



*Employment and  
Work Relations  
in Context Series*

# WOMEN, WORK & TRADE UNIONS

**Anne Munro**

ROUTLEDGE

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# WOMEN, WORK AND TRADE UNIONS

**Anne Munro**

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# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AEEU</b>	<b>Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union</b>
<b>ASC</b>	<b>Ancillary Services Council</b>
<b>BDC</b>	<b>Branch District Committee</b>
<b>BMA</b>	<b>British Medical Association</b>
<b>CCT</b>	<b>Compulsory Competitive Tendering</b>
<b>COHSE</b>	<b>Confederation of Health Service Employees</b>
<b>CWU</b>	<b>Communication Workers' Union</b>
<b>DBFO</b>	<b>Design, Build, Finance and Operate</b>
<b>DMU</b>	<b>Directly Managed Unit</b>
<b>DHA</b>	<b>District Health Authority</b>
<b>EOC</b>	<b>Equal Opportunities Commission</b>
<b>ESRC</b>	<b>Economic and Social Research Council</b>
<b>GMU/</b>	<b>General and Municipal Workers' Union</b>
<b>GMWU/</b>	
<b>GMB/</b>	
<b>GMBATU</b>	
<b>GPMU</b>	<b>Graphical, Paper and Media Union</b>
<b>HWSU</b>	<b>Hospitals and Welfare Services Union</b>
<b>JSCC</b>	<b>Joint Steward Consultative Committee</b>
<b>LCCEPS</b>	<b>London County Councils Employees' Protection Society</b>
<b>LRD</b>	<b>Labour Research Department</b>
<b>MEA</b>	<b>Municipal Employees' Association</b>
<b>MHIWU</b>	<b>Mental Hospital and Institutional Workers' Union</b>
<b>MSF</b>	<b>Manufacturing, Science and Finance</b>
<b>NALGO</b>	<b>National and Local Government Officers</b>
<b>NASUWT</b>	<b>National Association of Schoolmasters &amp; Union of Women Teachers</b>
<b>NAWU</b>	<b>National Asylum Workers' Union</b>
<b>NBPI</b>	<b>National Board for Prices and Incomes</b>
<b>NEC</b>	<b>National Executive Committee</b>
<b>NHS</b>	<b>National Health Service</b>
<b>NS</b>	<b>New Statesman</b>
<b>NUCW</b>	<b>National Union of Corporation Workers</b>

## ABBREVIATIONS

NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
NUT	National Union of Teachers
PFI	Private Finance Initiative
PLWTU	Poor Law Workers' Trade Union
RCM	Royal College of Midwives
RCN	Royal College of Nursing
SEN	State Enrolled Nurse
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UKCC	United Kingdom Central Council (for nurses, midwives and health visitors)
USDAW	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers
WEA	Workers' Educational Association
WTE	Whole Time Equivalent

*To J. M. Munro and D. W. Munro*

# INTRODUCTION

This book is about working-class women and the way in which their interests are represented in trade unions. It explores the position and role of women in trade unions, focusing on the internal relations of participation and representation. The central argument is that there operates an institutional mobilization of bias which sets a trade union 'agenda' and which excludes a number of issues which are specific to women workers. This agenda not only serves to limit the articulation and representation of women's interests within unions, but also to direct women's activity away from collective organization in unions.

A second argument is developed that the major difference of interest between men and women in the labour market stems from the hierarchical division of the labour market by sex. Furthermore, the trade union agenda has a material basis in the organization of work, reflecting and reproducing the hierarchical divisions by sex. Underlying this, is an argument that an understanding of trade unions requires an examination of the processes which operate in the workplace itself. It is only possible to identify what is excluded from the trade union agenda by a detailed analysis of women's concerns within the workplace. This study, therefore, investigates the racial and gender composition of employment and how it results in women having specific interests, and the ways in which they develop strategies for dealing with these interests, often outside of trade unions.

This research has been approached from a position of critical support for trade unions. The conclusions suggest that there is considerable scope for improving participation and representation of women members. They also indicate underlying limitations to this process, which cannot be challenged through structural change to unions alone. On the one hand the enduring nature of the resistance to change in local trade union organization is highlighted, while an argument is also developed that a long-term challenge to the trade union agenda has to come through workplace organization. These arguments have a general relevance to forms of collective organization and trade union activity across different labour markets, areas of employment or indeed industrial relations systems. However, the force of these arguments has to be demonstrated in relation to specific patterns of trade union experience,

and this book uses a case study of work and union activity in the health sector in Britain as the substantive setting for this more general analysis.

The initial empirical research which forms the basis for this book was carried out during the mid 1980s, at four trade union branches, two National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and two Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE), recruiting women hospital ancillary workers in the National Health Service in the West Midlands. Three of these union branches were revisited during the mid 1990s, after the formation of UNISON in 1993 and the establishment of NHS trust status from 1991. The research therefore spans a period of more than seventeen years, enabling an analysis of continuity and change at the workplace level.

In order to give a contextual background to the book, this introductory chapter begins with a discussion of the way in which the concept of the trade union agenda is used. Secondly there is a consideration of why the study of women in unions is important, followed by a discussion which locates the work within the debates around gender and race. Finally the main areas covered by each chapter are outlined.

## **The Trade Union Agenda**

The concept of a trade union agenda used here does not refer to a written or formally acknowledged agenda. It is used to indicate the range of issues which are generally recognized as part of the appropriate business of trade unions. It is not merely a function of the structure of trade unions which prevents the articulation of certain interests. Rather, the accepted trade union agenda hinders the development of potential issues and interests.

The arguments presented here draw on Lukes' (1974) work on the three-dimensional view of power. The one-dimensional view of power has a behavioural focus, based on decision-making where there is observable conflict. This is extended by the two-dimensional view of power to include the process by which decisions are prevented from being taken. Lukes argues, however, that this view retains a behavioural focus because non-decision-making is seen as a form of decision-making. There are three key aspects which Lukes develops in the three-dimension view: he includes not only decision-making, but also control over the political agenda; not only observable conflict, but also latent conflict; not only subjective interests, but also real interests.

Lukes describes how the mobilization of bias may exclude potential issues from the political process:

Decisions are choices consciously and intentionally made by individuals between alternatives, whereas the bias of the system can be mobilised, recreated and reinforced in ways that are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of particular individuals' choices. (Lukes 1974: 21)

In this way power may be exercised through the limitation of choice by a restriction of the political agenda. Lukes suggests that this process may take place either through collective action as in political parties or 'there is the phenomenon of "systematic" or organisational effects, where the mobilisation of bias results . . . from the form of organisation' (Lukes 1974: 22). This form of the exercise of power is not maintained merely by the chosen acts of certain individuals, but through the nature and practices of institutions. This concept of power can be applied to the setting of a trade union agenda. It is not based on a conspiratorial view of trade unions, rather that the trade union agenda has developed in a particular historical context. It has been set, over time, in the context of sectional organization with the dominance of male, skilled, full-time, white manufacturing workers. This agenda has developed and changed with changes to the workforce, yet many issues specific to women workers remain largely excluded. Women frequently fail to identify the trade union as a route for certain workplace problems because they too accept this union agenda, and the limited role of unions.

Lukes suggests that the shaping of expectations through control of the political agenda constitutes the extreme exercise of power:

. . . is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (Lukes 1974: 24)

It is not only that women accept the trade union agenda, but the way in which they identify and define issues or problems at work is shaped by this agenda. Their expectations are limited by their experience of trade unions.

Lukes' concept of potential issues which never reach the agenda also opens the possibility for potential conflict. There is potential conflict around a number of issues specifically relevant to women, for example around the definition of skill and labour market hierarchies in grading structures. Since union organization is based on the maintenance of differentials, a challenge to the value placed on the skills involved in women's work would provide a threat to male labour. This suggests that the gendered construction of work raises potential conflicts between men and women. The difficulty is that the mobilization of bias through

the trade union agenda prevents the articulation of that conflict. While there are complex debates around the identification and definition of interests (Somerville 1997), here the nature of women's interests are defined through the substance of the research rather than on an *a priori* basis. Those issues affecting women in their day-to-day experience of the workplace are identified and these concerns are related to the responses the women make, their articulated demands and the organized demands expressed through their trade unions.

The trade union agenda reflects and reproduces the dominant position of men within the labour market and within trade unions. It defines both the appropriate business for trade unions to engage in, and the appropriate processes by which unions operate. Yet during the 1980s and 1990s there have been changes in many unions in terms of the processes and procedures for the involvement and representation of women members. These changes may lead to an overly optimistic prognosis for the future of unions. The story of equal opportunities in trade unions is not one of systematic progress. Initiatives at national level, such as the commitment to proportionality in UNISON seem to indicate the development of what Cockburn (1989) describes as the long equal opportunities agenda. This research highlights the uneven nature of change and resistance from local union organizations.

## **Why Study Women and Trade Unions?**

Increasing involvement in waged-labour has had a limited effect on women's subordinate position in society. The labour market is divided horizontally and vertically by sex, with women disproportionately represented in the less secure areas of employment (Mackie and Pattullo 1977, Hakim 1979, Aldred 1981, Coote and Campbell 1982, Martin and Roberts 1984, Bradley 1989, Rees 1992, Crompton 1997). While women have moved in greater numbers into professional and administrative jobs (Crompton 1997, Walby 1997), they remain concentrated in low-paid work, in part-time work, in low-grade work and in home-working. Despite the introduction of legislation in the fields of equal pay and sex discrimination, the distance between men and women workers in terms of pay and skill levels has changed very little in recent years. This situation has led to many attempts to analyse and understand the persistence of women's subordinate position in wage-labour and in this the attention is focused on the role of workers' collective organizations, the trade unions. Questions are raised about the degree to which women participate in trade unions in order to maintain or improve their conditions of employment, and

**Table 1.** *Percentages of women in senior positions in largest 10 unions 1997–8*

Position	Union									
	UNISON	TGWU	AEEU	GMB	MSF	USDAW	CWU	NUT	GPMU	NASUWT
Membership	78	20	6	36	31	59	19	75	17	59
NEC delegates	65	13	0	41	32	53	20	43	22	24
TUC delegates	61	25	16	33	45	59	25	43	15	8
National officers	38	4	0	8	30	25	10	14	13	22
Regional officers	26	8	2	13	16	24	na	11	5	18

*Source: Labour Research, March 1998: 13.*

the degree to which unions are able and willing to represent their women members. Further questions are raised about whether trade unions serve to reproduce gender inequalities, or whether they challenge them. As more women become engaged in wage-labour, as trade unions become more reliant on women's membership, and as feminist analysis of employment relations has developed, the specific study of the relationship between women and trade unions has become more important for social scientists and for trade unionists. This research aims to develop the theoretical background to this area of study, and to indicate realistic possibilities for change.

By 1996 women made up 45 per cent of the United Kingdom workforce, and had a union density of 29 per cent compared with 33 per cent for men (Labour Research 1997b). There is, however, a general problem in the lack of statistical information available about the position of women in unions. Until recently few unions collected information on the sex of post-holders within their organizations. Where this information is available, it usually only covers senior posts. Unions also find it difficult to maintain up-to-date information on membership numbers as workers move jobs and unions.

In 1980, Coote produced information on ten major unions which demonstrated that women were under-represented in a number of senior positions, including executive members, as full-time officials and as delegates to the TUC (Coote and Kellner 1980). Since 1980 there have been considerable improvements in the collection of data. Labour Research now regularly produces figures on women's post-holding in the ten unions with the largest female memberships. During the 1980s and 1990s almost all of the unions included in



the survey had made some improvements in the proportion of women holding posts. There have been particular improvements in the proportion of women NEC members and the proportion of women TUC delegates. Least progress was made among full-time national and regional officers (Labour Research 1998b).

One implication of the argument put forward here that there exists a restricted trade union agenda, is that the election or appointment of women to senior posts within trade unions does not necessarily result in the representation of women members' interests. Some writers suggest that women officials bring a different style of leadership (Dorgan and Grieco 1993); Heery and Kelly (1988) argue that women officers do make a significant difference to the representation of women's interests. They indicate that women officials are able to 'tilt the union towards a much fuller engagement with specific interests and needs of women workers' (Heery and Kelly 1989: 201). Phillips (1991), in a general debate about democracy, advises that getting more women elected may be necessary to the inclusion of women's concerns on the political agenda, but that it is not sufficient to ensure it. There is, it seems, a need for some caution in assuming such a link.

There are no equivalent statistics available on the position of black women in unions. The TUC (1987) suggested that there was no significant difference between the proportion of black and white women in elected posts in unions, although in 1992 it highlighted the problems of gaining reliable information and of monitoring race (TUC 1992). Black workers are more likely to be union members than white workers, and among black workers, women are more likely to be unionized than men (Labour Research 1996b). However, union density is now declining more rapidly among black members (Labour Research 1997c, Labour Research Department 1998). There is little data available to show how far membership figures are reflected in post-holding. Modood (1997) found that Caribbean men were under-represented in union posts compared to white men, while all women were equally under-represented. It is this persistent under-representation which has focused debate on the relationship between women and their trade unions. The question arises about why this under-representation exists and persists. Less information is available on women's involvement at local level in unions and this is the area which will be covered in this book, through a study of UNISON and two of its former constituent unions, NUPE and COHSE. Having outlined the general position of women within trade unions it is necessary to locate the research in terms of the literature on gender and race.

## Gender

The aim here is to link the discussion about women's role in trade unions to the body of feminist literature which investigates women's oppression and the ways in which gender divisions are reproduced. To date much of the literature on women and unions has failed to make links with the literature concerned with explaining the nature of women's oppression. In early debates there was a lack of agreement on the nature of women's oppression and on the definition of patriarchy. In the most general terms it is used to refer to the 'power relations by which men dominate women' (Millet, in Beechey 1979: 66). From this basic understanding of patriarchy, the debates about its nature have led in two main directions. Firstly there has been an attempt to analyse the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, and secondly an attempt to identify the base of reproduction of patriarchal relations. The latter has primarily been identified as the family, sexuality and childbearing, while some writers have extended the debate to include the state and employment (Beechey 1979, Walby 1986 and 1990). Walby (1986) describes a number of different approaches to patriarchy, herself adopting a position which regards patriarchy and capitalism as independent and autonomous social systems. The starting point here is that any analysis of social relations must take account of women's oppression and that class relations and gender relations are inextricably intertwined. In her more recent work (1997), Walby too has moved away from using the term patriarchy, preferring 'gender regimes', which is a concept sensitive to the diversity in gender relations, yet maintains her general theoretical framework.

In their research on part-time work, Beechey and Perkins (1987) have been more concerned with understanding the relationship between gender and the social organization of employment. Here, gender 'refers to a process in which social relationships which are based on perceived differences between the sexes are constituted' (Beechey and Perkins 1987: 147) Using this concept of gender it is possible to investigate how gender relations are produced and reproduced within specific institutions, in this case in trade unions. Increasing attention has been given to the processes of gendering of work and organizations (Ledwith and Colgan 1996, Halford, Savage and Witz 1997, Bradley 1999). Much of this literature has focused on professional and managerial occupations, whereas my research aims to address these issues in the context of manual work in the public sector.

## Race

This book is primarily about the relationship between women and trade unions. However, it is essential that the analysis includes an integrated discussion of the relationship between black women and unions. The term 'black' will be used to indicate groups of people who are likely to suffer forms of oppression due to perceived differences based on racial origin. It is important not to assume homogeneity among black groups. Where appropriate, specific groups will be referred to by their ethnic origins, for example, 'those of Asian origin', 'those of Afro-Caribbean origin'. Reference to ethnic origin is not intended to imply nationality, since many of the groups covered in the research are black UK subjects. White groups will mainly be referred to as of white UK origin. Where appropriate, specific groups, for example 'those of Irish origin', will be identified as such.

The concept of race potentially has as many pitfalls as that of patriarchy. Although it is not the intention here to enter a debate on the relative importance of the overall subordination based on class, gender and race, there is an assumption that an understanding of social relations must encompass all of these areas and that they are necessarily interconnected (Phizacklea and Miles 1980, Miles 1982, Sivanandan 1982, Gilroy 1987). The aim of this research is to retain a structural analysis which is also sensitive to difference (Bradley 1996). There are important differences between issues of race and of gender. However, using the framework of Beechey and Perkins' (1987) approach to the construction and reconstruction of gender provides a useful tool for considering the construction and reconstruction of racial divisions. Gilroy's approach to race shares much with Beechey and Perkins' understanding of gender:

'Race' has to be socially and politically constructed and elaborate ideological work is done to secure and maintain the different forms of 'racialization' which have characterized capitalist development. Recognising this makes it all the more important to compare and evaluate the different historical situations in which 'race' has become politically pertinent. (Gilroy 1987: 38)

This book is particularly concerned with the way in which divisions based on race are constructed and reconstructed in the context of work. It considers the process by which stereotypes are applied to certain groups of workers to differentiate them and to legitimate discriminatory treatment. This is discussed primarily in relation to women of Asian origin, large numbers of whom worked in the hospital ancillary departments covered in the empirical

research. Chapter 6 identifies the centrality of race to the process of recruitment and the way in which racial stereotypes have been used to justify an expressed preference for the employment of white workers. There is also an examination of the way in which divisions based on race serve to hinder the development of a collective identity among women workers, resulting in separate forms of resistance among the women of Asian origin. Chapter 6 also discusses how the restructuring of ancillary work poses a particular threat to women of Asian origin. It is argued that black women, in this case women of Asian origin, have particular interests in the workplace and that the trade union agenda excludes these interests and undervalues the forms of resistance that these women encounter. The concept of the trade union agenda provides a particularly useful means for understanding the failure of trade unionism to reflect black women's experience in the workplace.

There are other important divisions among workers, for example based on age, sexuality, disability and so on. However, the argument developed here is that gender and race are fundamental to the structuring and restructuring of the labour market, and best illustrate the operation of the trade union agenda. The concept could, however, be developed to explain the exclusion of other interests.

## **Structure**

The book is divided into three parts. The first part reviews the literature and theoretical arguments, and provides a background to the empirical research; the second looks in detail at the nature of work; and the third examines the nature of trade unionism.

There are three chapters in Part I. In Chapter 1 the literature which is specifically concerned with women and trade unions is reviewed. Chapter 2 develops an argument around the divisions in the labour market, and discusses the specific interests of women. This is linked to a discussion of the role of trade unions in the maintenance of divisions through the operation of a restricted trade union agenda. Chapter 3 gives a general background to hospital work, in particular ancillary work, and introduces the hospitals and union branches involved in the research.

Part II involves a detailed analysis of women's ancillary work. Chapter 4 highlights the factors which affect unity and division among workers, looking in detail at catering and cleaning work. Drawing on this material, Chapter 5 demonstrates the centrality of gender to the construction and reconstruction of work, and the resulting gendered nature of workplace interests. Chapter 6

shows that race is also central to the construction of work, giving rise to specific interests and specific forms of resistance.

Part III focuses on how trade unions respond to the interests of women ancillary workers. Chapter 7 considers branch organization, analysing post-holding, shop-steward systems and union meetings. It argues that certain structures are necessary to enable the involvement of women ancillary members, although structural changes alone cannot guarantee their involvement. Chapter 8 analyses the representation of women's interests. It argues that through the operation of the restricted trade union agenda, many of women's specific interests are excluded. Many of women's concerns in the workplace are seen as inappropriate issues for trade unions, not only by shop stewards and union officers, but also by the women themselves. This argument is developed in Chapter 9, which shows that the restricted agenda discourages union participation, meaning that women's involvement does not guarantee better representation of women's interests. This chapter also highlights the way in which women's activities in the workplace are frequently underestimated. However, despite the obstacles identified, this chapter suggests that there is considerable potential for increased participation through structural change, in particular better workplace organization.

The central argument which is discussed in the concluding chapter is that the restricted trade union agenda is crucial in hindering the representation and participation of women members. It has developed over time and can be challenged and altered, although because of the way in which it is reproduced, any change is likely to be very slow.

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