvement in the union? (you may wish to put a cross in more than one box)

- Childcare at meetings  c117
- Funds to pay for childcare organised by self  c118
- Changed meeting times  c119
- Changed meeting locations  c120
- Training for women about unions and union methods  c121
- Training for men about women and their workplace and union experience  c122
- Creation of 'women's representative' positions in the workplace  c123
- More women in the union leadership  c124
- More friendly union meetings  c125
- More active encouragement by union officials  c126
- Other (please specify).....  c127
- .....  c128
- .....  c129
- .....  c130
- .....  c131

33. Which of the following, if any, make it hard for you to be more involved in your union? (you may wish to place a cross in more than one box)

- Shift work  c132
- Part-time work  c133
- Negative attitude of my employer or supervisor  c134
- Concern that it would affect my chances of promotion  c135
- Too busy at work  c136
- Meetings are held at times when I can't attend  c137
- Meetings are held too far from my workplace  c138
- Childcare isn't available for union meetings/events  c139
- Don't want to put children into childcare in evening after school/care all day  c140
- I don't have enough information about meetings  c141
- I feel I lack the training to participate  c142
- I feel I lack encouragement to participate  c143
- Costs of transport or other transport problem  c144
- I find union meetings unfriendly  c145
- I find the issues discussed at union meetings irrelevant to me  c146
- I'm too tired to take on something else  c147
- I'm too busy at home  c148
- I don't want to go on my own  c149
- I feel I lack confidence  c150
- Opposition from my partner/spouse  c151
- I have been discouraged by my family/friends  c152
- I have never been asked  c153
- I have been discouraged by other unionists  c154
- Lack of informal or social union events  c155
- Other (please specify). .....  c156

34. Are there any other comments you would like to make about any issues raised in this survey?

- .....  c157
- .....
- .....

Thankyou for finishing the survey. Please post it in the envelope provided.

### Appendix 3 Action Plan for Women in South Australian Unions

The UTLC has resolved to build upon progress to date and assist unions to run their own Affirmative Action programs, through the adoption of a *UTLC Action Strategy for Women in Unions* which:

- 1 endorses the above action plan for individual unions
- 2 widely publicises the outcomes of this survey amongst union officials and members
- 3 targets further increases in women's participation on UTLC Executive
- 4 assists unions to increase the proportion of women delegates at UTLC Council
- 5 maintains its contribution of resources to the Working Women's Centre and its participation in the management of the Centre, ensuring its continued commitment to the needs of working women and their unions
- 6 develops model policies and programs for Affirmative Action Plans in unions, combatting sexual harassment, providing childcare, setting appropriate meeting times, consulting on equal opportunity and affirmative action in the workplace and so on.
- 7 promotes these policies and programs through seminars and educative materials
- 8 provides practical assistance to unions to implement them, perhaps by conducting a pilot program with self-nominating unions
- 9 repeats a survey of all South Australian unions in 5 years
- 10 monitors the work program of the UTLC and its officers to ensure that the needs of male and female union members are equally addressed (including through an annual review of this relative effort within the Council's planning activities)
- 11 endorses the employment of a Women's Officer
- 12 extends the Anna Stewart Memorial Project by conducting three programs annually (including one for young women and one for women of non-English speaking background)
- 13 sets targets (and implement strategies to achieve them) so that women are proportionally represented on the UTLC executive and amongst UTLC delegates by 1994.